

The Freethinker

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"FIGHT BACK" CALL TO OPPONENTS OF CENSORSHIP AND TYRANNY

"The events of the past year indicate that we are being governed by people who would prefer us not to think for ourselves", declares the Campaign Against Censorship in its annual report. It was a year when censorship issues remained very much before the public. "This is all to the good, as it makes clear the continuing need for the Campaign and the work it can do".

The report asserts that there are two kinds of censorship: censorship of facts and censorship of opinions. Recently the focus has been on the censorship of facts.

The Peter Wright case resulted "from the Government's attempt to apply its Humpty Dumpty definition of national security outside the borders of the UK.

"Unfortunately for them, in Australia the rules of the game are different. There is a Freedom of Information Act, and instead of defending their familiar position that everything is secret unless stated otherwise, they had to defend themselves against the reverse — a thing is not secret unless you can show cause why it should be. Unable to adapt, they blustered, blundered and seem likely to fail. . .

"If Wright's book had not been the subject of a law-case, it might never have carried the credibility it must now have".

But if Peter Wright has made the British Government look foolish, journalist Duncan Campbell has made it look menacing.

"We have to ask ourselves what kind of country we are living in, in which the police can raid not merely the home of a Left-wing journalist or the premises of a Left-wing journal, but the regional offices of a national television network. . .

"Plainly the Government has learned nothing from the *Real Lives* affair except that pressure behind the

scenes may not always be enough.

"It is quite clear that some people would like to turn the BBC into a mere mouthpiece for the party line. Whether the BBC can stand up to them remains to be seen".

Referring to the Crown Prosecution Service, which came into operation last October, the report says it remains to be seen if this leads to a consistent policy in obscenity cases. Until now what has been acceptable or ignored in one area is prosecuted in another. One advantage of a uniform standard would be "the removal of the decision from the likes of James Anderton".

It is not only officially endorsed censorship that the Campaign Against Censorship has resisted during the year under review. CAC members who attended the annual general meeting of the National Council for Civil Liberties opposed what the report describes as "a lengthy, emotive, question-begging and cliché-ridden motion from an American feminist on the theme of 'porn causes rape'. It was clear that the executive opposed the motion, but the feminist element were out in force for this one motion, disappearing very quickly after the vote.

"The feminists generally are almost indistinguishable from the pro-censorship lobby at the other end of the political spectrum".

The censorship debate continues to be centred on television, the first medium to be both private and not dependent on literacy. It is not only the powers that be who are afraid that the masses may get wrong ideas from it. The report refers to "a certain elderly ex-schoolmarm whose inflexible position is that since some schoolchildren watch television until all hours, television even at midnight should be suitable for schoolchildren to watch. . .

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

THE LORD'S UNELECTED

It is with considerable pleasure that we admit to an error in a News and Notes item ("Death Penalty Report") last month. Peter Bruinvels was described as "Conservative MP for Leicester East", but on the day of publication electors in the said constituency sensibly gave him the bum's rush. Leicester East's new Member of Parliament is Keith Vaz (Labour).

Peter Bruinvels' departure from the House of Commons is a damaging blow to the Christian Right. A prominent Anglican, he was ever ready to sponsor and promote the views of religious pressure groups. Like most supporters of the "pro-life" lobby, he is a strident advocate of capital punishment. He let it be known that he was prepared to do the job himself (preferably by shooting, according to one source).

Now that the electors of Leicester East have come to their senses, Peter Bruinvels can devote more of his valuable time to church work — and getting in a bit of target practice.

FROM ST PETERSGATE TO PEARLYGATE

Five years ago last month a leading Italian banker met his death far from home and in bizarre circumstances. Roberto Calvi was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in London. In his pockets were a forged passport, a large amount of foreign currency and broken bricks weighing nearly twelve pounds. Back in Milan, Calvi's secretary had jumped or was pushed to her death from a fourth-floor office window. It is now clear that the banker was a key figure in a scandal of corruption, embezzlement and murder. It is also clear that he worked hand in glove with top Vatican officials.

Calvi was a complex character. An avowed Catholic who had the ear of Pope John II, he was also a Freemason, although Canon Law decrees that membership of that fraternity means automatic excommunication from the Church. The present Pope's immediate predecessor was making enquiries about a masonic lodge known as P2 when his mysterious death occurred after only 33 days as pontiff. John Paul I's departure caused sighs of relief in traditionalist circles, and particularly among clerical Freemasons within the Vatican City State.

The collapse of Calvi's banking empire sent shock waves through financial and ecclesiastical circles. One effective method of fund-raising he had used was the

S AND NOTES

presentation of "letters of comfort" supplied by Bishop (later Archbishop) Paul Marcinkus, American-born head of the Vatican Bank who once said that "the Church is not run on Hail Marys". The letters did not guarantee anything, but coming from a man of Marcinkus' status, they gave investors a very favourable impression of Calvi.

When Calvi's empire collapsed there were red faces and dirty hands at the Vatican Bank. It paid £160 million to creditors, claiming that this dispensation of *largesse* was a moral obligation and not an admission of liability. But the Italian authorities took a different view, and earlier this year they issued a warrant for the arrest of Marcinkus and two Vatican Bank senior executives, Luigi Mennini and Pellagrino de Strobel. All three are protected by the sovereignty of the Vatican State. Nevertheless it is galling for the hierarchy that an Archbishop and a confidant of the Pope cannot set foot on Italian soil from fear of apprehension.

The Vatican's refusal to accept service of the Italian warrant was defended by one Catholic writer: "If the Vatican were to 'surrender' Monsignor Marcinkus or he chose to take his chances in Italy he might languish indefinitely in jail while the lawyers prepared for probably protracted proceedings". But the *Catholic Herald* has pointed out editorially: "The Church has not just the right but the duty to make its case for the accused fully known to the world. And this it can easily do if it so wishes, for it has already conducted its own internal inquiry and has concluded that the Archbishop was innocent of any wrongdoing". So whatever noises they may make publicly, Vatican officials evidently entertain serious doubts about the Archbishop's innocence.

The Calvi-Marcinkus affair, followed by revelations in David Yallop's best-seller, *In God's Name*, subtitled "An Inquiry Into the Murder of Pope John Paul I", caused grim satisfaction in anti-ecumenical, fundamentalist Protestant circles. What else was to be expected of the materialistic, worldly Whore of Babylon? Of course those who entertained such uncharitable thoughts were unaware that the Christian world was about to become embroiled in another financial scandal. And this one would involve clean-cut, born-again American followers of the Man of Sorrows who allegedly started life in a manger.

The new scandal originated seven years ago in a motel room where Jim Bakker, a latter-day Elmer Gantry, had a tumble with a lady named Jessica Hahan who mislaid her virginity. Bakker's PTL

(Praise The Lord) Ministry lost \$265,000 it paid in return for her silence. But somehow one of Bakker's evangelising rivals got wind of the affair; he leaked like a sieve and battle commenced for control of the exceedingly wealthy PTL (the initials now standing in the public mind for Pass The Loot).

Television and radio religion is big business in God's own country. Super-rich televangelists prefer earthly to heavenly mansions. They preach that God wants everyone to be wealthy and do his will by acquiring property, cars, executive jets and broadcasting stations. Jim Bakker's programme attracted a 13-million audience every day. During 1986 he relieved the faithful of \$129 million, but of this the auditors discovered that \$92 million had been "lost". The Ministry was on the brink of ruin.

Bakker's wife Tammy was a prominent figure in the PTL outfit. A singer of sorts, like many others she discovered that crooning syrupy hymns was more lucrative than wailing country and western songs. She took to the luxury life-style of a televangelist like a duck to water. One of the Bakkers' homes was an opulent hotel suite in Mill Port, South Carolina. Tammy Bakker's wardrobe extended 50 feet along one wall. She had a liking for expensive jewellery and seemingly applied her make-up with a trowel.

When the crash came and investigators moved in, Jimmy Swaggart, one of the wealthiest and certainly the most malignant of all American holy rollers, made a take-over attempt. He was headed off by Jerry Falwell, of Moral Majority infamy, who already had an evangelising business with 2,000 employees. Other interested parties included Oral Roberts, who recently persuaded followers to cough up eight million dollars or else the Lord would call him to his heavenly reward.

Now the Bakkers are fighting back, and whilst imploring the faithful to put their Trust Cards in the Lord they have entrusted their affairs to a top-drawer lawyer. But Jerry Falwell is not the only stumbling block to Jim's and Tammy's attempt to regain control of their religious business empire. They are being investigated by the Inland Revenue Service and the Justice Department over what the *Washington Post* says "may turn out to be one of the biggest frauds in the history of American religion".

It is incredible that as we approach the 21st century Christian churches still enjoy such power, privilege and misplaced respect. The headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church is an independent State, its "sovereign territory" a sanctuary for fugitives from the courts. American evangelicals benefit from massive tax concessions, endeavour to control the country's education system, censor the contents of public libraries and influence Government policy. President Reagan was seen in a recent television programme telling an almost hysterical

mob of Southern Baptists: "I endorse you". For their part, evangelical entrepreneurs like Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart and the Bakkers promote extreme Right-wing politics and played a central role in sending a fifth-rate Hollywood actor to the White House.

For all their ethical claims, Christian churches and organisations compete, manipulate, and by their example foster selfishness and greed. There is little to choose between the ecclesiastical Mafia in Rome and the scoundrelly Moral Majority in the United States.

Graham Hezzlewood, 43, described as "a tormented Jehovah's Witness", was taken to hospital after amputating his private parts. He performed the DIY operation with a hammer and chisel. Mr Hezzlewood, of Burnley, Lancashire, told shocked ambulance-men: "I've chopped it off. I've had enough trouble with that".

CHILD ABUSE

The Church of Scientology, which was branded as "corrupt, immoral and dangerous" by a High Court judge during a child custody case, has launched a new campaign — aimed at children.

A representative of the cult-watching Family Action, Information and Rescue (Fair) condemned the Scientologists' devious attempt to attract young supporters. Head teachers are outraged and civic leaders who were duped into sponsorship of the campaign withdrew their names when the identity of the organisation behind it was revealed.

Central feature of the Scientologists' propaganda drive is a competition innocuously titled "Set a Good Example". The top prize is a trip to Hollywood. But in order to take part, competitors must read a booklet, *The Way to Happiness*. Those with keen eyesight will notice the author's name in small print. It is that of L. Ron Hubbard, the recently departed science fiction writer and religious charlatan who founded the Scientology business empire.

The competition is being promoted by a front organisation, the Concerned Businessmen's Association. Obviously the name has been carefully chosen. It not only conceals the Church's identity but is more likely to attract sponsors from business and industry.

Callers at the organisation's north London address are referred to the Scientologists' East Grinstead, Sussex, headquarters.

Derry Mainwaring Knight, who duped a Sussex vicar and other gullible Christians out of £250,000 allegedly to help him escape from a Satanic cult, has lost his appeal. Mr Justice Roche said the seven-year prison sentence was "not a day too long".

MALONEY AGAINST BOLONEY

It is not only holy statues that are on the move in County Cork. When it was recently proposed to the Irish Republic's Southern Health Board that a life-size statue of Padre Pio, the Italian stigmatist, be erected in the Regional Hospital grounds, some Board members had serious misgivings. So they followed the usual practice of referring the matter to a committee. The committee opposed the idea, but its report was rejected.

At this point Patrick Maloney, a local resident and publisher of *Church and State*, a quarterly journal of secular opinion, sought a High Court ruling to prevent work on the statue proceeding. A temporary injunction was granted pending a full hearing. Before this took place, the Health Board, beset by Government demands for spending cuts, abandoned the Padre Pio project.

Last year Mr Maloney caused mayhem in the Cork Trades Council by questioning that organisation's participation in the Eucharistic Procession, an annual Catholic event. There was further acrimonious debate this year and the Council did not participate in a corporate capacity.

A County Cork Secular Committee is being set up and plans are being laid for a Secular Society in Dublin. Full details will appear in forthcoming issues of *Church and State*, annual subscription £4, from 26 Church Avenue, Roman Street, Cork (that address is not an Irish joke).

Sitting up and taking nourishment — the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cardiff, John Ward, who fractured his ankle while on a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

THE BELIEVERS

Police in Acilia, near Rome, received an unpleasant shock when they forced their way into the home of Lina Maggi. They had been alerted by neighbours who became suspicious when her brother disappeared earlier this year.

It happened that the family belonged to a fanatical Christian sect which did not believe in treating the sick or burying the dead. When police searched the house they found the body of Nello Maggi. He was laid out on a bed next to the mummified body of his wife who died ten years ago.

A large crucifix dominated the room and banners hung on the walls. One was inscribed "The Nazarine Lives" and another bore the words "Father, Christ and Holy Spirit".

Lina Maggi and another devotee, Lola Fagioli, told the police: "We did not bury them because God did not wish it. We kept them in a purified, family environment".

London's Ghetto Children

BARBARA SMOKER

Last summer, the National Secular Society issued a statement, signed by many distinguished people, opposing the recommendation of the London Borough of Brent for an Islamic school in Brondesbury Park to be given public funding through voluntary-aided status. When the London Borough of Hackney supported a similar application early this year for the girls' primary section of an ultra-orthodox Jewish (Hasidic) school at Stamford Hill, the NSS again leapt in to oppose this move. For this it was attacked, with amazing ferocity. Here the NSS President, who found herself in the centre of the furore, gives her account of it.

On 23 March, 1987, the Labour Group of the overwhelmingly Labour Inner London Education Authority was expected to discuss the issue of the application for voluntary-aided status of a particularly fundamentalist Jewish school at Stamford Hill, London — the girls' primary section of the Yesodey Hatorah School. The application had already received the support of Labour-controlled Hackney Borough Council; so, fearful lest ILEA should fall in with the decision of their local colleagues, I spent most of that day rushing out a two-page memorandum from the National Secular Society to all ILEA members attending that meeting, urging them to stand firm against the application, together with copies for the Press.

In the event, that item on the agenda was not reached, and was postponed to an adjournment meeting on 6 April. Meanwhile, however, the NSS, and I personally, were vehemently attacked as "anti-Semitic" by certain ILEA members — in particular, by a Mr John Carr. Having represented the safe Labour Hackney seat for some years, he had failed to be selected for it for the last ILEA election and had to make do with the very marginal seat of Lewisham West, so he appears to be trying hard to retrieve the Hackney candidature for the next ILEA election.

Mr Carr told me that *all* the members of the ILEA Labour Group were "very angry" about the "racism" of my memorandum. Since some of them wrote later to the NSS in most supportive terms, his word "all", at least, was obviously a lie. He dragged Honorary Associates of the NSS (including Michael Foot) into the matter, sending them all copies of my memorandum and suggesting they dissociate publicly from it, but most of them wrote in our support (see quotes from some of their letters in the "News and Notes" section of the May issue of *The Freethinker*), as did many other people whose views we value.

The media, which generally ignores the statements we make on the issue of publicly-funded denominational schools, naturally loves anything in the nature

of a confrontation, so media people were suddenly on the phone to us from morning to night.

Mr Carr and I were jointly interviewed on Radio 4, and separately interviewed on BBC1 TV. Most of the heavyweight papers carried reports (variously garbled) on the subject, with such misleading headings as "Attack on Jews". And there was a feature article in *New Society* arising from it. The *Jewish Chronicle* ran it for several weeks, and, more surprisingly perhaps, Ken Livingstone (the former leader of the former Greater London Council, who is widely tipped to be the next leader of the Labour Party) devoted three-quarters of his column in the *London Daily News* to it — denouncing me for my "prejudice", accusing me of causing "deep offence", and likening a denial of public funding for separate Jewish and Islamic schools to "the persecution and bloodletting" of Catholicism in Ireland and Poland! (A clue to Mr Livingstone's extreme reactions could, perhaps, be the fact that he himself was accused recently of being "anti-Semitic" — when he was merely being anti-Zionist.)

In the memorandum that unwittingly whipped up all this frenzy, I put the NSS view that not only would the public funding of this Hasidic school be regrettably divisive in itself and exacerbate the existing prejudice and discrimination against immigrants; it would inevitably lead to a proliferation of such applications on behalf of other schools for various religions. While expressing sympathy with the statement that had been made by the Chairman of Hackney's education sub-committee that, "It is clearly unfair that funding should be made available to Church of England and Roman Catholic schools but is denied to the orthodox Jewish community", I pointed out that the proper solution to this injustice is not to permit every religion to set up its own segregated schools at public expense but for Parliament to begin to phase out the funding of denominational schools of every kind, and thus to encourage integrated schooling.

It had previously been stated, on behalf of the Yesodey Hatorah School's application, that many of the Hasidic families could not afford to pay the current school fees at £20 a week, since (in accordance with their religious tenets) the families averaged seven children.

Taking up this point, I wrote in the memorandum: "The very fact that they average seven children seems, to the National Secular Society, a good argument for them to be exposed to some responsible sex education, including information on the world population problem and the overcrowding of this country". It was, admittedly, written in my usual style, pulling no punches. When I have written similarly about the Roman Catholic or fundamen-

talist Protestant strictures against birth control, I have never had much comeback for it, but this time it got me into a lot of trouble. It seems that (more than four decades after the Holocaust) a fundamentalist Jewish sect must never be criticised. I was even threatened by one of the ILEA Labour members with prosecution under the Race Relations Act!

Other Hasidic arguments that had previously been put in support of the Yesodey Hatorah School's application were that the children could not attend ordinary state schools because their first language was Yiddish, that they wore clothes that looked strange to other children (and might therefore attract ridicule or even playground violence), that a good proportion of each school day must be devoted to their religious instruction and practice, and that the girls must never mix with boys.

Those points also I took up in my memorandum — only to be told that my mentioning strange clothing and the Yiddish language was “ethno-centric” and “anti-Semitic”. Apparently it all depends on which side of the argument the mentioning occurs.

While I am as concerned as anybody about the right of minority groups to pursue their own chosen lifestyle, I am also concerned about the rights of minorities *within* those minority groups (eg their children), and of the smallest minority of all (the individual). And it is surely a basic right to have access to people and ideas from the wider community.

My reason for mentioning the children's clothing (in the style of a bygone century) was that it is imposed on the young people and marks them out from others of their age group; it is not (like punk hair, for instance) of their own choosing. And it must surely be most unhealthy and uncomfortable for the girls never to be allowed to have fresh air come into contact with any part of their bodies except their faces. Even in a heat-wave, they are always muffled up to the chin and wear woollen stockings and long sleeves. Besides, the motive behind this is clearly the denigration of femininity.

Because I referred (again as those on the other side of the argument had themselves stated) to many of the girls at the Yesodey Hatorah schools speaking Yiddish rather than English, I was told that they all speak English as well as Yiddish; but I then heard from a chiropodist in Stamford Hill that when Hasidic girls are brought to him for treatment, the girl's father often acts as interpreter — translating the English questions into Yiddish and re-translating the daughter's replies into English. This must mean either that the girls (mostly grand-children of the original immigrants) cannot speak English, or else that the whole charade is a ploy to avoid their addressing a male Gentile — and I am not sure which explanation is worse.

The Hasidic boys, of course, do speak English as well as Yiddish, because they are going to have to earn their living in this country and become heads of households, whereas the girls are destined only to become wives and mothers. Their schooling apparently consists mainly in religious and Hebrew studies and in the practical skills required to run a kosher home.

Sons born to Hasidic families will eventually grow up to some measure of freedom, and I am told there is in fact a high drop-out rate among them. But there is little hope of escape for a girl born into that community. She will be brought up with the idea that she must always be submissive to men and that her chief role in life is to marry and fulfil the biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply”. From the age of three (in the most rigid families) she will never be allowed to mix with any male outside the family (except, eventually, for the husband chosen for her), and she will never come into contact with any non-Hasidim, nor with any ideas at variance with those of her sect. Perhaps the reason I feel so strongly about this imposed isolation is that I myself suffered from similar (though less extreme) isolation as a child and adolescent — the whole of my formal education being in pre-conciliar convents, which merely reinforced the views of my devout Catholic parents; and it cost me a decade of almost suicidal turmoil to get out of that mental ghetto.

On first receiving my memorandum, John Carr — supposedly, as an elected ILEA representative, a man with some degree of general knowledge — actually telephoned me with the information, apropos the point I had made about birth control, that there is no world population problem at all: everyone in the world, he said, could fit on the Isle of Wight! He added that I had by implication accused the Hasidim of “swamping” Britain, and that made me a neo-Nazi. This refrain was then taken up by others.

Although it had not occurred to me when writing the memorandum that the small Hasidic minority could possibly “swamp” the whole country, I then did a little arithmetical calculation to see the theoretical effects of a small community averaging seven children per couple, and wrote as follows to the *Jewish Chronicle*:

If, because of their rabbis' insistence on absolute fulfilment of the biblical injunction to “increase and multiply”, each Hasidic couple has, on average, seven children (and this has not been denied), then their numbers will increase by 350 per cent from generation to generation — which, with their custom of early marriage, means at intervals of about 18 years. At this rate, in (say) 180 years, 500 couples would produce, if my arithmetic is correct, some 300-million descendants; thus, within the next two centuries, even if every non-Hasidic family were to stop breeding altogether, this country would be filled with overcrowded houses, their occupants being dependent on the rest of the world for the agricultural space to feed

them. In practice, of course, it could never come to this, since drastic measures (such as the present restriction in China to one child per couple) would be deliberately taken before then to curb the population growth, or else nuclear pollution would solve the problem, or nature would intervene with horrific widespread famine, compared with which the Sudan and Ethiopia today would look well fed. Is that what the Hasidic rabbis are waiting for before they permit responsible family planning?

When that letter was (to the credit of the *Jewish Chronicle*) published, the result was persecution — not persecution of a Jewish minority sect, but of me. I received innumerable telephone calls at home — mostly abusive, many obscene, and some making death threats. A number began with dulcet-toned congratulations on my published letter, and then suddenly changed into a string of vituperation. There were phone calls after midnight, and phone calls before 5 am. And there were letters, letters, letters.

The most colourfully obscene letters were anonymous or used false names and addresses. Many of them, in accusing me of racism, were themselves blatantly racist — eg “Why pick on the poor Jews — what about the f - - - ing niggers?”, “You would not vent your cowardly insults against the black people, for instance, or you would end up a corpse as the policeman did in Tottenham”, “There are five million black niggers in Britain, their birth-rate far exceeds that of the sheenies”, and “If you were concerned for England you should fear overpopulation by the blacks and Asians”.

Also, “You should count England lucky if it were overrun by Chassidim, because they are more often than not business people and law abiding”. This last (comparatively literate) letter was one of the signed ones. It was from a Stamford Hill correspondent, who finished piously: “May you get mugged by a negro very soon. — Amen”. An anonymous correspondent whose benediction read “I fervently pray that you may suffer torment, get paralysed, have a lingering painful death, the sooner the better” nevertheless seemed to think that the Almighty could do with a helping hand in the matter, as he added “I have a loaded revolver to kill Jew-haters”. Having convinced himself that I was indeed a Jew-hater, he looked for an explanation: “It can't be because of the crucifixion, you bastards don't believe in Jesus — it can only be because you are a vicious lousy. . .”. (I'll spare the printer and readers the rest of the sentence.)

On the other hand, I also received a number of friendly phone calls and letters from, and personal approaches at meetings by, other Jewish people living in the Stamford Hill area, who told me that not only do their Hasidic neighbours refuse to speak to them or allow their children to speak to them, but they actually refer to them as “goyim” (ie “of another nation”, not Jewish) and “English” (itself,

apparently, in this context, a term of abuse) and even “anti-Semitic”! One non-Hasidic Jewess told me that her only aim now is “to get out of the ghetto”.

Two (Liberal Jewish) members of the tenants' association for the blocks of council flats adjoining the schools told me that Rabbi Abraham Pinter, who is vice-principal of the Yesodey Hatorah Schools (his father, Rabbi Chiam Pinter, being the principal) wears two other hats simultaneously: he is an elected councillor on Hackney Borough Council, and he is also, of course, a powerful religious leader in the neighbourhood. And these three different roles surely represent a conflict of interests.

A research assistant for the BBC TV programme “London Plus” who phoned to arrange for me to be interviewed in an item about the Yesodey Hatorah girls' school told me that it was a condition of the invitation that I should not take part in any ITV programme on the same subject; and when I demurred, he said that if I did so my part in the item would be cut out — presumably leaving only the other side of the argument to be screened. In the event, I kept to his condition, but what was actually screened was a deliberate trivialisation of the interview I gave.

I explained in the recording that the National Secular Society is a society of freethinkers, concerned primarily with freedom of belief, which must surely mean the right of the individual to choose between different ideas on the basis of his or her own experience — a choice which is denied to the Hasidic girls, since they are presented with only one set of ideas and are sealed off from contact with any other ideas or with people of any other background. All this was cut out from the item as screened. So was my statement, countering the charge of anti-Semitism, that the NSS has always opposed all applications for voluntary-aided status, not just Jewish ones. For instance, we campaigned against the transfer to the Church of England a few years ago of an existing state comprehensive secondary school in Ealing. Also chopped was my plea for girls in every community in Britain to be allowed equal opportunities with their menfolk for education and careers. Nothing, in fact, was shown of my interview except my response to the interviewer's question about the clothes worn by the Hasidic girls. The rest of the item, apart from a look around the school, comprised longer interviews of special pleading on the other side by Rabbi Abraham Pinter and by Mr John Carr.

Both Rabbi Pinter and Mr Carr stressed in the programme that the Hasidic community, as victims of Nazi tyranny, had fled to this country in the hope that here they would be allowed to preserve their own traditional culture. But how many other communities have retained all their cultural traditions intact over the past half-century of change? Might

the Hasidic community not try, after the passage of more than four decades, to shed their persecution complex? After all, Hitler did not discriminate between one sect of Jews and another: the non-Hasidic Jews suffered just as much as the Hasidim.

Rabbi Pinter referred to the Hasidic community as "refugees" from Hitler, yet I had been castigated for using the phrase "immigrant community": the Hasidim in this country are, I was firmly instructed, no longer immigrant, but English. They certainly should be by now, but they still behave as immigrants.

The Opposition in County Hall having no political muscle, and the Majority Group maintaining good "whipping" discipline, the only true debates on contentious issues are those that take place within the meetings of the ILEA Labour Group, which are undemocratically held in private, without Press coverage. I decided, therefore, to attend their adjournment meeting on 6th April if I could possibly gain admittance.

Bluffing my way into the building and up to the relevant committee room, I saw a number of Hasidic men (in their distinctive wide-brimmed hats) hovering about the corridor. I entered the room and took a seat in the observers' gallery, alongside the one other "observer" — obviously a representative of an accredited Labour organisation. After some while, I was apparently spotted by John Carr or one of the other members who knew me by sight, and the steward/chucker-out was instructed to eject me. He asked me (politely enough) to leave, and I slowly walked down the steps to the door — where I found I was out of sight of the chamber and there was a passage behind a partition where I could hear everything unseen. Needless to say, I did not resist the temptation to take advantage of this.

The debate was very evenly divided, and the woman in the chair ruled that speeches for and against the school's application should be heard alternately. After the first speech on our side of the argument, the next speaker began: So-and-so "would not have spoken like that if this happened to be an election year" (ILEA not being due for election this year) — thus implying that the views expressed by our elected representatives in a decisive debate are expected to reflect electoral advantage before reason or conscience.

I took copious notes in the semi-darkness, until, running out of paper, I reached into my capacious handbag for replenishments, and in so doing must have made a rustling sound that was audible in the chamber. Once more I was ejected — this time more efficiently. So I missed the rest of the debate and the vote. But it was later officially reported, to my delight, that the supporters of the application had been defeated.

The rabbinical "brothers" Pinter then announced

their intention of appealing directly to the Secretary of State for Education for their school's voluntary-aided status — but they have little chance of success in that quarter without the backing of the ILEA, even apart from the fact that the DES is well aware of the menacing proliferation of denominational schools, and is determined to halt it — if only because of the extra expenditure involved.

Finally, to summarise what we in the NSS stand for: it is an open, multi-cultural society — not segregation on grounds of religion, sex, or skin colour. With this objective, the NSS position on denominational schools is that Parliament should call a halt to all new applications for voluntary-aided status and should set a date for all the existing voluntary-aided schools to become either self-supporting or be absorbed into the state system. Otherwise, we could not in equity oppose the present Muslim, Sikh and Jewish applications. And as soon as one of these is successful, it will open the flood-gates to applications from the Children of God, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, Mormons, Scientologists, Plymouth Brethren, Rastafarians, Seventh-day Adventists and all the rest.

Catholic Authorities Threaten Divorced Teachers

The National Secular Society says it is "disturbed, though not surprised" that in Roman Catholic schools in England and Wales at least 30 teachers, including non-Catholics, who have divorced and remarried are for that reason facing dismissal.

The situation came to light when Mr Tony Baker, who works in a Catholic voluntary-aided comprehensive, Our Lady's High School, Lancaster, spoke of his experience.

In a press release, Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS declared: "The proportion of Catholic schools in this country — and of denominational schools generally — is going up all the time. (When decreasing school rolls necessitate the elimination of one of the schools in an area, the axe rarely falls on a denominational school.) And the teachers' salaries in voluntary-aided Catholic schools are, of course, paid out of the general rates.

"The National Secular Society has always urged Parliament to phase out State subsidies to denominational schools and so encourage integrated schooling. Our main reasons for opposing church schools are their social divisiveness and their denial of the basic right of every child to come into contact with the wider community and with a range of ideas at variance with those of its home background. But teachers also have civil rights.

"A third argument for abolishing denominational schools — and one that ought to appeal to the present Government — is that it would make economic sense".

AIDS and the Puritan Backlash

DENIS COBELL

The AIDS threat is being regarded as a "God-send" by religious pressure groups and authoritarian individuals who are intent on turning the clock back to the "good old days" of sexual repression. But the seriousness of AIDS should not frighten secularists and humanists into rejecting rationality and abandoning the defence of hard won law reforms.

Antony Grey, writing in the October 1986 *Free-thinker*, urged sensibly in his title "WE MUST be Rational", and feared the "crassly ignorant statements about it (AIDS), and the attacks upon the main sufferers, coming from some Tory MPs and the usual bunch of evangelical Jesus-botherers". The Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, claiming divine authority, recently added his voice to those of puritan sects attacking gays, the main group of sufferers from AIDS in the UK and USA. But the mainstream of Christianity, in the form of the Archbishop of Canterbury, has also been quoted: "I don't believe it is possible to be loyal to the Christian tradition and to see homosexual and heterosexual relations as having equal validity. The best way forward is for the Church to combat with vigour the hatred and denigration of homosexuals which is widespread in our society. We must try to come to a balanced understanding of their difficulties and their potential by seeing it not as a sin or a sickness, but more as a handicap".

Dr Runcie's second-in-command at York, Dr John Habgood, added his support to this statement by describing homosexuality as a "misfortune". However, John Selwyn Gummer, Government Minister and member of the Anglican Synod, asserted somewhat more strongly: "All too often the Church has failed to speak out against the sins of infidelity and homosexuality and the price is now being paid". The price he is referring to is presumably what has been described by puritans and anti-secularists as "the wrath of God", in the scourge of the disease AIDS. How accurate for Antony Grey to declare that "the typically English vice is not buggery but humbuggery"!

Inter alia, I wrote many articles for *The Free-thinker* in the 1960s. Looking in my files I note such titles as "Vicissitudes of Adolescence" (about the Carstairs Reith Lectures of 1962 which blew away a few cobwebs when advocating "charity rather than chastity"), "Humanists and Sex Morals", "VD and the Doctors" (1963), "Sex Without Love" (1964), "Pox and Co" (1966) and "Sex, Doctors and God" (1967). All these articles argued for progressively tolerant attitudes on sexual behaviour and morals, many specifically, as their titles indicate, related to

an open approach towards sexually transmitted diseases. I stand by what I wrote in the 60s. This approach is now being attacked, not solely by the puritan lobby, but by a wide section of the media, ignorantly referring, as the *Sun* did, to a "Gay Plague" which may soon affect us all.

Certainly AIDS is a deadly disease for which there is as yet no cure, and it therefore assumes the mantle worn by syphilis until this century, when it also was a fatal disease without cure. AIDS is predominantly a sexually transmitted disease, at the moment mainly amongst male gays. This is bad news, but the trojan work done by the Terrence Higgins Trust and Body-Positive groups, long before the Government got its campaign off the ground, has alerted the gay community to the dangers. Accurate information has been circulated about preventive measures such as "safe sex" practices and the use of condoms. Most habitués of gay centres and communities will be well aware of this publicity, and although it is too late for some, the decline in the incidence of other sexually transmitted diseases on both sides of the Atlantic reflects how well most gays have responded. This decline, and the fact that the rate of increase in AIDS cases has fallen in the USA, was not so widely reported when the media here made great headlines out of the February total of just under 700 AIDS victims in the UK.

However, I would ask how likely is AIDS to become widespread throughout the heterosexual community? To do this a comparison with other sexually transmitted diseases may be useful.

First, syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, has become predominant amongst gay men over the past 15-20 years, but the number of cases in women has been small, and of these mostly where women have had sex with bi-sexual partners.

Secondly, Hepatitis B, which has become sexually transmitted among gays, and is regarded according to DHSS findings as similar to AIDS in terms of infectivity. Nevertheless AIDS is not as readily transmitted as Hepatitis B, and is easily inactivated by heat and disinfectants.

Thirdly, much has been made about the comparatively small number of drug addicts who have caught AIDS through sharing dirty needles — as AIDS is also a blood borne disease — in common with the more easily transmissible Hepatitis B, which also affects many drug addicts. I would not play down the "drug problem", but propaganda about its dangers and the provision of clean needles and syringes to addicts should restrict it to a minority, without affecting the whole younger generation. Moreover, where is the epidemic of Hepatitis B in the rest of the community?

Fourthly, haemophiliacs have caught AIDS from

improperly treated blood products, but this arose before the danger was identified, and can now be avoided.

Finally, although it is true that other venereal diseases are rife in sub-Saharan Africa alongside AIDS, the main ones, syphilis and gonorrhoea, are on the decline in the West.

In the light of these disease patterns, why should we suppose that AIDS will take a different path? The recent leaflet sent by the Government to every household in the country has predictably caused alarm and despondency, especially amongst such as old ladies living in Bournemouth.

Discussion about the origin of AIDS poses difficulties. One London expert in sexually transmitted diseases avers that the virus, HIV, may have "escaped" from its place of manufacture in a laboratory in the USA. Is this true? There are those who think it started life in Africa; this lends support to the anti-immigrant lobby. There were those who once thought syphilis came from the New World after Columbus returned in the early 16th century, although there are references to the probable existence of syphilis in the Old Testament.

So why all the fuss and panic? Someone might uncharitably remark that the sexually transmitted diseases experts welcome their new rise to eminence, while the puritans and the Government find fulfillment in their warnings of doom and seize the opportunity to stamp on libertarianism. But I think the cash the Government intends to spend, mostly on publicity, would be better spent on research into a cure and vaccine through the laboratory and medical institutions, together with improved counselling provision. Surely it is no coincidence that the present Right-wing, moralistic Government should choose Lord Whitelaw to head its committee on AIDS? Those participating in the moral crusade against AIDS, who want a return to the sexual repressiveness of the past, have already shown us their equally regressive political and economic theories. Humanists and secularists must vigorously oppose the blinkered approach of puritan Christians and other hangers-on.

I see no need to repent of our progressive ideals. But yes, we MUST be rational.

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FREETHINKER

BOOK

VICTORIAN VALUES, by James Walvin. Andre Deutsch, £9.95

In order to blacken the economic and political policies of preceding Labour governments, Mrs Thatcher seized on the supposed virtues of her thrifty and hardworking grocer father (without reference to the virtues of her mother then or since — or did Margaret spring from his head as Athene sprang from the head of Zeus) and on the era from which we are supposed to think that such virtues derived. The object of the exercise is to set up a kind of moral Golden Age in a fuzzy past with which to lambaste the permissive Sixties. Thrift, cleanliness, self-respect, hard work, pride in your country: . . . "All those are Victorian virtues. . ." (Margaret Thatcher, April 1983).

In fact, they were, and are, the virtues of any small community that has to work for its livelihood and to maintain close bonds with one another to survive either the rigours of a tough climate or depredation from hungry predators, or both. Such virtues predated the Victorian era by thousands of years and probably go back to the first human communities. They are certainly features of small communities in Africa, India and elsewhere in the world where the traditional patterns of life have not been destroyed by the commercial greed of the Western bloc.

The object of this book, as of the Granada TV series it was written to accompany, is to throw the light of historical evidence on the Victorian era, rather than to allow the folklore, so persistently pushed by Mrs T and her cronies for their own political purposes, to blind us to the realities of that era. For example, Mrs T chooses, for the present time, at least, not to refer to 19th-century "gunboat" diplomacy with foreigners and natives as a "virtue", but her instant recourse to an expensive, bloody and unnecessary Falklands war at the very moment when the United Nations was beginning to piece together an international agreement about how to deal with the brutal dictatorship of Galtieri, reveals something of her deepest feelings about politics and power.

So the myths and the positive lies of her Government about the past — though previous governments are far from innocent of similar behaviour — are spread for present political gain. Unhappily they are the more easily swallowed by a people badly edu-

REVIEW

cated in history because *part* of the legend is true. Britain was a leading industrial and exporting power; certain great advances *did* occur in the 19th century, especially in transport, sewage and the supply of clean water.

The central fact causing these changes was the rapid growth of the total population and its change from an agricultural society centred on the village and the small market town to an urban industrial and commercial society. The first modern census of 1801 showed a population of 10.5 million for England, Scotland and Wales. By 1851 it had doubled to 21 million. When Victoria died in 1901 the population was 37 million. Between 1790 and 1910 it had grown by ten per cent every decade. In 1700 one person in four lived in small towns or cities. The biggest city, London, held one million; the next biggest, Bristol, held about 50,000. Every other city, such as Norwich, York or Exeter was even smaller. By 1800 one in three lived in towns; by 1850 it had risen to more than one in two and of these urban dwellers — 14 million in all — nearly eight million lived in towns over 100,000.

So the real problems of the Victorian era resulted from the massive shift from a pattern of life based on a small, close-knit community to a hastily constructed series of conurbations built to house these new millions without regard to planned or even sanitary housing, transport, supplies of food or services such as sewage, the disposal of rubbish or even the supply of clean water. No wonder that the overcrowding, the dirt, disease, industrial pollution and the hardly believable poverty were observed with dismay by foreign visitors.

The attempts to solve these problems, by thoughtful businessmen like the Chamberlains, who knew that healthy, well-fed and clean workmen were more efficient and reliable than those who were hungry or diseased, were social and municipal, not because their political prepossessions moved on those lines, but because of the massive scale of the problems. The supply of clean water does not attract the entrepreneur out for a quick profit. It has to be done by people with an eye to the future welfare of the people, whether or not they get better workpeople as a result.

But Mrs T — I continue to use her as the symbol because that is what she is, the symbol of the monetarist greed that seems to have lost touch with the basic fact that wealth is based on work and products rather than on the manipulation of shares — has an obsessive hatred of socialist or municipal enterprise. She chooses to ignore the fact that the jerry-

built and insanitary slums grew from the greedy end of private enterprise — a phenomenon that she could not, even if she would, control.

Victorian Values avoids a moralistic approach and sticks to historical fact. Nevertheless morality keeps creeping through. The link between poverty and crime; poverty and prostitution; between oppression and violence; between overcrowding and incest; and between poverty and disease, infant mortality and a low expectation of life is inescapable. When Booth and Rowntree produced statistics that could not be brushed aside; when compulsory education forced the mass of the young into official attention it was already the last two decades of the century. Up to that time the extremities of poverty and degradation had been obscured, partly by the unwillingness of the rich to recognise the inescapable consequences of their style of life; partly by "the segregated social 'zoning' of many British cities" which caused the desperately poor to remain "invisible" to their betters. When three out of every five volunteers for the Boer War were found to be physically unfit for military service, some alarm bells started to ring. Our very survival as a military power could actually be put in jeopardy. The lower classes were not fit enough to die for us!

Nearer to our own time Lloyd George and Churchill saw the condition of the urban poor as the most worrying of all contemporary issues in a world of increasing industrial and political competition. "What was to be done, to use Churchill's words, about an empire which ruled the waves but could not flush its own sewers? One simple answer — and one reached by people of greatly differing political persuasions from early socialists to the staunchest of conservatives — was to use the power of the state".

And that is the power that Mrs T is determined to control so that it may *not* be used for the alleviation of poverty, the elimination of unemployment or the education of all; and so that it *may* be used to the very full to quell dissent, to protect private property and to hound those who wish to reveal the state's dirtiest secrets. We have, very recently, seen how extensive this control has become, from the centralisation of police forces to batter the miners at one extreme to the setting of Mrs T's Dobermann Pinscher on to the BBC over its alleged "bias" in reportage. Nothing that the State does is to be even questioned; no criticism to pass unscathed, whether it be by the repression of a Health Executive statistical report that exposes declining health standards under this government or by the public ridiculing of the Church as "meddling in politics" because its report, *Faith in the City*, reveals in clear detail just how uncaring Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative allies are.

MICHAEL DUANE

Workers in the Dawn

In this first in a series of articles about fictional representations of freethought, Andrew Whitehead discusses an early novel by one of the more enigmatic of nineteenth-century writers, George Gissing.

"There can be no doubt as to the power of your book", the positivist Frederic Harrison wrote to the youthful Gissing. "It will take rank amongst the works of great rank of these years". The subject of Harrison's praise was Gissing's first published novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, which appeared in 1880. His judgement, however, was not widely echoed.

George Gissing's name is much better known than his novels. Some of his writings have become minor classics, notably *New Grub Street*, but many remain little read. None is quite so obscure as *Workers in the Dawn*, which achieved meagre sales on its first appearance (just 49 copies purchased in the first six months), and which remained out of print in this country until 1985 when it was resurrected by the Harvester Press*.

There are understandable reasons for the cloak of disdain which so quickly envelopped *Workers in the Dawn*. It is exceedingly long, over-ambitious, flawed in plot, unconvincing in argument. But there are compelling reasons, too, for devoting attention to the novel. It was written when Gissing was at his most socially aware — a positivist, perhaps a socialist, and certainly a freethinker. Gissing's radicalism ebbed with the years, giving way to a rather vulgar elitism. His commitment to freethought, however, was more enduring. A story gained credence that Gissing had, on his deathbed in the south of France in 1903, sought the comfort of the Church. The tale proved to be a clerical invention.

Workers in the Dawn can loosely be described as a radical novel — Gissing, for one, regarded it as such. It is certainly one of the most interesting literary depictions of late-Victorian freethought. Gissing wrote of the novel to his brother at the time of publication:

As regards religious matters, I plainly seek to show the nobility of a faith dispensing with all we are accustomed to call religion, and having for its only creed belief in the possibility of intellectual and moral progress. Hence it follows that I attack (somewhat savagely) the modern development of Ritualism, which, of course, is the absolute antithesis of my faith.

The ecclesiastical Aunt Sally is Mr Orlando

Whiffle, introduced to the reader as "far excelling anything that a professed ridiculer of ecclesiasticism could possibly have conceived". He progresses during the course of the novel from bumbling rural curate to incumbent of the fashionable and high church St Abinadab's in London. His pompous defence of the Church as by law established extends to the refusal of burial to an unbaptised child.

Another character, Mrs Cumberbatch, expresses resentment at the description of her congregation of the new branch of the Semi-United Presbyterian-Episcopal Church as a sect:

"Sect!" repeated Mrs Cumberbatch, with a smiling condescension. "So I have heard people speak of us before. Some even call our faith a schism. But, of course, you know, we are the only true Church? After all I am not surprised that you are unacquainted with us. We do not care much to make converts. We alone are the elect, and if it pleases our Master to turn to us one of those who are going the broad way we accept the offering gladly. Otherwise, we can acquiesce in the Lord's will".

Mrs Cumberbatch, Gissing observes, tolerates with good cheer the damnation "of that not inconsiderable portion of mankind" which chooses not to worship alongside her.

These comic characters, easy targets for lampooning, bring to mind the caricatures of Dickens's novels. Indeed there are common threads between these two novelists. Gissing greatly admired Dickens and wrote a highly-regarded critical study of his work. Although born in Wakefield, Gissing followed Dickens in setting most of his novels in London, and — at least in his early writings — Gissing shares the keen sense of locality and the probing exposition of the lives of the London poor. *Workers in the Dawn* opens with a powerful description of the misery and destitution in Whitecross Street, which was very close to the site of Bradlaugh's Hall of Science.

But where Dickens tends towards clear distinction between good and bad in the best tradition of the melodrama, Gissing takes a more rounded approach. He is far from universally hostile in his depiction of religion, and similarly the advocates of freethought in his pages are complex characters with many failings.

The characters in *Workers in the Dawn* cover the full gamut of religious belief. Besides the High Church ritualist and the petty sectarian, there's the sincere Anglican clergyman gently lapsing into agnosticism; his daughter, seduced from her religious faith by the writings of Shelley, Schopenhauer, Darwin and the positivist Comte; the tolerant and warm-hearted nonconformist clergyman work-

ing among the poor of central London; the ranting revolutionist; and most notably the radical master printer, who rails against these faiths, "one and all, great and small":

"from the most grovelling superstition of the cannibal to the purest phase of devotion nurtured in the mind of a Christian, trust me, they are nothing but remnants of the primeval darkness, *clinging* to a man as he toils laboriously upwards, clinging in spite of all the efforts to shake them off".

It would be wrong to suggest that *Workers in the Dawn* is concerned primarily about belief and disbelief. It is above all the story of two people, a man and a woman — both young, freethinking, and in a sense privileged — and how they try to come to terms with the poverty around them, and in so doing destroy their own chances of happiness together. In the closing pages, the central character is asked whether he does indeed hold religion in low esteem:

"Only when it is a meaningless babble in the mouth of fools. . . Every real life-guide, whatever it calls itself, my conscience compels me to respect. How I wish that I had had the strength to conceive and act up to a religion of my own!"

That lack of strength leads to the depressing denouement of the novel.

*George Gissing — *Workers in the Dawn* (edited and with an introduction by Pierre Coustillas), 1985, The Harvester Press, paperback, £9.95.

TV Magician Slams Spookies

Magician Paul Daniels has told an interviewer that many of his show-business colleagues believe in the supernatural.

He said: "The trouble is that the majority of show business people live in a fantasy world. Actors and their like don't grow up very much, and they are astonishingly superstitious".

Commenting on demonstrations given by the late Doris Stokes, Paul Daniels said he did not like ideas given out by mediums who claim they can tune in or out of the psychic world as if they were tuning a transistor radio. He believes it is very common when in a state of grief to imagine you have seen a lost one's shape.

"I just don't believe that ghosts and spectres exist", he said.

"But I do believe in the power of the imagination to turn a shadow or a shaft of passing light into something else. . .

"I can truly understand the desperate need to communicate with some loved one who has died. . .

"I condemn those who make money callously from the sad, the lonely and the insecure".

LETTERS

SOMBRELY SERIOUS

The three bitter critics (Letters, June) of my Palm Sunday article should realise that ridicule is a powerful and legitimate weapon. It is freely used by Christians against freethinkers and atheists. Therefore I am most happy to turn their own weapon against them.

The article was a light-hearted dig at fundamentalists who take the Bible 100 per cent literally, and I am familiar with the arguments and explanations proffered by my so-serious critics. Pompous S. Campbell, who boasted he would "enlighten" me, did not even manage to get my name right; and his unauthorised additions to the Gospel account were so dogmatic that readers can only assume that he was there — or that he has an uncontrolled imagination. No doubt the Evangelists are humbly grateful for his "improvements" upon their work.

The article was all a bit of fun, O Joyless Ones!
ERIC WESTMAN

DOTTY DOGMA

I cannot share the censorious reaction of some readers to Eric Westman's delightfully skittish dismissal of some of the more absurd 'Christian dogmas. As Bertrand Russell rightly points out in the preface to his *Unpopular Essays*: "Those who are solemn and pontifical are not being successfully fought by being even more solemn and even more pontifical". After all, if a Bishop in the Established Church can characterise the Resurrection as a "conjuring trick with bones", surely freethinkers can lay claim to some satirical licence!

M. O'BRIEN

EVOLUTION: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

I'm grateful to James Sang for his courteous reply (May) to my letter, and of course I accept his point about the difficulty of summary. Having now read the book he recommended — Richard Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker* — may I be permitted to risk the same difficulty by making a few brief points about its (and his) advocacy of adaptive complexity through evolution.

Dr Dawkins begins by dismissing the incredulity test as irrelevant, but it is central: we accept something because we find it fits the known facts. It is clear from his book that Dr Dawkins goes along with this, because his whole argument is (of course) an attempt to make something credible. Having read it, I continue to find full evolution — as opposed to adaptation — considerably less credible than creation.

The discussion about the development of the human eye, long considered a stumbling block for evolutionists, seems to assume that five per cent of an eye is equal to five per cent vision, which does not follow; but I might have been willing to let that pass, had I not come upon the assertion that, given enough time, "we should be able to construct a plausible series of gradations linking the human eye to just about anything". Clearly, an all-purpose theory.

Dr Dawkins' whole argument on the origin of life hinges on a use of probability theory that is highly dubious, even if we accept the unimaginable lengths of time he considers necessary. If the odds against something happening are (say) 1,000 billion to one, it does not mean it is likely to happen if you have 1,000 billion places for it to happen, or 1,000 billion occasions on which it can do so. At each time and place, the odds are still 1,000 billion to one against.

It is interesting that the whole discussion is opened with a prolonged analogy in which external design is central; elsewhere we run across phrases like "we just don't know" and "sheer luck" concerning things that some readers might think critical, but at least Dr Dawkins is honest, even (to a point) about divine creation, which he says is "the only alternative". In fact he rejects it for no scientific reason. He simply doesn't believe it, because it is "mysticism" or, as others have put it, not susceptible to scientific inquiry. This is all very well unless truth — whatever it is — doesn't happen to be susceptible to scientific inquiry. So much the worse for truth, I suppose.

I apologise for the length of this letter and to Mr Morton, whose challenge (May) I must respond to very briefly. There are many indications that this planet is only a few thousand years old, just as there are many that it is much older. The former include the efflux of helium-4 into the atmosphere, decay of the earth's magnetic field, formation of river deltas and the influx of radiocarbon to the earth system. If we accept uniformitarianism, which is necessary for evolution, we can compute an age for the earth ranging from less than a thousand years(!) to over 500 million years, depending on what you measure. I understand that the influx of elements to the oceans alone gives measurements ranging from 100 years (aluminium) to 260 million years (sodium). The assumptions made in carrying out all such measurements are clearly in need of examination.

TIM LENTON

IRRELEVANT AND OFFENSIVE

Karl Heath (June) should have noticed that I personally made no comments in my letter (May) on the quality of "anti-racism". Certainly my letter had implications; but these were carried by quotations from Peter Newsam, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality. Karl Heath's accusation that anti-racism was "contrived" by me (and others) is therefore unjust; and his accusation that this figment "appears to offend (my) delicate white susceptibilities" really attacks Mr Newsam. All this is rather inept!

What I was doing in my letter was to point out that Karl Heath had either quoted out of context, or displayed ignorance, at every point in his review, save one. In this new letter he adds the further distortion, of pretending that those who are concerned about this particular strain of "anti-racism" (Peter Newsam, for example) are seeking to avoid opposing racism. He should by now have understood that the point at issue concerns the method for opposing racism. His last two paragraphs are irrelevant in substance; and, pointed as they are, highly offensive.

HARRY STOPES-ROE

VAGUE HUMANISM

One or two points arise from the June correspondence. My complaint regarding the Tony Benn article was not that it was socialist. Had it been a reasoned attempt to associate Paine with the origins of socialism (after the manner of Christopher Brunel's letter, perhaps) I might not have been moved to complain. But it was not. It was, I repeat, little more than a sequence of socialist slogans, and an insult both to the intelligence of your readers and to the memory of Thomas Paine. If R. W. Morrell found it "refreshing, humorous and challenging" then I can only conclude that he finds the repetition of socialist slogans "refreshing, humorous and challenging"; reminiscent of the old lady who used to confess weekly to a certain sexual indiscretion of her youth, because she so enjoyed talking about it.

Like R. W. Morrell, I too find the term secular humanism vague; so I am forced to agree with him that, if the term is vague enough, then it may well include socialism, flat-earthism, latitudinarianism, or what have you. Of one thing I am certain, though, and that is that the term's vagueness arises not from the word "secular" but from the word "humanism", a concept that seems to embrace a great range of believers from Erasmus to Karl Barth by way of Thomas Paine. It is for this reason that readers like Tony Green and myself would be much happier if *The Freethinker* put more emphasis on its "secular", and less on its "humanist", aspect. I take a somewhat cynical view of humanism, which to my mind starts by opposing clericalism and generally finishes by establishing a new religion just as rigid.

GLYN EMERY

HUMAN FEELINGS

Like Hazel Brothers (Letters, May), I have often wondered what is meant by the "spiritual" side of the human personality.

Since believers usually imply that this aspect of personality is the part which links us to "the transcendent", it cannot have much meaning for free-thinkers. The nearest experience to transcendence which some free-thinkers are able to accept is that there are certain moments in one's life when one feels supremely happy and at one with the world.

Abraham Maslow and Colin Wilson described these moments as "peak experiences"; and Richard Robinson wrote, in *An Atheist's Values*, that "the contemplation of Beauty sometimes induces ecstasy — the happiest state, a humming perfection of the whole person".

These are in essence sensual feelings, and it is sad that the word "sensual" has come to mean the reverse of "spiritual". Perhaps we should rescue the word "aesthetic" from the grip of the professors of Fine Art and Philosophy, and restore it to its root meaning in Ancient Greek: perceptive, sensitive.

Then the aesthetic aspect of the human personality could take its place alongside the intellectual, the emotional and the moral aspects.

NIGEL BRUCE

MEMORIES

At the beginning of 1941 I was sent by the Labour Exchange to a job as a packer in Wells's toy factory in Walthamstow. It seems surprising that, with the war at a critical stage, consignments of tin toy cars and trains were still being shipped to Woolworth's stores in Canada and South Africa; but it was so. They were the kind of old-fashioned toys that collectors now hunt for, stamped-out shapes fastened together by little tabs.

Four of us worked in an outbuilding, packing the goods in cardboard cartons. Empty space in the cartons was stuffed with paper, and for that purpose stacks of newspapers were brought in.

What they had at the beginning of 1941 was a large quantity of unsold copies of *The Freethinker*, practically every issue from the 1920s to the mid-'30s. Obviously there had been a clear-out somewhere; many of the copies were folded sheets, uncut, from the printer.

What a find! I spent half my work-time lapping up the cream of Cohen and Foote, being enlightened by McCabe, revelling in the digs and slaps at oppressive religion. The charge-hand took to walking about our section more frequently, and after a month I was given the sack. Not producing enough surplus-value, in the language of socialist economics.

As a job, it was not much bottle; but I think of the

toy factory with some affection. I was a young fellow, and being there just then added handsomely to my education.

ROBERT BARLTROP

OBITUARY

Mr B. Tindall

Bob Tindall, who has died at the age of 85, was a forceful and unorthodox character who, by conventional standards, appeared eccentric. A native of Hull, Yorkshire, he emigrated to Australia in 1926. Experience of poverty and hardship in both countries influenced his views and actions throughout life. He had a strong distaste for government and a healthy contempt for Christianity and the churches.

During the 1920s and early '30s he moved around remote communities in Western Australia. It was a difficult environment in which to earn a living as a sign-painter, advocate freethought, and practise teetotalism and vegetarianism.

Bob Tindall read extensively, and over the years he acquired a large collection of books and pamphlets. Speaking at the cremation ceremony, Laadan Fletcher said: "He was fearless in stating his views. He contributed thoughtful articles to the Rationalist press in Australia which revealed a depth of knowledge and understanding that was astonishing in a person with so little benefit of formal education. His power to draw on a wide range of reading, even in his later years, was quite remarkable".

Secular committal ceremonies took place at the following cremations: Mrs Lily Benson (Oxford); William Bryant (Hanworth); Miss Vera Edwards (Enfield); Tibor Haas (Beckenham); Joe Leonard (Putney Vale); James Probert (Coventry) and Mrs Freda Sarr (Islington).

Freethinker Fund

The Fund continues to be well supported and warm appreciation is expressed to the latest group of contributors.

J. Leenders, 50p; K. Gill and Q. Gill, £1 each; J. Ancliffe, H. Barrett, H. G. W. Copeland, J. C. Dixon, C. R. Fletcher, F. Greenlaw, R. J. Hale, S. Hancock, L. J. Johnson-Laird, I. R. Jones, N. McDonald, F. T. Pamphilon, A. C. Stewart, C. R. Walton, E. Westman, C. Williams and F. Yates, £1.40 each; J. H. Morten £1.90; N. Ball, £2; E. Cecil and E. Hillman, £2.40 each; M. D. Hallett, £2.80; C. Brunel, £3; E. F. Channon, £4.40; H. Madoc-Jones and R. J. M. Tolhurst, £5 each; D. Christmas and S. Collis, J. Gibson, J. A. Ryder and R. Tutton, £6.40 each; C. Blakely, £10; R. J. Condon, £20; Glasgow Humanist Society, £40; Spartacus, £100.

Total for May: £250.80.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, honorary secretary, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone Brighton 733215.

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 4 August, 8 pm. Eugene Levine and Julia Pelling: Report of the British Humanist Association's annual conference.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Stall at Lewisham People's Day, Saturday, 25 July, 1 pm until 5 pm, Mountsfield Park, Stainton Road, London SE6.

National Secular Society. Sunday, 13 September, Annual Outing to Lewes, Sussex. Information obtainable from the secretary, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Summer programme obtainable from George Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, telephone 01-642 8796.

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, 20 July, 7.45 for 8 pm. Public meeting.

Barbara Smoker would be interested in buying any of the following bound copies of *The Freethinker*: 1971, 1973, 1974, 1976 and 1977. Please contact The Freethinker office (702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266).

Can you combine doing office routine with arranging regular important lectures and the preparation of weekly committee meeting minutes? South Place Ethical Society seeks a three-day-a-week secretary for this challenging job. Write in the first instance for details and an application form to the Acting Secretary, SPES, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

NSS Denounces Archbishop's Bogus Degrees

The Archbishop of Canterbury presided at a bogus degree ceremony in Lambeth Palace Chapel on 17 June, presenting a number of "academic" degrees entitling the unqualified recipients to put misleading letters after their names.

The National Secular Society marked the occasion with a statement denouncing "the perpetuation by the Church of England of the pre-Reformation practice of conferring spurious academic degrees on people of their own choice as a reward for services to the Church".

The NSS pointed out that because the present Archbishop happens to be an Oxford graduate, those on whom he conferred degrees are entitled to wear the academic robes of the University of Oxford. "If Dr Runcie happened to be a graduate of, say, the Little Big Horn Academy of Agriculture, these ecclesiastical graduates might not be so keen to wear the appropriate uniform", it added.

The Lambeth degrees date from the time of Henry VIII, when the Peter Pence Act empowered the Archbishop of Canterbury to grant all manner of dispensations that had previously been in the gift of the Pope.

If they were admitted to be merely honorary degrees, the practice would be meaningless and

slightly ridiculous, but not fraudulent. However, a press statement emanating from Lambeth Palace and Church House insisted that the Lambeth Degree "is an authentic degree and not an honorary one".

The NSS commented: "If they comprised only Divinity degrees, no one would really mind — except, possibly, genuine Divinity graduates who had studied hard for the letters after their names. But the degrees dispensed by Dr Runcie included the creation of a Master of Arts, a Doctor of Music, a Doctor of Civil Law and a Doctor of Medicine.

"Fortunately, the doctorate of medicine is conferred on a genuine surgeon, practising at St Luke's Hospital for the Clergy — but presumably the 16th-century law does not require the Archbishop to be even as scrupulous as that. What is to prevent his granting a doctorate of medicine to a faith healer? And in these pluralist days, why restrict this 'academic' humbug to the C of E?

"If the practice were to be extended in the name of religious equality, we could soon see 'authentic academic degrees' granted to nominees of the leaders of every religion, sect and cult in Britain".

When a power failure occurred during a metaphysical seminar at a Dallas hotel, Shirley MacLaine, who was conducting the proceedings, asked her followers to repair the fault spiritually. They remained in the dark until an engineer arrived.

"Fight Censorship" Call

"This year her straw man in the House of Commons is Gerald Howarth. He is more dangerous than Winston Churchill because more intelligent, though he was no better than Churchill at providing specific examples of what he wants banned.

"The best he could do when interviewed was the two Jarman films and the famous scene in *The Singing Detective*. Will nothing persuade the would-be censors that a whole Act of Parliament is a ridiculous response to one scene in the third episode of a serial by a writer known for contentious work? Anyone who claimed to have come on it unawares must be either illiterate or lying".

Pointing out that Ministers up to and including Mrs Thatcher trooped into the lobby to ensure the pro-censorship Bill's second reading, the report warns that next time such a Bill could be Government-sponsored explicitly instead of implicitly.

Appealing for the support of those dedicated to the right of individuals to express themselves, the report concludes: "If we don't fight back we shall be overcome by a tyranny we did nothing to prevent".

The Campaign Against Censorship: Mary Hayward, Honorary Secretary, 25 Middleton Close, Fareham, Hants, telephone 0329-284471.

Israeli Farmers Hit by Government Surrender

Israel's wheat growers are furious over the Government's decision that the entire 1987 crop is to be treated as "surplus to requirements". It has bowed to pressure by ultra-orthodox elements who have argued that the wheat has been grown in defiance of the shmitta law. This decrees that the land should be allowed to lie fallow every seventh year.

The Israeli Treasury has informed farmers that it will not be purchasing their wheat this year. The Government has arranged to import an extra 200,000 metric tons of wheat from the United States to replace its own unwanted crop. The deal will cost the country up to ten million dollars.

When the State of Israel was established, the rabbis devised a way of getting around the religious laws. They ruled that every seventh year fields may be sold to non-Jews who could continue working them. Religious fanatics have always opposed this practice.

A spokesman for the Organisation of Field Crop Labourers has strongly criticised the Government for giving in to the zealots. He said the matter may be brought before the courts.