

The Freethinker

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ABORTION RATE RISES IN WESTERN EUROPE'S "MOST CATHOLIC COUNTRY"

"One view that is taken by many people in Ireland is that the way to prevent teenage and largely illegitimate pregnancy is to have very strong religious, social and economic sanctions against it", Madeleine Simms, vice-chairman, Brook Advisory Centres, told a meeting of the Irish Association of Family Planning Doctors in Dublin last month. "All one can say about this view", she added, "is that it does not seem to be entirely realistic".

Mrs Simms told the Association that every year 4,000 women from the Republic of Ireland come to Britain and are officially registered as having an abortion.

"We receive other women for abortion who stay with friends and relatives and have abortions from British accommodation addresses. These are then registered as British, not Irish abortions. We do not know what these numbers are, but colleagues tell me that a conservative estimate would be the official figure over again.

"Only 574 of the officially notified abortions taking place in England are to teenagers from the Republic of Ireland. If, however, we make a similarly fairly conservative assumption that this is half the real total figure, then around 1,200 abortions are carried out each year on Irish teenagers, who have, I understand from the Irish Census Office, just over 2,600 babies each year. Thus, each year, for every two to three Irish teenagers having babies one may have an abortion, a by no means negligible proportion for what is generally recognised to be the most Catholic country in Western Europe.

"This could suggest that the supposed Irish consensus about abortion is now breaking down, among the younger generation at least, despite the activities of the Life group and the pronouncements of the Irish courts. The undisclosed extent of abortion may

also help to explain why the Irish birth rate is falling so steadily now, though I have no doubt that the development of birth control is a more important factor".

Madeleine Simms said that the large majority of Irish women who come to Britain for an abortion are in their twenties and thirties.

"What I suspect is happening, on the pattern of abortion clients from other parts of Europe, is that the better off middle-class women who can afford to travel to obtain their abortions abroad are coming to England for this purpose, while the younger, poorer and more panic stricken girls are staying at home to have their unwanted babies. I also suspect, though I have no way of proving this, that the Irish teenagers who do come to England for this purpose, are the more educated, middle-class ones who have powerful reasons, educational and career, for wishing to avoid premature motherhood.

"Another view, which might be crudely labelled the Marxist view, is that nothing worthwhile can be achieved until society is restructured, and the position of women fundamentally altered. Although I find this view quite persuasive in some respects, I have to say that I also regard it as a counsel of despair.

"The history of the birth control and the abortion law reform movements both show that you do not need to wait until everything can be done in order to do a lot of useful and worthwhile things, that themselves develop an impetus that changes society.

"This leaves us with the middle view, that by providing appropriate birth control facilities for the young, much can be done to help them to maturity and to provide a better quality of life for all

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

CLASSROOM SEGREGATION

A National Secular Society memorandum to the Inner London Education Authority Labour Group has caused considerable controversy. And not for the first time the Society has been accused of racism.

The NSS statement concerned a renewed application for voluntary-aided status on behalf of the girls' primary section of an ultra-orthodox Jewish (Hassidic) school at Stamford Hill. Previous applications had been rejected in 1979 and 1983. The latest attempt to attain voluntary-aided status has the backing of the London Borough of Hackney.

In anticipation of the racist smear, NSS president Barbara Smoker said: "It is . . . discriminatory to isolate children on grounds of their religious and ethnic background and of their sex".

Having Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools paid for by ratepayers and taxpayers may seem a progressive step, in line with multi-cultural and bi-lingualism. "But in fact it is most divisive", the NSS asserts.

The Society "views with alarm the extension of voluntary-aided status to such schools, as this would mean their rapid proliferation — segregating the children of immigrant families, pressurised by their religious leaders, from the host population. And this would inevitably exacerbate the existing prejudice and discrimination against immigrants. Indeed, as most immigrant parents realise, State schooling is in the best interests of their children".

Rabbi Abraham Pinter, principal of the run-down school and a Labour member of Hackney Borough Council, claims that Hassidic parents find it difficult to pay the school fees (£20 a week for each child) as these families average seven children.

The NSS declares that this seems to be a good argument for them to be exposed to some responsible sex education. It points out that as most of the parents of the children attending Yesodey Hatorah School were born in Britain, they could reasonably be expected to have integrated by now, at least to the extent of speaking English and sending their children to State schools.

"But in fact they still speak Yiddish, their children are made to wear strange clothing and observe the strictest religious customs, they refuse to allow them to be educated with English children, they treat their girls very differently from their boys, and half of each school day is devoted to religious and Hebrew studies. There are surely enough out-of-school hours each week for religious instruction and practice, without trespassing on the time required for legitimate school subjects."

S AND NOTES

CHRISTIAN MALICE

As a young man, Hesketh Pearson, the noted biographer, got himself into hot water by remarking to his father that if Christ was anything like the average Christian, "he must have been a pretty poisonous person". A rather sweeping statement, no doubt. Not all Christians are out of the same mould as the Paisleyites, the Moral Majority or Opus Dei. Quakers and Unitarians are tolerable, whilst even some of the evangelical fold are only slightly barmy and much given to wishful thinking.

Nevertheless Pearson's dictum is basically sound. Christianity produces some very unpleasing specimens of inhumanity, six of whom have recently sponsored a display advertisement in the *Daily Mail*. It consists of an extract from the New Testament (Romans 1, 18-32) which is a tirade of hatred directed in general at those who "did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God", and in particular at homosexuals.

It seems that the perverse Christian deity "gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not have been done". Consequently "they" have become filled with envy, strife, deceit and malice. In addition "they" are "gossips, slanderers . . . arrogant and boastful". *Daily Mail* readers may be forgiven for thinking that the advertisers were referring to America's Pearlygate televangelists, presently in the throes of sexual and financial scandals. But the advertisement is headed AIDS?, and clearly it is homosexuals at whom these strictures from the Christian horror comic are directed.

Freethinkers normally enjoy a chuckle when pompous nonentities waste their money on newspaper insertions of biblical texts or "grateful thanks to St Jude for favours received". But the concluding passage of this particular advertisement has a rather serious connotation: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do such things but also approve of those who practise them" (Romans 1, 32).

The AIDS threat has already provoked physical assault and attacks on homosexuals' property. Ignorance fosters fear and hostility, prompting irrational elements to seek a scapegoat, invariably an already harassed minority group. And when religious zealots proclaim that by means of an epidemic "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness", it takes on an extra and often murderous dimension. Thus the "perfidious Jew" was blamed for the Black Death, and thousands were massacred in Church-fomented pogroms.

It is not only adult homosexuals who are the victims both of AIDS and religious obscurantism. Italy has been scandalised by the case of unwanted

The Society's critics include Left-winger Ken Livingstone. Writing in the *London Daily News* he referred to "the attempt to destroy Catholicism in Britain and Ireland" in post-Reformation times. Mr Livingstone is wilfully blind if he does not recognise that religious fanaticism and social divisiveness in Northern Ireland is perpetuated by classroom segregation which isolates Protestant and Catholic children.

The most idiotic response to the statement came from ILEA vice-chairman, Tony Powell. He took "greatest exception to the racist comments put forward", and said he was "taking advice as to whether it should be referred to the Race Relations Board for action".

But the NSS has had strong support from other quarters. Derek Wilkes, co-chairman of the Association of Humanistic Judaism, said: "I do not find anything in the memorandum to ILEA about Jewish schools to be in the least offensive. . .

"When a person of any origin makes his permanent home in England, he must teach his children to understand about English language, history and culture. Of course that does not mean that he may not also be devoted to his Jewish heritage as well, including the religious side if he so wishes".

Myra Polya issued a statement to her fellow-members of the ILEA Labour Group informing them that she supported, without reservation, the NSS memorandum.

"I am sure", she wrote, "that when you separate children at school, whether by sex, religion or class, you perpetuate and encourage divisions in our society.

"The cult of the Yesodey Hatorah is particularly repugnant because of the male repression of the female and the enormous amount of school time spent on religious teaching. Indoctrinating young children with the attitude that women should expect years of pregnancy, walk behind men, be excluded from full participation in religious ceremonies and not have knowledge of their legal rights, is absolutely contradictory to ILEA's policy of Equal Opportunities".

Lord Willis informed Barbara Smoker: "I am entirely in agreement with your views about the Hassidic sect. . . I pass through Stamford Hill and I see many of these pathetic little children in their quaint garb".

Lord Houghton of Sowerby declared he was "fully in support of NSS policy" on this issue.

Brigid Brophy wrote: "I applaud and entirely agree with your argument".

AIDS-infected babies whose only home is a hospital ward. The mother of one is a heroin-addicted prostitute, and when it was discovered that she was carrying the virus she wanted to have an abortion. A priest persuaded her not to do so. An AIDS social worker said of the stricken infants: "Many die of loneliness before they die of AIDS".

The situation is somewhat better in Britain where many of the babies born to mothers carrying the AIDS virus are with their families. Some are being cared for by foster parents. But the number of unwanted babies is certain to increase. Perhaps the well-heeled signatories to the *Daily Mail* advertisement — they include a chartered accountant, a company director, a managing director and a Professor of Rheumatology — will offer a home to an innocent victim of AIDS.

A JOB FOR MARY

Mary Whitehouse has been having another go at BBC 1's *EastEnders*. She sees the hugely popular soap as an insidious threat to the family and traditional moral values. With *EastEnders* weekly audience topping the 20 million mark, the doyen of moral crusaders may find that on this occasion she has bitten off more than she can chew.

Commenting on a recent episode, Mrs Whitehouse was annoyed because Dot Cotton, the one and only Christian in Albert Square, "is made out to be a crackpot, the most prejudiced lady you could come across". Quite so; just the type of lady you would find at the church door on Sunday morning collecting signatures to a Whitehouse-style petition.

Talking of church — and mindful of Mrs Whitehouse's concern that children should be shielded from scenes of violence and depravity — she might be interested to hear of a Good Friday attraction at St John the Baptist Church, Fleet Street, Coventry. It was announced in the parish magazine as "Stations of the Cross for the children". Perhaps she will complain to the Rector, the Rev Trevor Southgate, about children being taken around a ghoulish exhibition of torture, bloodshed and violent death.

Over to you, Mrs Whitehouse.

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CHANNEL 4 STANDS FIRM

Christian propagandists are up in arms over Channel 4's refusal to televise a video series entitled *Jesus Then and Now*. It was produced by the Trinity Trust and "presents the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and its relevance to the lives we lead today".

Colonel Larsson, principal of the Salvation Army International Training College, hailed the series as "a superb example of 20th-century technology in the service of communicating the Good News".

The Rev John I. Morgans, chairman of the Council of Churches for Wales, described it as "a most helpful tool for evangelism".

The Rt Rev Maurice Taylor, secretary of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland, commended *Jesus Then and Now* "as a means of helping people on their journey of faith".

The Rev Kenyon Wright, general secretary of the Scottish Churches Council, praised *Jesus Then and Now* as "a critical yet balanced presentation of mainstream Christianity".

The professional broadcasters decided that it was anything but critical or balanced. Bob Towler, Channel 4's religious programmes editor, dismissed *Jesus Then and Now* as "a propaganda statement of one particular viewpoint, made by those who adhere to it".

Another Channel 4 spokesman described it as "rather like a party political broadcast, which gave just one point of view from a small sector. And we felt it was not of a sufficiently high quality to show".

Now Sir Peter Mills, MP, is trying to get broadcasters' decision reversed. A letter-writing campaign has been launched by religious pressure groups and publications.

Freethinker readers are urged to encourage Channel 4 to resist attempts to compel them to show a religious propaganda video described by its producers as "ideal for home-based evangelism, Christian teaching and Bible study". Letters should be sent to Jeremy Isaacs, Chief Executive, Channel 4 Television, 60 Charlotte Street, London W1P 2AX.

Sutton Humanist Group was one of around 40 local organisations that participated in a recent display at the town's Europa Gallery. The Group has booked the same venue at a cost of £400 for its own exhibition in September. In preparation for this ambitious project the Group has produced an excellent Paper in which 16 questions on humanism are considered. It provides a very good basis for discussion and can be highly recommended to other groups. Copies are obtainable from the secretary, George Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, telephone 01-642 8796. A donation of 30p is suggested, but a bit extra would not come amiss.

Moving the Bishops

T. F. EVANS

Mrs Thatcher's controversial choice of the new Bishop of Birmingham has resulted in widespread comment on the absurdity of a Prime Minister who might be a non-Anglican or even a non-Christian appointing Anglican bishops. But is this practice any more absurd than having an established Church of England now that Anglicanism is another minority interest, like train spotting or growing prize marrows?

Readers of this journal have long been accustomed to finding a great deal of simple and harmless fun in the strange relations between the Church of England and the machinery of the State. The complicated interaction of religion and politics with its antecedents going back to — nobody quite knows where — or rather, perhaps according to individual choice, to Saint Augustine or the less defensible impulses of King Henry VIII has culminated in the ludicrous situation whereby the present monarch finds herself Head of the Church and its supreme governor. It is not a subject on which she frequently expresses her opinions — not in public, that is — but it is unlikely that filling this particular office gives her very great pleasure or even interests her very much.

On a chessboard, the bishop moves in a strange diagonal course. It is as if his passage across the board were the resultant of two forces moving almost in opposite directions and that the path taken by this particular piece is the result, in effect, of an uneasy compromise. Something of the sort happens in real life, if the affairs of the Church may be thought to be more "real" than those of an orderly and intelligible game of chess.

Up to a few years ago bishops were appointed by the Queen on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. In 1977, a new procedure was worked out whereby a specially created body, the Crown Appointments Commission, put forward two names for any vacancy and the Prime Minister made the final choice between those two on which to base the recommendation to the monarch. It is in the last few weeks that the situation has become unsatisfactory. Two names were put forward for a vacancy in the See of Birmingham. The Prime Minister made her decision and chose the one that was only the second choice of the Church itself. Nobody knows on exactly what ground the choice was made, but some disquiet has been heard because of the noisy gloating by a back-bench MP for a Birmingham constituency who announced publicly that he had "lobbied" Mrs Thatcher not to choose the first of the names as the cleric in question was thought "too Left-wing".

Records of the past have been examined and we were reminded that, in the words of the *Daily Telegraph*: "During the Labour administrations between

the wars, several appointments were blatantly political, including that of E. W. Barnes to the diocese of Birmingham". The article, from which this passage is quoted, goes on to refer to the appointment, in effect by Winston Churchill, of "a noted socialist", William Temple, to the highest of all ecclesiastical posts, that of Archbishop of Canterbury, during the last war. The implication is clear that, whereas governments of the Right have been balanced and fair in their selections, those of the Left have used the appointments of bishops for unashamedly political purposes. To argue this out would take more time and space than are available, but it would be a bold historian who contended that the bishops, as a whole, have represented an anti- or even a mildly non-conservative force in British life. Admittedly, in the very recent past, several bishops have spoken in the House of Lords and elsewhere against the policies of the present administration, but it is at least arguable that the cause of this may be as much the nature of those policies as the original political disposition, if any, of the bishops in question.

It seems to be generally agreed that the position is unsatisfactory and changes in the procedure for the appointment of bishops, and perhaps quite drastic ones, should be made. (So far, there are no signs of a widespread desire to end the actual establishment of the Church, but perhaps that will come in time.) Without any firm hope that they may be acted upon, we put forward, with the usual modesty and deference, a few ideas for consideration by those in high places who will be required to find a way out of the maze.

First, the views of the present Government on democratic election should be examined with great care. The trade unions are in the process of being given, in a quaint phrase, "back to their members". In other words, some officers who were not previously subject to regular declarations of support by union membership are now to be elected. We might lay down that all bishops and archbishops too should be subject to the processes of democratic election. It might be difficult to decide on the size of the constituency. All clergymen should have a vote, of course, but what about the laity? In view of the apparently antediluvian attitude of large sections of the Church of England towards one half of the human race, it will be a difficult problem to decide whether women will be permitted to vote. Further, in view of strong Government support for the participation of parents in the running of schools, the possibility should be carefully examined of giving the parents of clergy special votes in any elections that take place. Advocates of this particular version of democracy will no doubt call for special votes for

the grandparents of clergymen as well.

The trouble with development on these lines is that one can never tell where it will end. Several newspapers, and not only those few unsympathetic to the Government, have assured us that the first question asked by the Prime Minister, when confronted with a name submitted for an appointment that is in the hands of the head of the Government, is "Is he one of us?" There have been suggestions that it is the intention of the present administration, if given the time to do so, to fill all the offices it can with holders sympathetic to its own point of view. We have no reason to know whether these suggestions are true or not, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that some strictures on the BBC point in that direction; with the removal of some services, such as the health service, from control by elected members to oversight by nominated boards; and the limitation of the powers of local government generally also indicate the same process.

The World's First Spaceman— or a Flight of Fancy?

About now, 500 million people, if they are assiduous in their religious observances, will celebrate an alleged event known as The Ascension. According to the Gospels, this was the upward locomotion of the resuscitated corpse of the Second Person of the Christian Trinity, Jesus. The ascent ended in heaven — a place not located in any known galaxy — where, according to one Gospel, Jesus perched himself on the right hand of the First Person of the Trinity. Another account, in Acts, has Jesus levitating only as far as a cloud — cumulus, nimbus or cirrus not specified — where he was conveniently lost sight of.

Let us try to reconstruct what happened at The Ascension. The three God-inspired accounts all agree that Jesus went *up*: he rose from the earth's surface. How high he went we are not told, but our most powerful astronomical telescopes, which can see upwards for distances measurable in countless light-years, have still not been able to penetrate as far as his heavenly destination. Nor are we told the length of time his journey took, though it was obviously less than a hundred years, since by then Mark and Luke had written their Gospels mentioning his arrival. Nevertheless, Jesus must have been travelling at a colossal rate, even if he journeyed for the full century. Certainly he had to attain the 25,000 mph Second Cosmic Velocity necessary to escape the earth's gravity. And since he was clad in only a robe, the friction with the earth's atmosphere must have burnt it off him, so that he continued his space-trek stark naked and somewhat singed.

Patently, many questions spring to mind, and

There seems a strong likelihood that, if the Government does not turn to the option, suggested above, of increased democracy as stipulated for the trade unions, it could go in the diametrically opposed direction and gradually take all appointments into its own hands. Thus, we could find that the Government of the day will be required to appoint, say, the committee of the MCC and the managers of all league football clubs. The Government will have, if not the final say, certainly a very strong one, in selecting the "stars" of the weekly "Top of the Pops". The University of Oxford will never again be allowed to elect its own Vice-Chancellor but will accept the name sent in a plain envelope from Downing Street. The Prime Minister will make the seedings for the Wimbledon tennis championships and, of course, decide who has won the Booker prize for the best novel of the year.

Some of us may not like the prospect, but we will at least know where we are.

ERIC WESTMAN

neither Paul nor the evangelists make any attempt to answer them. For instance, how did Jesus breathe in raw space, without a suitable space-suit? How did he survive the bitter cold of space, after his initial roasting? What provisions did he take for his long journey — multiplicable loaves and fishes? How did he navigate around black holes and quasars? And how did he effect his landing in heaven? The God-inspired biblical accounts say nothing on these matters.

Again, how did he — a material Earth-entity — manage in heaven, a spiritual state? What happened when he wanted to "spend a penny", take a bath, have his hair cut, or even go for a stroll with nothing to walk on? And how much of Jesus actually ascended to heaven on that trip, bearing in mind that when he was eight days old he had been circumcised. Was his prepuce already up there waiting for him, ready to re-attach itself, and did it still fit? After all, there is a great difference in size between an eight-day-old baby and a man of 33.

With so many questions left unanswered, it is readily understandable why executive-status professional Christians such as the Bishop of Durham admit that they do not believe in The Ascension. Perhaps Acts-compiler Paul was smart to make it just a mini-Ascension to a handy cloud which, no doubt, soon dispersed or disappeared over the horizon, along with its divine occupant.

But one thing is certain: despite Christianity's efforts to supplant Yuri Gagarin by Jesus Christ as the world's original space-traveller, it has not succeeded in expunging the Russian from the *Shell*

Book of Firsts. For not only is the evidence overwhelming in the case of the Soviet cosmonaut, there is none at all for Jesus. Indeed, there is no evidence at all that he ever existed. Unless, of course, you count a few truck-loads of bones, nails, teeth, blood and foreskins. And in that case, if so much of him remains down here, he obviously never made the epic flight claimed for him by the Bible.

Parishioners at South Brent, Devon, were rather miffed by their vicar's Easter message. The Rev David Niblett wrote in the parish magazine: "Only take a sip of communion wine in the chalice. You don't get any more of God by taking a large gulp". One parishioner complained: "It gives the impression that people are staggering around and tipping instead of worshipping".

On the Active List: George Barker (1847-1937)

NIGEL H. SINNOTT

And so there passes on one more of the old guard. . . Farewell, my friend, too few of your worth are in dearest and nearest to your heart. — Profanum the world. Your memory shall always remain an inspiration to me to carry on the work that was Vulgus (1937)

This year marks the 140th anniversary of the birth, and this month the 50th anniversary of the death, of one of the many stalwart freethinkers who migrated from Britain to Australia and New Zealand during the 1880s.

George H. Barker was born in Norwich on 4 February 1847 and became a clipper in the boot-making trade. This was an industry which seemed to attract or foster reformers, for it was the radical shoemakers of Northampton who repeatedly elected Charles Bradlaugh to his seat in the House of Commons.

Barker was a man of independent mind from boyhood. He was only ten or so when he revolted against the cruelty inherent in the Christian concept of hell. In 1871 he heard Bradlaugh lecture in Norwich in answer to the Bishop of Peterborough¹. Young Barker was captivated by the famous atheist orator and eventually joined the National Secular Society, of which Bradlaugh was president and founder. One of Barker's proudest possessions was a membership certificate, stating that he was enrolled on the Society's Active List, signed by Bradlaugh on 15 March 1881.

During the 1880s a number of NSS members, such as William Whitehouse Collins, Joseph Symes and William Willis, migrated to New Zealand and Australia to improve their fortunes, to act as evangelists for secularism, or both. In late 1887 Barker joined the exodus, presumably in the hope of better employment, and arrived in New Zealand on 2 February 1888. He settled in Christchurch, continued as a bootmaker, and became active in the freethought movement there led, from 1890 to 1918,

by W. W. Collins.

Little at present is recorded of Barker's middle years. We know that he married and his wife died before him; but they had no children.

Barker lived until the age of 90. In his old age he was looked after by Mrs W. H. Albrecht and was befriended by a young Australian, Harry Hastings Pearce, who was working in New Zealand at the time and also writing on behalf of rationalism in Auckland and Christchurch under the *nom-de-plume* of "Profanum Vulgus" (Latin for the common crowd). Of his friend, Pearce wrote:

Mr Barker . . . impressed me as being a grand and human character. Honesty and sincerity, a certain wistfulness, a keen sense of humour and mental integrity combined to make him lovable and really intriguing. He was a convinced atheist of the Bradlaugh school and had no time for such terms as agnostic, etc. I have quite often heard him repeat G. W. Foote's designation of an agnostic² as being "an atheist with a top-hat on".

He had a wonderful grasp of the real fundamentals of forthright freethought. He rejected Christianity as something vile and inhuman in its teachings and history.

Pearce took some photographs during this period which show Barker as a very alert old man with a full moustache and magnificent, flowing side-whiskers — still very much the 1880s freethinker!

George Barker died at Ashburton, near Christchurch, on 21 May 1937 and was buried at Bromley Cemetery after a secular funeral service read by B. R. McLaren from a text composed by W. W. Collins (died 1921).

Before his death Barker was anxious to preserve his NSS membership certificate. He gave it to his young friend Pearce "on my promise to preserve it as long as I lived and make provision for its security after my death". Pearce was as good as his word: he took the certificate back with him to Australia in 1938 and treasured it until his own death in 1984. By a strange coincidence Harry H. Pearce, in his

final years, was befriended by a keen member of the National Secular Society who came to live in Victoria.

The National Library of Australia, in Canberra, now holds the Harry H. Pearce Collection which must rate as the finest assembly of freethought books, pamphlets, manuscripts and memorabilia in the Southern Hemisphere. It includes, of course, the certificate Charles Bradlaugh signed for George Barker in 1881.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Dr Edward Royle (University of York) for establishing this date. Barker's obituary suggests he was about 18 when he first heard Bradlaugh; in fact he was 24.

2 *Truth Seeker* (Auckland), May 1937: p 3. There are a number of printer's devils in this issue: "agnostic", for example, appears as "aristocrat" in one place. I have attempted here to reproduce what I believe "Profanum Vulgus" submitted, rather than what was printed.

OBITUARY

Mrs J. Dyke

Janine Dyke died suddenly at her home in Hampton Magna, Warwickshire, at the age of 44. A staunch supporter of the Labour Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Mrs Dyke was a nurse by profession. She leaves two young children, together with her husband, mother, brother and other relatives.

There was a large gathering of family mourners, friends and colleagues at the secular committal ceremony which took place at the Mid-Warwickshire Crematorium, Oakley Wood.

Mr F. Dowson

Philip Howell writes: Fred Dowson, who died at his home in Diss, Norfolk, was a former head of the Modern Languages Department at Lowestoft Grammar School. His career at the school was a long and happy one, and he encouraged many of his pupils to go on to successful careers. Many of them remained in touch with their former teacher until his death at the age of 81.

After his official retirement, a chance enquiry led to a further career as a music teacher.

In 1981, Fred Dowson became editor of the Diss Town Guide, and took great pride in adding literary skill to a practical work.

Throughout his years as a freethinker, Fred Dowson scorned talk of "the good old days", and encouraged hope for the future. His life was an inspiration to others, and a demonstration of how one can enjoy it.

There was a secular committal ceremony at St Faiths Crematorium, Norwich.

A Fractured and

As one of Australia's most widely read journalists and forthright atheists, Phillip Adams is on the receiving end of a considerable correspondence from religious readers who seek to save that which was lost, or to castigate an irredeemable sinner. He asserts that their lofty confidence in Christian truths conceals the reality of confusion, division and often hatred among "true believers".

Over the years I must have received 15,000 letters from angry or conciliatory Christians, trying to show me the error of my irreligious ways. Whilst the authors of these epistles would disagree on this or that article of faith, arguing amongst themselves about papal infallibility, virgin birth, immaculate conception, bodily assumption, reformation, fundamentalism, creationism and so forth, they've one thing in common — a serenity that is, in fact, an ineffable smugness and a sense of their spiritual superiority. Each writer is convinced that his or her brand of Christianity is the one true faith and that everyone else is in serious, tragic theological error.

Just as the most intense hatreds can be found within political parties, not between them, Christians are forever fracturing and factionalising their faith and branding one another heretics. It's Protestant versus Catholic, Catholic versus Catholic, Methodist versus Baptist, Jehovah's Witness versus Mormon, and so on. Other beliefs, like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, scarcely rate a mention.

There's the paradox. They write to Adams attacking him for his patronising poo-hooing attitude to Christianity, accusing him of writing in ignorance, of not knowing what he's talking about, of having a closed mind to the unassailable truth of the New Testament, whilst dismissing religions of equal authority and, more often than not, greater antiquity, than their own. In short, they look down *their* noses, patronise and poo-hoo other people's gods. When it comes to the belief systems of the rest of the planet, Christians are sceptics, agnostics, atheists.

In short, their relation to most religions is the same as mine to all religions. Yet my Christian correspondents remain blissfully indifferent to the contradiction. The letters I get from true believers talk about Christianity as if it were a country they'd discovered, as a result of bold and brave exploration. The fact is it's a country that discovered them. Far from coming to their faith at the end of a long journey, they got it as a result of standing still.

For 99 per cent of all believers, of whatever ilk, religion is a matter of geography. If you're born here, you're a Hindu; a few hundred kilometres north you're a Sikh; a day's drive south-west makes you a Jain; and if you turn left at the train station,

Factionalised Faith

PHILLIP ADAMS

you're a Muslim, which *sort* of Muslim depends on the side of the street. You don't embrace a religion; it embraces you. It involves no choice, no process of evaluation and abhors independent inquiry. Your beliefs come with the territory, like your entitlement to vote in this or that electorate.

In surrendering to the local orthodoxy, we are confident, self-assured and finally, arrogant. If you're born in Russia, you're Russian Orthodox. If you're born in Rome you're Catholic (either that, or the local anti-clericalism propels you into the Communist Party). If you're born in Northern Ireland, you're in trouble.

While the whites of America talk about being Born Again Christians, the embracing of a belief is, 99.9 per cent of the time, a function of where you were born the first time. Unless the Reverend Sun Myung Moon is in town, or a recently imported maharishi is buying up the local real estate, you've little chance of being born, or born again, anything else.

But many young people are becoming theologically promiscuous. Just as they reject mum's and dad's social attitudes and political beliefs, they're going in for praying around, for religious exoticism. Whilst most kids seem content to live on a diet of Coke and hamburgers, they want a spiritual diet of different flavours. Hence the enthusiasm for curry-scented beliefs like the Hare Krishna, which gets kids out of yuppie costumes into socks, thongs, saffron robes and Kojak haircuts.

There have been many attempts to export faiths, to break from the gravitational pull of geography. The most militant marketers were, of course, the Christians, whose missionaries were so zealous that local faiths were uprooted or ploughed in. The imposition of the Bible meant a scorched earth policy, a cultural uprooting from which many ancient societies have never recovered.

For centuries a Christian in Japan was as rare and incongruous as a date palm in the Arctic. The Japanese must have been the most successful in warding off the tentacles of Christianity, by the simple expedient of bolting their country's doors and making Osaka and Kyoto as impregnable as Lhasa.

Many people are forced or choose to abandon their culture or nationality and immigrate. When they do, they invariably take their religion with them. Remarkably few people become expatriates from their faith. They change their landscape, not their mindscape. Quite apart from the phenomenon of proselytising, religion has proved stronger than nationality.

People talk about making a decision for Christ, but it's not a considered decision. It's not something

that is arrived at after evaluation and comparison. We buy cars and hi-fi sets with more care than we acquire our religious beliefs. We buy bananas with more caution and objectivity.

Ah, the arrogance of the Christian, claiming copyright on God and morality, proudly wearing his blinkers, dismissing ideas he's never examined, concepts he's never considered, whilst proclaiming an unswerving belief in a sacred text that, by and large, he's never studied. Mind you, they're always telling me that it's finally a matter of faith. And when I read the familiar patterns of their arguments, it's painfully obvious that it's a blind faith.

If you haven't tested your beliefs, you're not entitled to them. I find I know considerably more about the Old and New Testaments than most of my Christian critics. It's a pleasure to get a well-argued letter from a true believer, someone who's taken the time and trouble to study the beliefs he or she lives by. But I grow, oh, so bored with the bags of mail from people who've inherited their Christianity from their parents, whose depth of understanding comes from Bible stories and images of the crib in shop windows at Christmas time. They're like people who vote from habit, without beginning to understand the issues, totally reliant on the how-to-vote card issued at a polling booth. Most Christians (and most Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists) are in exactly the same boat. They were given how-to-pray cards at the age of three or four and haven't given it a moment's real thought ever since.

Christianity presents us with the most confused of shunting yards, with rails going off in all directions. Which timetable to believe? Which train to catch? Everywhere collisions, derailments, a cacophony of huffings and puffings. The appeal is to people who want to run their lives according to central planning. And yet . . . Whilst claiming serenity and certainty, Christianity is entropic, encompassing everything from the whooping and hollering, speaking in tongues and charismatic movements to the austere, withdrawn life of a closed order. Everything from the radical work of priests in battling fascist regimes in South America to the racist beliefs of white supremacists in South Africa. I suppose you can argue that diversity is both inevitable and healthy. Strength in disunity. On the other hand, it's hard to think of an organisation, or a philosophy, in comparable disarray.

It is hard to produce a single issue on which Christians agree, least of all on the significance or even the reality of the Resurrection. If you put all the competing crosses of the contending Christs together, you'd have more than enough for the graveyards of Ypres and Flanders.

BOOKS

LIBERATING TECHNOLOGY, by John Graves. Peter Owen £12.50

This is a book for everyone who wants to keep in step with the changes shaping the modern industrial world. An unstoppable revolutionary technology is rapidly taking over. Do we drift and stumble our way into the new society of automation, instantaneous, universal inter-communication, and micro-electronics — in their multifarious forms and applications — or do we get to grips with the facts, and the decisions that arise from them, in order to give to the future a pattern that will enhance human life?

John Graves not only clearly reviews the mounting changes; he gives us piece after piece of information which puts the scale of change into perspective. For example, he tells us of the XMP series of computers, launched in 1984 by Cray Research, which "is capable of 1, 260 million calculations per second. In other words, if it takes a person one minute to perform each calculation, it would require 2,400 years for him to accomplish what the computer does in one second". Or again, "A team at Glasgow University is set to produce chips so microscopic that about 4 million words . . . could be inscribed on the area of a pinhead".

But what — the inevitable question — about jobs, as this degree of hyper-technology penetrates not only into the factory but the office and, indeed, almost everywhere else: health, education, science, design and the rest? Here the author sets out the pessimists' case (twelve million unemployed by 1990) and the optimists' case (new jobs will burgeon with the new processes). He admits both as possibilities but holds out other prospects: the intelligent use of the new powers to liberate mankind from old drudgeries and shortages.

The road to liberation is wide open, but it will need vast changes in attitudes and habits if we are to get society launched along it. The old jobs, or many of them, are undoubtedly going, with middle management just as vulnerable to redundancy as machine minders. This, however, can be countermanded by a different approach to work. Work and skill will still be required in the new society, but day-by-day work for a particular employer is likely to become much rarer than it is today. Instead, many people will live by offering their skills for a fee to whoever happens to want their particular skills at a particular time. Many more people than at present will make their livings as independent workers.

But supposing the work does not come along in sufficient quantity? Here we run into the new-style economics that will have to be matched to our

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modified society. We all need food, clothes, housing and a range of other goods. Producing these in the quantities required by people is not a problem, with all the know-how now available to us. The new-age problem will be, rather, how to get the consuming power around — money that is — so that production and consumption match, near enough, and so as to ensure everyone has his, or her, fair share. And that is best achieved by giving everyone a basic income.

The puritans are likely to throw up their hands in horror at such a suggestion, but it makes excellent pragmatic and human sense in contemporary circumstances. No one will be doomed to poverty and everyone will have an economic base from which to develop his/her own interests and powers.

Where is the money to come from? That is an unreal question. At present, we are providing huge sums as social security and supplementary benefits, and further huge sums administering a confused and inefficient system of welfare. Why not rationalize the lot, and give every man, woman and child a basic income by right? The author gives us the hard figures. 'Total taxes paid from income in 1982 were £45 billion. Total social security benefits expenditure in the period 1981-82 was £29 billion'. So the social dividend is mainly a matter of reorganizing funds. The taxes on those earning more than their basic income would not need to be exorbitant.

Obviously, three huge advantages would accrue: living on the social dividend would not be felt as a disgrace — as unemployment plus social security now is; everyone would be freed to build his/her personal life according to abilities and interests; and the spread of consuming power in society would give national economics a much greater stability.

For Humanists, the sort of changes envisaged in this book are pertinent. We believe in the Open Society. Modern technology makes openness inevitable. Once information technology (IT) has taken over, old-style manipulation by secrecy becomes ever more difficult. Democratic values are also fostered. Society will tend to be a system of networks which will only function well if those involved in any system are drawn into active participation. Finally, the new technology gives us the means to build a really caring society, which leaves nobody out and puts nobody down. We shall at last have a society in which self-respect and self-determination — within a benign social context — will be available to everyone. "For once", the author concludes. "technology is on the side of the idealists".

JAMES HEMMING

REVIEWS

GEORGE ELIOT, by Marghanita Laski. Thames and Hudson, £3.95

It is amazing how much interesting information about the life and works of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), literary giant and freethinker, Marghanita Laski has packed into a mere 120 pages, decorated with 123 illustrations. George Eliot's character, with its startling inconsistencies, its grandeurs and pettinesses, is sympathetically but unsparingly portrayed.

Queen Victoria, we learn, was a great admirer of her novels, and wrote privately that she did not

blame George Eliot, given the circumstances, for living as George Henry Lewes' wife ("In God's eyes, I believe . . . that will be considered as holy and right").

It came as a surprise to discover that George Eliot was completely out of fashion with the literary establishment from shortly after her death in 1880 until some 40 years ago. She must always have had her devotees. My mother has told me that as an adolescent she was "in love" with Adam Bede, and at her instigation I read and enjoyed *Silas Marner* while my age was in one figure. (And what a splendid television film it made last Christmas!)

I come away from Marghanita Laski's book, in the Literary Lives series, happily looking forward to a good re-read of George Eliot.

MARGARET McILROY

LETTERS

ANTONY FLEW AND THE NSS

I accept your correction (News and Notes, April 1987) of my remark in a letter to Karl Heath (11 March) that Antony Flew was "driven out of the National Secular Society for political reasons", and I agree that he "left the Society for his own political reasons"; though I think it is fair to say that political pressure was applied on both sides.

In return I hope you will accept my correction of your remark that I have been writing "in support of" Antony Flew. In general I don't share his political views, and in particular I disagree with what he says in his contribution to the book *Anti-Racism: A Threat to Education and Value*, and I dislike the way he says it; but I do defend his right to say it, and I insist that he says nothing racist.

I sympathise with Karl Heath's strong feelings about racism, but I suspect that they have prevented him from appreciating the genuine dangers of "anti-racism"; and I repeat that he has seriously misrepresented the book, both in his review (March 1987) and in his letter (April 1987).

NICOLAS WALTER

A DENIAL OF RACISM

Because of my present absence in the USA I have only now learnt that you published in your March issue what purports to be a review of F. Palmer (Ed) *Anti-Racism: An Assault on Education and Value*. Karl Heath here begins with references to my Vice-Presidency of the Rationalist Press Association and frequent contributions to *New Humanist*. (Certainly before your time as Editor, and while your columns were still open to enemies of socialism, I also contributed equally gladly though less frequently to *The Freethinker*.) Since Heath ended with the question: "Where does Antony Flew stand?" I presume that you wish, as obviously you ought, to print my belated reply.

The subtitle of that book is perhaps unfortunate, since it apparently suggests to some people that the essays included are in favour of racism; rather than, as of course they are, against several quite different policies currently promoted under the false flag of

"Anti-Racism". With regard to my own contribution, I can only suggest that Heath is moved by some wilfully blind and to me inexplicable personal animosity. For, not surprisingly, he can find only a single sentence to quote: "What, for instance, should we think of what called itself a system of criminal justice yet demanded that convicted criminals be treated in all respects like everyone else?"

The context from which he tore this poor trophy is the first section of my paper, in which I try "to spell out what it is to be a racist, and why it is wrong". My argument was that racism — advantaging or disadvantaging individuals for no other or better reason than their membership of some particular racial set — is morally wrong, because unjust. It is unjust because it essentially involves treating unequally those who are in relevant respects equal. (Racial set membership is rarely, if ever, properly relevant. Indeed the only possible exceptions which I have ever been able to suggest are, all other things being equal, preferring a black actor to play Othello and a white actress Desdemona!)

All this argument Heath ignored, commenting savagely, maliciously, but quite absurdly: "There seems little doubt which members of our society Flew has in mind when he draws this analogy with convicted criminals".

If to be a Rationalist and a Humanist were indeed to behave with Heath's furious contempt for reason, truth or fairness, then I for one would never have joined such a movement; and had I, in some fit of absence of mind, ever associated myself with such people I should resign forthwith.

ANTONY FLEW

Editorial comment: Nicolas Walter qualifies acceptance of a denial — not a correction — of his statement that Antony Flew "was driven out of the NSS for political reasons" with the totally unjustified allegation that "political pressure was applied on both sides". Professor Flew makes the equally unjustified allegation that "enemies of socialism" are excluded from *The Freethinker*. Many *Freethinker* contributors are opposed to socialism, but in fairness it should be added that few would wish to be associated with the Moonies or Antony Flew.

POLARISING BLACK AND WHITE

Karl Heath's review (March) of *Anti-racism; an Assault on Education and Value* is so full of distortions, wild accusations, illogicalities and red herrings that I, as one of the contributors to that book, scarcely know where to start refuting him. I am sure my fellow-contributors can adequately defend themselves so I shall limit my remarks to one general point and to his references to myself.

The book's purpose is to call into question the clumsy, counter-productive propaganda of the race industry which merely serves to polarise the races and thereby make it all the more difficult to attain the cordial race relations which all decent men and women, whatever their colour, wish to see prevail in this country. It is the abuses and excesses of too many anti-racists which the book seeks to expose. Would Karl Heath accuse those who deplore football hooliganism of also being opposed to football?

I resent his assumption that because I do not share his views on the methods of the anti-racists, then I must be some kind of Tory. As it happens, I resigned from the Labour Party last year (having first voted Labour in 1945) because it no longer has any legitimate claim to be a party of the Left. It is patently clear that too many people in the Labour Party and elsewhere would sooner support the blacks rather than support the Reds — whatever the colour of the latter. Mrs Thatcher must rub her hands with glee when she hears people like Karl Heath and Peter Newsam because they are playing to perfection the reactionary role of polarising the black and white workers of this country and diverting their energies away from the class struggle.

Also, I note that Karl Heath makes no attempt to refute any of my specific exposures of the mendacious propaganda produced by the Institute of Race Relations. Indeed, his letter merely reveals that his education and values have been successfully assaulted by anti-racism and that he has abandoned rationalism for emotionalism.

TOM HASTIE

ANTI-LIBERAL ANTI-RACISM

Karl Heath's review of *Anti-Racism: an Assault on Education and Value* (March) opens with the claim that "'Anti-racism' is a term not normally employed by the opponents of racialist attitudes and practices". This is surprisingly out of touch with reality. It is a well known phenomenon, which Peter Newsam, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, has discussed at length. He described it: "This is a well-thought out, broadly-speaking neo-Marxist, view to be debated on its merits. Anti-racist teaching, on this view is teaching against the form of society we now have in this country. By definition, anyone supporting the present general framework within which we live must, by not being anti-racist be tacitly or overtly racist". Egdehill College, 18.7.84.

If one penetrates Karl Heath's review, one finds that two of his three leading quotes and two other principal quotes are so out of context as to reverse their point. For example he castigates for insensitivity the quote "The word 'racist' is little more than a sophisticated device. . ." having omitted the prefix "Used in such a programme".

His comments on the other leading quote and three more merely show his ignorance. He is ignorant of the Marxist connection, which is established above. He is ignorant of the anti-liberal quality of this movement of "anti-racism", illustrated in a further quote from the same source: "The re-shapers of society find it [integration] irrelevant or even damaging because the

ground on which integration is built is the society we already have which, to re-structurers, is irremediably vitiated by, amongst other things, the way power is located and exercised within the class structure. I said 'damaging' advisedly. If one wants a kettle to boil, the last thing one wants is to reduce the pressure by fiddling with the gas taps. So reducing racial discrimination by reducing anger can be interpreted as an attempt by 'white power' to buy off black resistance".

This leaves one quote — that from Tom Hastie. This is fair: the passage is silly! But not racist.

Karl Heath's letter in the April *Freethinker* is an effusion of worthy, but irrelevant, condemnation. One is surprised by his idea that any movement which opposes something bad is for that reason beyond criticism.

HARRY STOPES-ROE

THE REDUNDANT WATCHMAKER

It is difficult to summarise a one-hour talk in a few hundred words, as I tried to do in *Evolution and Christian Belief* (March); so Tim Lenton (Letters, April) may have cause for thinking that my formulation of the arguments was "too rigid".

Of course, this does not make his "creation science" (sic) statements any the more telling. But if he (or anyone else) really wants to appreciate the neo-Darwinian case for evolution versus creation, he cannot do better than read Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker* (Longman). This deals specifically with the fundamentalist's "Aunt Sally" argument that it is absurd to believe that life emerged and developed by chance. This book carefully demonstrates how natural selection operating on inherited variation adapts organisms to their environment, as has been going on for 3,000 million years. And this simple, inevitable process eliminates the need for a divine watchmaker!

JAMES SANG

NATURAL SELECTION

Tim Lenton is quite right — "the emergence and development of all life by chance" really would be "so absurd as to be incredible" (Letters, April). To say that that is what evolutionists believe is, however, to display a lamentable ignorance of evolution, not to mention the sheer dishonesty of putting such a preposterous fallacy into the mouths of evolutionists. No one believes that evolution works just by chance alone; it has a mechanism — natural selection — and natural selection is not a chance process. In fact it is very selective — hence its name.

There is no reason at all why a non-random selective mechanism acting on random variations should not produce, given enough time, a massive increase in order and complexity. Many processes such as crystal growth and chemical reactions proceed in just that fashion. Molecules collide in an entirely random manner but only certain collisions with the right energies and orientations will result in a reaction. In other words they are selected.

As for transformation of species, one can hardly expect to observe it in a lifetime any more than one could observe the English language develop from Anglo-Saxon but that does not mean one cannot find evidence of it. Imperfect though the fossil record may be, there are some cases, particularly amongst molluscs and corals, of one species giving rise to others with all conceivable intermediate forms being known, and there exist today living examples, called clines, in which two or more geographically isolated and distinct species are connected by a series of intermediate forms. This is hard to explain in terms of

divine creation.

Finally, Mr Lenton mentions the view that life has been on earth for over three billion years but says that the "data is capable of different interpretations". Is he implying that the earth may not be so old? If he is one of those young-earth creationists then I challenge him to produce one single fact or argument that indicates that this planet is only the few thousand years old that creationists believe it to be.

STEPHEN MORTON

SIMPLE WORDS

Norman Bacrac (Letters, April) has completely misunderstood what I wrote about morality. I was not propounding any moral code because I wanted "stability and uniformity". What I did was to set out what "morality" means and then to question whether what he thinks is "morality" is actually "moral". I concluded by stating that, given his "subjective" view of morality, his only consistent course was to abandon "morality" and become an amoralist as I have done.

All of this Mr Bacrac ignores, attributes to me a statement I did not make ("Consequences of acts and particular situations are not to be taken into account") and does not even attempt to answer the conundrum I set him regarding whether acts of which he "morally" disapproves can be moral if carried out by people whose "own criterion for good" says that it is OK to do them.

In order to avoid further misunderstanding I will state as simply as I can my position regarding "morality". It is this: I do not accept the authority of any moral code whether it be religious or secular in origin. My satisfaction is my "criterion" for my actions and that has nothing to do with "morality". If Mr Bacrac can grasp this he will see that the questions he directs at me about devising "moral imperatives" are not based on anything I wrote nor, indeed, anything I believe.

S. E. PARKER

MORALITY AGAINST AUTHORITY

S. E. Parker and S. Nicholls (Letters, March) are both muddled about the link between religion and morality. Religious morality deserves to be rejected because it is based on "objective" rules which cannot be followed, overloading humankind with needless fear and guilt.

However, the rejection of religious morality does not require the rejection of morality in favour of amorality. This is because "morality is social in origin and application", to quote the definition of secularism. "Morality", to quote Reuben Osborn, "is a specific form of social consciousness, of awareness of our relatedness to others without which society would be impossible". Parker's adoption of amorality can be consistent only with emigration from society, which he noticeably does not do.

The idea of moral behaviour as behaviour according to a fixed idea owes more to religion than humanism. Humanism has rejected moral absolutes, not morals! Parker may wish to reconsider his position when he realises he is the Aunt Sally which Mr Nicholls and the religious needs, just waiting to be knocked down.

For humanists, what is "right" is that which enables us to coexist as social beings, and what is "wrong" is that which prevents us from doing so. Norman Bacrac's rejection of "the desire to inflict pain or suffering" and "gratuitous pain" is therefore legitimate (Divine Authority and Morality, February).

S. Nicholls' sketch of secularist views bears little

relation to what secularists generally believe. Contrary to his unsupported assertion, there are rational ways to make sense of our world. A belief for which there are no rational grounds is not a valid basis for rational thought.

COLIN MILLS

TONY BENN'S SPEECH

I feel I must protest at your allowing so much space in *The Freethinker* (April) to Tony Benn's article campaigning for the election of a Labour Government, under the guise of a celebration of Thomas Paine. Surely the job of *The Freethinker* is the encouragement of secular humanism, not the spreading of Labour party propaganda.

The publication of this article might have been acceptable had it been an examination of socialism in the context of Paine's work, but it was more like an examination of Thomas Paine in the context of socialism. Humanism embraces members of all parties and of none. To allow it to be tainted by connection with any one side of the political divide can only play into the hands of our enemies.

I normally leave my copy of *The Freethinker* in the rest room at work when I have finished it, in the hope that it might influence a casual reader. I cannot consider making such use of this edition.

TONY GREEN

ANOTHER OBJECTION

I really do think you deserve a rebuke for having devoted space, prime space at that, in the April *Freethinker* to what is little more than a sequence of socialist slogans hung precariously on the peg of the Thomas Paine anniversary. In the first place, a blatantly political article, whatever its colour, can hardly be said to be supportive of secular humanism, which is the main burden of *The Freethinker*, particularly so in this case, since Paine himself was a confessed deist. Even if we extend the concept of free-thought to include political thinking, the tired old slogans of Tony Benn's lecture could hardly be said to be particularly "free" or for that matter involve much thinking.

The article does not even have much to do with the real Thomas Paine. We are all accustomed to the sort of assertion that says that if So-and-So (Thomas Paine, Jesus, Socrates, Cromwell, or what have you) were alive today then he or she would subscribe to the views of such-and-such an organisation (Militant, Empire Loyalists, Raving Looney Party, or whatever). Such assertions convince only those who make them. They are incapable of demonstration or even of refutation, and serve only to invest with borrowed respectability ideas that have none of their own. Worse than this, such assertions can damage their subjects' reputations by reciprocity. If as Tony Benn seems to maintain, Thomas Paine's views really adumbrated pure socialism, then should we not take the rights of man with a large pinch of salt?

GLYN EMERY

A WORD FOR IT

When the words "spiritual" and "the spirit" crop up in conversation with believers, how do other free-thinkers translate those ideas into a form acceptable to themselves? Or do we have no equivalent part of ourselves?

HAZEL BROTHERS

NSS Urged to Resist Reactionaries

Guests from many parts of the country and representing a wide range of organisations attended the National Secular Society's annual dinner at the Coburg Hotel, London. Barbara Smoker, president of the Society, was in the chair. Alastair Service, general secretary of the Family Planning Association, was guest of honour.

Proposing a toast to the guest of honour, Diane Munday recalled that many years ago she recruited him into the Abortion Law Reform Association. In due course Alastair Service became a highly effective parliamentary lobbyist. He was involved in many campaigns, particularly those relating to divorce, sex education and one-parent families.

Mrs Munday said that the reforms for which Alastair Service had worked were now under attack.

"There is now the Family Campaign, a Conservative Party group. Its aims include repealing the divorce laws and recriminalising homosexuality. It is also against sex education, abortion and test-tube babies.

"Peter Bruinvels, MP, is a supporter of this group. He believes that mothers should stay at home, and would not permit his wife to work. He also believes that God sent him to the House of Commons.

"Let us hope that God sees fit to replace Mr Bruinvels next time around. Then he might find that some wives have to go out to work".

Diane Munday said it was not only our enemies but some of our friends who need watching.

"As a long-standing member of the National Council for Civil Liberties I was horrified to hear their spokesperson attacking the decision to sterilise a severely mentally handicapped 17-year-old, and suggesting that she should be protected from pregnancy by keeping her under control and letting her have an abortion. Some civil liberty there", she declared.

Looking to the future, Diane Munday said that at the newly-formed Health Education Council, Alastair Service would need all his skills of diplomacy, tact and persuasion.

In his response, Alastair Service spoke of the experience since the 1950s of going through a great tide of social reform, and then the tide falling back.

"Diane Munday and I spent three most extraordinary years together in the Abortion Law Reform Association, which was indirectly an offshoot of the NSS, born in 1936, a combination of secular ideas and the ideas of family planners.

"It was no coincidence that ALRA was revived in the 1960s. What had happened was that in 1959 one of those strange periods in Western society came to a head: a period of thought and consideration of where society could move on to, to improve.

"In 1959 was published a book edited by Gerald

Gardiner, later the Lord Chancellor, called *Law Reform Now*. In it is a list of practically all the reforms which happened in the following ten to fifteen years. It was well before its time, because it was not until 1965 that the first of those reforms, Sydney Silverman's Bill to abolish capital punishment, was passed".

Alastair Service then gave an account of his part in bringing about the abortion law reform in 1967, and recounted how many reforms followed—divorce law reform, reform of law relating to homosexuality, the Race Relations Act, equal opportunities for women and reform of the law on adoption. He also played a part in bringing about free family planning on the National Health Service.

But 1975-76 marked the high tide of that period of reform. There had developed a growing number of opposition organisations like LIFE and SPUC and in the last years of the 1970s there were several attempts to reverse abortion law reform. With the advent of the Thatcher government came the full reaction and a drift rightwards. He suggested that it may be necessary for societies to have a period of digestion after a stage of rapid reform.

Even during this period of reaction, some progress has been taking place — on the front of public awareness of health issues like smoking and diet, for example. Also the decision to make sex education comply with government guidelines does at least ensure that sex education takes place, and it doesn't take place in all schools yet.

Alastair Service concluded: "Where are we now? What is going to happen in the future? I don't know what kind of government we are in for next time. I hope somebody is writing away at the political, social and philosophical masterpieces which are going to lead to the next wave of social reform. Somehow we have got to hang on until the next wave starts. That's all you can do; hang on in there".

Proposing a toast to the NSS, author and broadcaster Edward Blishen said that for 50 years he had led a stubbornly secular life.

"I happen to think there is more laughter this side of the fence", he said. "But I believe that the serious things of life are better served too.

"In some respects they are served by laughter. But they are also served by due sorts of gravity. And I cannot believe there is gravity at all, in the sense of there being serious attention to serious matters, if there is not that openness that incessantly looks for, and incessantly respects, evidence".

Nigel Sinnott, on a visit from Australia where he now lives, responded on behalf of the NSS. He paid tribute to Diane Munday and Alastair Service as examples of people who "changed the law in Britain with little more than blood, sweat, tears and a type-

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writer. They show what a small group of people can do".

The former *Freethinker* editor described his researches into a number of British secularists who settled in places like Australia and New Zealand.

"Such secularists have had an influence to the utter ends of the earth", he added.

"When things get rough and when the permissive society is threatened by another wave of aggressive authoritarianism, what matters is the courage to stand and see things through".

Freethinker Fund

This month completes another year in the history of *The Freethinker*. It first appeared in May 1881, and for 106 years has fought the good fight against religious superstition.

What of the future? We now hear fewer glib assertions that religion is a spent force in Britain. Certainly a large proportion of the population never darken a church door except for weddings and funerals. But religious zealots continue to propagandise from a privileged position in broadcasting studios, newspaper offices and the education system. Christian teachings may be expounded to rows of near-empty pews, but the churches exert their baneful influence on social and political matters through a network of pressure groups.

It is essential that the secularist-humanist viewpoint continues to be expressed through a journal which, against all the odds, has appeared with unflinching regularity for over a hundred years. Donations to the Fund and a determined effort to increase circulation will ensure its survival into the 21st century.

We thank all contributors to the Fund, including those listed below.

J. Patterson and D. Redhead, £1 each; M. A. Aitchison, G. R. Bigley, C. M. Burnside, M. J. Carr, R. S. Eagle, K. Evans, A. E. B. George, N. Gibbard, W. J. Glennie, J. K. Hawkins, D. J. Goldstock, A. J. Hoyle, B. N. Kirby, W. D. Milne, J. W. Mooney, A. M. Nicholls, J. O'Neil, R. Orr, G. Reece, D. Shahbazzin and J. E. Westerman, £1.40 each; P. Prince, £2.20; J. B. Coward, W. T. Ford, V. C. A. Mitchell, A. F. Pendry and F. A. M. Stevenson, £2.40 each; A. J. Martin, £3; H. C. Harding, £3.40; C. R. Fletcher and A. R. Harford, £4.20 each; D. Harper and M. Mepharm, £5 each; B. Able, H. K. Campbell, S. Eadie, S. Harvey, H. J. Jakeman, G. S. Mellor, F. Pidgeon, P. E. Ponting-Barber and R. K. Torode, £6.40 each; R. G. Stubbs, £6.80; R. M. Gilliland, £7.80; J. G. Hillhouse and M. O. Morley, £8.40 each; Sutton Humanist Group, £10; B. A. Burfoot, £11.40; J. E. Rupp, £21.40; V. Brierley, £30.

Total for March: £232.20.

Public Meeting

DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS

Edward Blishen
G. N. Deodhekar
Barbara Smoker
Robert Tutton

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square,
London WC1

Tuesday, 26 May, 7 pm

Organised by the
National Secular Society,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme for 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.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 28 May, 7.45 pm. Terry Liddle: Jesus — Messiah, Priest-King or Revolutionary?

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 June, 7.30 for 8 pm. Susan Blum: The Refugee Problem.

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

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 18 May, 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.

Worthing Humanist Group. Trades Council Club, 15 Broadwater Road, Worthing. Sunday, 17 May, 5.30 pm. Annual General Meeting.

concerned. I think this is what has always motivated family planners all over the civilised world, and I know it is what motivates many people here.

"What I think we must ultimately aim at is a system whereby there is a designated government official, a dynamic enthusiast, who has responsibility for setting up and funding a national birth control service for young people, men as well as women".

Madeleine Simms said that birth control services for the young need to be provided with a measure of expert counselling. The Brook Advisory Centres had done splendid pioneering work in this field and had provided a model for services elsewhere.

There must be powerful publicity and advertising so that young people know where these services can be found. Criticising the hypocrisy that surrounds this issue in Britain, Madeleine Simms declared: "The mass circulation newspapers print any amount of salacious rubbish, but when it is suggested that they or the Independent Broadcasting Authority advertise contraceptives and abortion services, much shock and horror has traditionally been expressed by all concerned.

"What is happening now is that this hypocritical double standard is at last being broken down, not because the popular press or commercial television has the welfare of the young greatly at heart, but simply because of the fear of AIDS. All of a sudden publicity and information and advertising about condoms and other sexual matters is becoming perfectly acceptable. I am particularly delighted about this because for the past decade I have been corresponding with the IBA on this very subject, and have always been assured by the gentleman who is employed to keep tiresome members of the public quiet, that contraceptive advertising would be too offensive to public taste to be tolerated . . .

"We are growing up a bit in Britain, though it seems to be taking a long time, and without the threat of AIDS it would certainly all be taking much longer. So what I am suggesting to you is that if we are to prevent teenage pregnancy we need well publicised and relevant birth control services aimed specifically at young people.

"Above all, we need a realistic and attractive programme of both sex and health education for youngsters in the schools, so that they grow up in knowledge and understanding rather than in ignorance and fear".

Ted Biles, our unfailingly reliable printer since 1974, retired last month. He took over the job under difficult conditions, and for 13 years he and his wife Pat gave excellent service and support to the paper. We wish them a long and happy retirement.

The Messiah Does a Bunk

The £150,000 house at Slindon, Sussex, temple of the Lifeways cult, has been sold. John Yarr, leader of the group, has gone into hiding from his enraged dupes.

Yarr was referred to by his followers as The Perfect Master and The Messiah. He preached celibacy to male disciples, but seduced at least 29 females. When they later compared notes, the ladies discovered all of them had been promised that they would be The Messiah's "divine bride".

Mari-Ann Barrett said she fell under Yarr's spell at a meditation session in Portsmouth. She was taken in by his "charisma, power and inspiration".

She added that The Messiah "made me feel it was my duty to satisfy him sexually and he made out that I was his wife.

"Then I found out that he was doing the same with other women".

The Messiah's disillusioned followers now denounce him as a fraud. They also believe that he is planning to set up another harem, this time in Oxfordshire.

The Virgin Mary's promised appearance at the Church of St Mary Magdalen, Willesden, north London, has been postponed. Two Roman Catholic lay sisters claimed the Virgin Mary had told them that if 500 devotees were present on Easter Sunday she would appear to them. But only 350 turned up, so no vision. Sister Gabriel declared that she was "disappointed" — and who can blame her? But she was hopeful that the Virgin Mary would be on the wing at Whitsun.

Religious Belief Declines

A poll carried out by the Harris Research Centre and published at Easter shows that 39 per cent of British people have no religion at all. A further 21 per cent hold non-Christian religious beliefs.

The Church of England is on the slippery slope, with 26 per cent of the 40 per cent claiming to be "followers" not attending church. They did not consider themselves religious.

Unbelief is most prevalent among the young. In the 18-24 age group, 56 per cent said they had no religion.

Forty-nine per cent of the men questioned said they had no religion. Thirty per cent of women gave the same answer.

The poll was commissioned by TV-am. It was carried out at 100 sampling points, and 1,056 people were interviewed.