

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 107. No. 9

SEPTEMBER 1987

30p

EMBRYO RESEARCH: RELIGIOUS LOBBY DELAYS LEGISLATION

The Cabinet has again postponed plans to introduce a parliamentary Bill that would legalise human test-tube embryo research up to fourteen days after fertilisation, and set up a statutory licensing authority to monitor it, as recommended by the Warnock Committee majority in its report. The postponement "for at least a year" has been hailed with delight by "pro-life" groups. The main reason for shelving the Bill is that it had become clear that on a free vote it would be defeated, since most MPs, of all parties, are influenced by the massive propaganda campaign of the "pro-life" lobby and the public hysteria it has whipped up.

The Government still intends to publish a White Paper on the subject, and the National Secular Society, representing a rationalist viewpoint, has therefore submitted a statement to the DHSS. In general it supports the Warnock Committee majority report on embryo research, except that it can see no justification for limiting such research to fourteen days after fertilisation.

"Although further development of the embryo is impossible at present, technical advances (such as the development of an artificial womb) would be unnecessarily impeded if fourteen days were made the legal cut-off point, presumably for the irrelevant reason that identity is determined with the emergence of the 'primitive streak'. This criterion has no relevant moral significance except for those who believe superstitiously in 'ensoulment' at that point.

"While we would certainly agree that there must be a definite legal cut-off point for embryo experimentation, we would suggest that the period should be extended to 35 or 38 days' development, since that is when a functional central nervous system begins to develop. Just as brain death is rightly accepted as the criterion for organ donation at the

end of life, the analogous criterion of the start of the development of a functional nervous system — that is, well before there is any possibility of consciousness — would be morally rational."

The NSS declares that all right-minded people — atheists and religionists alike — agree that there are moral limits to what can be done to a human being, whatever the benefits to humanity may be. But we have to decide what sorts of entity constitute a human being — and that is where secularists and religionists differ.

"The talk about 'unborn babies' and 'little human beings' only confuses the issue — deliberately, of course. The embryo is not a baby at all; only a potential baby. It is, of course, human, but not a human being; only a potential human being. And to equate a potential human being with an actual human being is sheer superstition. Certainly, the embryo contains the 'blueprint' for making a complete human being — but so does a fragment of flesh scraped from a grazed knee! Even though the embryo has been 'switched on' to put the blueprint into effect, it is just as remote from the baby it could one day become as a piece of frog-spawn is from a frog, or an acorn from an oak-tree.

"Status, dignity, and natural rights belong to entities by virtue of what those entities actually are — not by virtue of what they have the potential to become. And what they actually are must include the possibility of their having some sort of consciousness before they can have any call on such moral concern.

"In our view, all interests and rights depend on consciousness — the kinds of interests and rights depending on the level of consciousness. The reason that human beings — and animals, too — deserve

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

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

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

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

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

SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

NEWS

THE ULSTER QUICKSAND

Scarcely a day passes without news of yet further cuts in expenditure on health, educational and social services. "Good housekeeping" is the monetarists' favourite euphemism for short-sighted economic policies of a Government that closes hospital wards and deprives the schools and universities of resources. However, the same Government spends money hand over fist in maintaining Northern Ireland, a financial "black hole" and Britain's major political embarrassment.

During the current financial year Government expenditure in the province will amount to £4,530 million and is expected to be £5,140 million by 1989-90. This year £150 million will be allotted to the Army, of which nearly £50 million will be spent on the largely Protestant Ulster Defence Regiment. That unit has a particularly unsavoury reputation, having been a bolt-hole for many members of the "B" Specials terrorist squad when it was disbanded in 1970.

For decades Ulster Protestants were sycophantic lickspittles of the mainland Conservative Party. Conservative and Labour governments remained indifferent to discrimination practised against Roman Catholics and ignored warnings that one day the balloon would go up. It eventually did so in 1969 when a peaceful civil rights march, which would have gone unremarked in any British city, was brutally attacked by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Since then, Secretaries of State, the most notably malevolent being Labour's Roy (now Lord) Mason, have presided over a reign of terror.

Unionist politicians have now gone their own way. One of the few occasions in recent times on which they turned up at the House of Commons was to cast the exact number of votes by which the Sunday Shops Bill was defeated. The Rev Ian Paisley's noisy demonstration against Mrs Thatcher at Strasbourg reflected a widespread Protestant view that the Scarlet Woman has moved from Rome to number 10 Downing Street.

There is a growing realism among the British public that the Ian Paisleys and Peter Robinsons are not untypical of the Unionist community. Paisley's religious rantings and Robinson's coldly menacing tone have frequently revealed the true and ugly face of Ulster Protestantism. We are constantly reminded that a majority in the Six Counties want union with Britain. But it is entirely on their terms, and opinion polls indicate that given the opportunity in a referendum mainland Britishers would choose to end the

AND NOTES

union with Northern Ireland's religious Rambos.

Some worldly-wise Unionists realise that their cause is being damaged by its disagreeable image and have gone off on another tack. Hence there has been the formation of something called the Campaign for Equal Citizenship in Northern Ireland. It promulgates the myth that by refusing to set up an organisation and field election candidates in the Six Counties the main British political parties are disfranchising its citizens.

Such blatant dishonesty is breath-taking. Not only would it be a waste of resources for the mainland parties to organise in Northern Ireland, but any Conservative, Labour, Liberal or Social Democratic supporter of the Anglo Irish Agreement who ventured into a Protestant stronghold would be at serious risk of injury or death. Unionists have traditionally rejected all but the most hard-line politicians, electing anti-reformist MPs with membership of or endorsement by the Orange Order an essential qualification for selection.

When a spokesman for the CECNI recently referred to the colonial-style unaccountability of government in Northern Ireland he was accurately, if perhaps unintentionally, stating the blunt truth that Protestant "loyalists" as much as Catholic republicans are colonial subjects. Employing the classic divide-and-rule tactic, the governing power exploited differences that exist in any society. Fostering delusions of racial and religious superiority in the Protestants ensured their loyalty; in tangible terms this meant a dependable source of Right-wing votes and cannon fodder. They were encouraged to believe their mini-statelet was a jewel in the crown when in fact it was never anything more exalted than the parson's nose of England's oldest colony.

Religion and nationalism are twin follies for which all sides in Northern Ireland are paying dearly.

SABBATH OBSERVERS

Five men were arrested in Jerusalem when a mob of religionists clashed with police outside the Beit Agron Cinema. Demonstrators were throwing stones and bottles at the building in protest against the screening of *Lassie Come Home* on the Sabbath.

Commercial entertainment during the Sabbath is banned under a local by-law. Cinema owners argue that films are cultural and that showing them is therefore within the law. Ultra-orthodox elements claim that the opening of cinemas desecrates their holy day and harms Jerusalem's "spiritual character".

MAGGIE'S MINIONS

All praise to organisations like the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, journals like *Peace News* and individuals like Tony Benn for defying the authorities over the Peter Wright book, *Spycatcher*.

It is, however, rather difficult to summon up sympathy for those newspapers which are being forced to swallow a dose of the Government's censorship medicine. They have hitherto sung hosannas to Mrs Thatcher and played a leading role in her two general election victories. Almost without exception the national and provincial press have led the Thatcherite pack in attacks on unions and local councils. Now that Maggie is rubbing *their* noses in it, we can scarce forbear to cheer. It is a temptation to be resisted; when the law is being used to camouflage tyranny we cannot be too choosy about our allies.

Why has the Prime Minister gone to such lengths to prevent the public from reading allegations which law Lord, Lord Oliver pointed out, "are available to the news media for public ventilation everywhere except in England"? One of the charges in *Spycatcher* is that MI5 officers conspired to destabilise the Wilson Government. Would an investigation reveal that there was also a covert operation to remove from office Mrs Thatcher's predecessor, the "wet" Conservative leader, Edward Heath?

A BURNING QUESTION FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS

When the subject of eternal punishment is mentioned in discussion with Christians they become uncomfortable and are often stricken by an uncontrollable urge to change the subject. Many have long since been shamed into rejecting the biblical doctrine of bliss or blisters. Nevertheless there are still people who are deeply disturbed by fear of an everlasting burn-up. A correspondent to the counselling column of the Roman Catholic weekly *Universe* recently wrote: "I've only just begun to realise the horror of hell . . . this difficulty is causing me much anxiety".

Now the fact that a Catholic adult has "just begun" to have such worries shows that although the flames of hell have not been completely quenched they have been well doused by the Freethought Fire Fighting Service. Until recent times Christian leaders were preaching and teaching, as they had for many centuries, that eternal punishment in a lake of fire, tormented by devils and demons, was just that. The "reality" of hell was one of the few questions on which the Christian churches agreed. Catholic priests and Protestant reformers were in competition in lurid descriptions of the wrath to come.

Replying to the anxious *Universe* correspondent, Father Paul declared: "It is quite mistaken to picture God as vengeful and determined to exact punishment for the sins of humanity". He claimed "there is nothing in Christian teaching which attempts accurately and factually describes what hell is like".

Father Paul's soothing assurances will not do. The ravings of saints, popes, bishops, priests and lesser clergy about eternal damnation, blighted the lives of millions. They spoke with conviction and authority, their words reinforced when necessary by the dungeon and the stake.

Christian terrorists often composed their message to influence sensitive young minds. One example of this was the Roman Catholic "penny dreadful" written by a priest in the last century "for Children and Young Persons". The following quotation from *A Sight of Hell* is a typical specimen of the reverend author's blood-curdling sadism.

You will be lying helpless in the lonesome darkness of hell. The devils in the most frightful shapes on purpose to frighten you. Serpents come and hiss at you. Wild beasts come and roar at you. . . . Perhaps at this moment a child is going into Hell. Tomorrow go and knock on the gates of Hell and ask what the child is doing. The devils will go and look. Then they will come back and say — the child is burning. Go in a week and ask what the child is doing, you will get the same answer — it is burning. Go in a year and ask; the same answer comes — it is burning. Go in a million years and ask the same question, the answer is just the same — it is burning. So if you go for ever and ever, you will always get the same answer — it is burning in the fire.

Child abuse is presently in the news. There is nothing new about it. It is at least as old as Christianity.

REVOLTING CHURCHGOERS

The Rev Samuel Prasadam got the frozen mitt from a number of parishioners, including some members of the Parochial Church Council, when he took up his appointment as vicar of All Saints Church, Luton, last month. A group of over twenty worshippers left the congregation rather than have the Indian-born Mr Prasadam as their vicar.

Leading the revolt was Mrs Gladys Lindsey, deputy church warden and parish activist. She said: "I am not the only one who is upset. Quite a few others agree with me that we need a white vicar".

It is not only the vicar's colour but the fact that his wife is a Church of England deaconess which has miffed the petty-minded defectors. One parishioner commented: "It means she will be up there every Sunday running the church with her husband. Some people don't like the idea of women running things in the church".

How strange it is that Christians who regard a Jewish zealot of Middle Eastern background as their Saviour should be so determined that the vicar of All Saints, Luton, should be white. Even stranger is the fact that the most fanatical and proselytising Christians in Britain today are of Eastern origin. Many of them are descendants of black people who were bred, bought and sold by Christian slave-traders. And the Bible which they reverently carry to their places of worship is the same "good book" which was frequently and accurately quoted by Christian churches and states in justification of slavery.

Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, directed that his body should not be cremated. He also requested that if mortally ill his life should not be prolonged by life-support equipment. He declared: "Nature must be given a free hand, according to God's will".

A TRIBUTE TO HJB

The name H. J. Blackham has been familiar to readers of humanist books and journals for nearly six decades. Although he has written extensively and led study courses on philosophical subjects, Barbara Smoker points out in an introduction to *Blackham's Best* that he is not in a strictly academic sense a professional philosopher.

Blackham's Best is Barbara Smoker's personal selection of quotes and snippets from HJB's writings. Inevitably it reflects the compiler's tastes and inclinations. She writes: "The inaccessibility of most of HJB's writing is what gave me the urge to pick out from his books and articles a sentence here, a paragraph there, and to present these (necessarily arbitrary) bite-size morsels, for savouring without indigestion". Certainly this attractive booklet will bring Blackham's work to the attention of a wider audience, now and in the future.

Although in the second decade of "retirement", H. J. Blackham is still working on a formidable programme of research and writing at his home in the Wye valley. *Blackham's Best* is the first of those tributes that will be paid in honour of his 85th birthday which falls on 31 March 1988.

Blackham's Best is obtainable from Barbara Smoker, 6 Stanstead Grove, London SE6 4UD, price £1.50.

The Pope's nine-day visit to the United States will cost over 30 million dollars. He will be protected by a hundred licensed-to-kill agents. Iranians, Jews, American Indians, gays and women's organisations will demonstrate against the papal visit.

Perdition: Hell-Fire and Zealotry

PETER COTES

Pro-Zionists demonstrated outside the Lyceum Studio Theatre, Edinburgh, on 17 August when Jim Allen's controversial play, *Perdition*, received its first — and so far only — performance. *Perdition*, which alleges that Hungarian Zionists collaborated with the Nazis during the last war, has been fiercely criticised and was banned by London's Royal Court Theatre earlier this year.

There's been some rare nonsense written and talked about "doings" at the old Royal Court Theatre, once the London home of thoughtful and engaging drama in the more elegant days of the Vedrenne-Barker production management. Today, after a spell as the theatre of "discovery" — Osborne, Pinter, Wesker, Bond, Churchill and all that — it has become the contemporary centre of ill-natured controversy in which reputations, so often won, have been, in the case of two current victims, lost. The drama of the past is thus replaced by the melodrama of the present. *Perdition*, the cause of all the rumpus, a play by Jim Allen to be produced by the Royal Court management and directed by Ken Loach, was scheduled for production on 22 January last, but withdrawn *before* its first night. Now that the play-script has been printed in book form (together with relevant notes, letters of support for and against the Royal Court's decision, lists of press comments and reprints of articles and letters, as well as a Publisher's Note), it is a trifle easier to see what all the fuss was about, to separate the wood from the trees and wipe away the mist of confusion that seemed to obscure rational observation and bedevil the issues.

From charges and counter-charges on both sides, for and against the play, and the decision taken by the Royal Court's Artistic Director, Max Stafford-Clark, it would appear to have been imprudent, at the least, because of a "lost confidence in the play's credibility" to produce *Perdition* after all. A belated judgment, one might think, after taking into account the length of time — 18 months — since the script has been sent to his Theatre and finally accepted for production by Stafford-Clark.

The recurring theme running throughout the play must have been a dicey one at any time — the accusation of Zionist collaboration through "officials" privately dealing with Eichman in that mass murderer's plan to exterminate over a million of their co-religionists who perished in 1944. These "collaborators", ran the argument, backed a plan of secrecy, offering "help" to those who, in turn, expedited matters for the Nazis. For such co-operation they would be permitted to escape to Germany, thus being given safe jobs. This cop-out by the few at the expense of the many would earn them their pay-off. And the future of the state of Israel would at least be not only established but,

henceforth, secured. *Quid pro quo?*

Now that's dirty. But for that matter so is much dramatic art. Shakespeare, Webster, Strindberg and many others wrote of dark deeds and base spirits without having their plays — some of them masterpieces — thought any less worthy for being what they were. Not that such "art" should be talked or written about in the same breath as Jim Allen's perhaps, but where truth is at stake it's the principle that matters. For the fact remains that if every time we disliked a performance, a production, an interpretation, or a play, we decided (on the strength of what is said) to *feel* entitled to demand its withdrawal on the grounds that we had lost "confidence" in the interpreter — be he director or actor who should be sacked, or the dramatist who should be denied a platform for his play — then we are on a slippery slope indeed, one that can have only the most calamitous of endings if we carry it to its logical conclusion.

Now it is possible that Jim Allen's "reading" deserves no more than that, for I doubt whether it merits the description "stage play". But because of its acceptance by the Theatre concerned and its writer's record as a dramatist of talent and integrity, it surely deserved the right to be heard (if only on radio), not suffocated by a smokescreen of half-truths and possibly downright lies regarding its intentions. Even an enervating affair, which I take this play to be on the printed page (Ken Loach's imaginative direction might well have given it that "theatrical" life it fails to possess as a play published without benefit of a proper production), deserves at the least to be judged by an audience, not all of them unaware of the writer's record as a concerned member of society nor its director's progressive background as a television director of distinction.

The principle of freedom from censorship in the arts is surely still at the heart of the matter, as well as the fact that once having accepted the *bona fides* of the principles in the case, we must believe in *their* good faith and careful research to justify the play's existence. Also the confidence expressed in the play's intentions by the four members of the cast who are Jews, including that highly accomplished actor and experienced broadcaster, John Gabriel, who indignantly refute the suggestion that any of them would lend their talents and reputations to a calumny on the Jewish people.

"Save me from my friends" is a saying more often heard than "protect me from my 'protectors'". But when the latter emerge in the guise of the "Nanny" of Parliament, the purity leaguers of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, or the Chief Rabbi (leaving aside the zealots in our midst who believe that, as with the case of the book, *Spycatcher*,

the British public should see only what is good for it), then we must be on our guard.

Nobody but a knave or a fool, and Messrs Allen and Loach are neither (unless being disingenuously trusting can be deemed wrongheaded in this selfish society), would wish to add even one more pinprick to a massive sore, forever suppurating and fomented by the scoundrel times in human history, of anti-semitism, a monstrosity that has plagued the world from time immemorial. But if we continue to canonise some who may be quislings, or turn a blind eye to villains when they happen to belong to one religion rather than another, then we must take the consequences.

If we wish to perpetuate the *status quo* by consecrating greed, tyranny and authoritarianism, completely denying the freedom to human beings of

thinking for themselves, then to be consistent we must deny our fellows their right to think at all about anything that is liable to tread on the toes of the easily — sometimes understandably — offended. The price to be paid is a heavy one, entailing as it does an eternal vigilance; with not a little patience sometimes, by watching, reading — yes and even being in the audiences of plays and films that postulate the belief that wickedness and weakness are not necessarily the prerogatives of any one section of society. It was an admired and highly respected Editor of this journal, the late Chapman Cohen, who once wrote: “The dread of all sorts of ideas is a very old feature of human society”.

Perdition is published by Ithaca Press, 13 Southwark Street, London SE1, price £4.95.

The Golden Age

No “Golden Age” — instead “Man’s Inhumanity to Man”. Some humanists may not like this explanation, but what is theirs?

The theme of a lost Golden Age is a thread running through Antiquity from Hesiod to Lactantius, or from even earlier if one includes the Babylonian Gilgamesh. The Fall of Man, Paradise Lost, Expulsion From Eden, Loss of Innocence — all perennial themes. Virgil, Horace, Tacitus, Juvenal and Seneca write of the Golden Age; the notion of early innocence permeates Epicurean philosophy and the National

the Natural Law of the Stoics. Hesiod’s Golden Age was the reign of Kronos (Saturn) when peace, serenity and eternal spring prevailed. Successive Ages, Silver, Bronze and Heroic (time of the Trojan Wars), each worse, except the Heroic, than its predecessor, led to Hesiod’s Iron Age, his own time of travail where justice and piety had vanished. The Romans attributed the wisdom and virtue of the Saturnian Age to the reign of their second legendary King, Numa Pompilius.

Through the Middle Ages the Golden Age remained in the past, but the discovery of the New World enabled one writer to imagine a contemporary “Utopia” on hitherto unknown islands in the Atlantic, discovered by Sir Thomas More’s hero, Raphael Hythloday. Published in 1516, *Utopia* has been described as the application of humanist philosophy to the structure of human society.

With 19th-century science and technology the Golden Age became, for a time, the hope of the future, but modern pessimism and cynicism, reinforced by bitter experience, led to dystopias like “Brave New World”.

Ideas like the Golden Age, so pervasive and per-

KARL HEATH
sistent in the past, are not idle bubbles. They have a cause, in this case an instinctive belief that human life could be better, and that something had gone wrong.

In our century we seem even further from the Golden Age, with two world wars, genocide, gas chambers, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and species suicide technically possible for the first time in our history. In the year of my birth, 1916, a compound of vice and folly produced the Battle of the Somme. By the end of the first day, 1 July, 20,000 British soldiers were dead or missing. The battle continued until mid-November, by which time the Allies had lost 794,000 men and the Germans 539,000. The front line had been moved no more than seven miles. In *The People’s Chronology*, p 771, John Trager writes: “Like other top officers, Haig does not visit the front lines, and says he considers it his duty not to, lest the sight of wounded men affect his judgment”.

Were there three million monsters engaged in mutual slaughter, or decent men drawn into an insane and meaningless holocaust? Was this proof of Original Sin, or proof that Hobbes was right in declaring human nature vicious? If so, humanists might as well liquidate all their groups and opt for hedonism or euthanasia. Hobbes was clearly wrong. “Leviathan”, the State authority which he invokes to curb natural evil, generates unnatural evil on a far greater scale. The worst crimes in history have been perpetrated by governments. No terrorists, no gangsters, no IRA, no Mafia remotely match the terror of the State. Those who died on the Somme, Allied and German, were decent human beings. The British soldiers did not use the Government-inspired hate term “Hun” for the enemy, instead the human-almost friendly name ‘Jerry’. They had tried to fraternise with him at Christmas 1914, until

thwarted by offensives deliberately ordered by their horrified High Commands.

Were they Jekyll and Hyde? The Establishment chooses to excuse its own excesses by placing Hyde inside, covered only by a skin-deep veneer of civilisation. The converse is true; innate goodness is perverted and overlaid with conditioning to obey authority, however inhuman. Ferdinand Tönnies in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* describes how men's natural human instincts of love and compassion conflict with the demands of the State and its institutions. Human beings become alienated, schizophrenic, capable of behaviour they would normally regard as horrendous. Fritz Pappenheim, in *The Alienation of Modern Man*, quotes *New York Times* reporter, George Barrett, after two years in the Korean War, describing the utter meaninglessness of life as seen by the GIs whose endlessly repeated phrase was "That's the way the ball bounces". The sorry state of affairs continued in Vietnam with its Mylai massacre, its "Body-counts" and "Kill-ratios" and the use of the term "Pacification" to describe a policy of "If it moves, shoot it".

This alienation is not confined to war. Victorian workers were described as "hands", deprived of all their humanity except their power to work.

So — what went wrong? The ancient writers afford some clues. Virgil writes: "No fences parted fields, nor marks nor bounds divided acres of litigious grounds, but all was common". Josephus describes Cain, "the first man to set bounds to fields" as lusting after possessions and lucre and acquisitions of land. Seneca, in the time of Nero, writing of the lost Golden Age, says: "The social virtues had remained pure and inviolate before covetousness distracted society and introduced poverty, for men ceased to possess all things when they began to call anything their own. How happy was the primitive age when the bounties of nature lay in common". Most striking of all is Lactantius who lived in Diocletian's eastern capital, Nicomedia, around 300 AD. In his *Divine Institutions* he writes: "Dim was the source of these evils bursting forth from the contempt of right. The greedy afterwards seized the works of others, clutching things as private property; and that which individuals as members had worked hard to obtain for use in common was now carried off to the houses of a few. In order to reduce people to slavery they systematically collected and accumulated life's necessities and shut them up, making these bounties their own; not for humanity's sake, but to sweep into their own heap the makings of lust and avarice. Under the name of justice they made unequal and unjust laws to defend their plunder against the multitude."

Our greater modern knowledge enables us to evaluate these views. Nothing in social anthropology suggests Rousseau's "Golden Savage", or the gentle

happiness of unsullied innocence. Life in primitive society was hard, and nature relentless, but there is reason to believe that society was more homogeneous, more co-operative and with little dichotomy between social needs and individual desires. Until the end, about 11,000 years ago, of the Fourth Glaciation in the present Ice Age, our species had lived exclusively by food-gathering, collecting the wild products of nature. But in Neolithic times, when the ice receded, somewhere, perhaps in a flooding river valley though some say the mountains of Syria, cultivation was discovered, leading to urban civilisation since cities did not become possible until agriculture was established. Where hunting grounds had been a tribal possession, land for agriculture was seized by individuals. From the time of the first cities we find that land has become private property, owned by a powerful few who become the ruling class. For the first time the natural resources upon which everyone depends for survival had ceased to be the social property of everyone. The mass of people were expropriated. The new landowners required labourers and naturally they found them among those who had been deprived of other access to the means of subsistence. The new owning class was thus able to dictate terms and their terms were slavery. The propertyless must surrender their freedom if they were to survive. The biblical patriarchs acquired their bondservants and handmaidens. Sometimes whole communities sold their liberty in return for food — "Corn in Egypt" and Israelite bondage. For thousands of years mass slavery was institutionalised.

Human society was split asunder, divided into classes of owners and workers, their interests mutually in conflict. To hold society together the State appears, in the form of rulers, governments, laws, prisons, soldiers and bureaucrats. But the State is not neutral; it does not represent the interests of the community as a whole. It holds society together but in such a way as to maintain the property, power and privileges of the rulers. Whoever heard of a State where the slaves ruled over the slave-owners, the serfs over the barons or the poor over the rich. This is as true today as it ever was, despite the pretensions of elective systems.

The fatal turn in human affairs and the source of our social evils was the private ownership of social resources, employed for private profit, the latter, as we are well aware today, taking precedence over public need. It is this division of human society which has led to empires and wars, to domination and oppression, to dictatorship and concentration camps. Centuries of cultural conditioning have trained us to obedience and acceptance, to a false faith in the impartiality of the State. Many of us have become something less than human for no fault of our own, frustrated and alienated. "Things" have taken

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Blue-Chip God Companies

DAVID TRIBE

Last month David Tribe exposed the dubious activities and recruiting techniques of the new cults which have proliferated since the 1960s in Britain and the United States. In this article he examines the claims and attitudes of established denominations.

It has long been said that religion is superstition in fashion and superstition is religion out of fashion. By the same token, a "cult" is a dead pagan or a recent living sect and a "denomination" is a sect that's been around for a long time.

When I was young, the sect with a special reputation for home-breaking was the Exclusive Brethren, an offshoot of John Nelson Darby's Plymouth Brethren and already old enough to be deemed a denomination. In the nineteenth century, however, this and Spiritualism, Theosophy, Christian Science, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) were merely cults. Go back one or two more centuries, and so were the Shakers and the Quakers. Go back to the first (or even the third) century of the Christian Era, and so was Christianity. Religious historians will protest that, if this attitude existed then, it reflected upon pagan society and not on Christianity. In their view a true cult is (a) loony and intrinsically incredible; (b) supported by a handful of people; (c) run in a bizarre way; (d) set up as a business venture. But is this differentiation valid?

I will leave it to Eric Westman to point out the extent to which Christianity is or is not intrinsically credible. On the assumption that "those who believe absurdities can commit atrocities", the cults cannot be compared with the denominations. "Mainstream" Christianity is way ahead of the outfits recently in the news: a million times more frauds, conspiracies, persecutions and murders. Apologists say this is dredging up history and such things do not happen in these enlightened times; but if David Yallop is to be believed, the Vatican hasn't lost its talent for good old-fashioned criminality.

Little can be proved by the numbers game. I will leave it to the Gospels to demonstrate how Christianity began with a megalomaniac and twelve dupes. Twenty centuries of "conversions" and the ability to be on the right side in a succession of wars, conquests and colonisations did the rest. Even so, only a minority of the world's population is nominally Christian, and only a minority of that practising. If the criterion of truth is longevity, most of the other world religions and astrology would take the palm.

One comes then to (c) and (d) above, which for all practical purposes can be taken together. A sometime Anglican vicar (and sometime everything else)

once told me that in his battles with his former employers this treatment of them riled them more than atheistic polemics. In other words, they couldn't stand vestments to be called fancy dress; the Eucharist, ritual cannibalism; the Easter offering, annual cadging; stipends, wages; the Bench of Bishops, the board of directors; archdeacons, middle management; the offertory, cash flow; sacred buildings, real estate; and deconsecration of redundant churches, rationalisation of the property portfolio.

Not all churchmen are so sensitive. Archbishop Marcinkus, president of the Institute of Religious Works (Vatican Bank), is reported to have said, "You can't run the Church on 'Hail Mary's'". This was recently amplified by a Catholic teacher in Sydney, Australia: "The Catholic Church is being run like a bank with the cross and Jesus Christ as their calling cards" (*Manly Daily*, 14 May 1987). That would not matter if it were offering a real service to its customers and interest to its depositors; if the True Cross had not been exposed as myth or legend in the first century and the equivalent of a lumberyardful of bogus relics in the twentieth; and if the Precious Blood of Jesus had been subjected to biochemical analysis and shown to have therapeutic properties.

When officiating on national occasions, contributing to theological volumes (sales catalogues) and conducting dialogue with humanists on late-night television, leaders of the major denominations adopt a lordly attitude to the cults. The latter, they say or imply, appeal only to the simple-minded, impressionable, gullible, or to young people "who know nothing of Christ and the Gospel". How anyone who has been young since the 1944 Education Act came into force could know nothing of this redeeming message — unless constantly playing hooky from school — is not explained.

It may be instructive instead to revisit the Ten Commandments posited for the cults (*The Free-thinker*, August) and see how they apply to the time-honoured denominations.

1 The churches have certainly been flexible with names. Their putative Messiah is the secular "Jesus" when trying to establish a biography or a warm inner glow, but the sacred "Christ" when biographical details become embarrassing or cosmic power is required. As for the churches themselves, what a plethora of names, practices, beliefs, styles and titles we have — and all stemming from a unique revelation of One True God. Some of them are presided over by princes, prelates, patriarchs and popes (and a diversity of underlings) who are arrayed not like the lilies of the field but like the orchids of the jungle. These pompous titles and this gorgeous raiment

- have nothing to do with an offer of salvation and even less (if my mathematics can rival that of the Trinity) with a homily on the virtue of poverty, but can only be calculated to impress the vulgar.
- 2 In using normal and abnormal psychology, the denominations have few peers. The Jesuits' "give us a child until it is six" has been vindicated by modern experts in indoctrination. At an earlier time, the churches removed the distractions of rival belief systems by destroying libraries, closing secular schools and universities, and burning books and authors. Even the arts contributed to brainwashing when the only paintings, sculpture and music permitted were religious. Physiology was used too. Holy men and women abstained from sex, fasted, subjected themselves to sensory deprivation in deserts, caves or monastic cells, stared at crucifixes and other sacred objects for hours at a time — and not surprisingly had wet dreams or visions of the Blessed Virgin. Lay dupes were also likely to hallucinate while gazing at a dazzle of light round the High Altar in a darkened cathedral. Above all, the alternation of threats (hellfire, demons, pitchforks and the like) — with some physical torture thrown in — and comfort (heaven, angels, harps, etc) has been endorsed by police and security forces in all modern dictatorships.
 - 3 Denominations do not, of course, need to be told that they should have all the trappings of a religion, and have been cashing in on their status for centuries. This also applies to "paramilitary" organisations like the Salvation Army and, to a lesser extent, "underground" bodies like the Brethren.
 - 4 "Spiritual" blessings of a non-specific sort are conspicuous in denominational cornucopias. Through tithes, "freewill" offerings, deathbed bequests and other means, dupes have discovered how blessed it is to be poor. "Brides of Christ" have not been able to bring their dowries to Christ in person, but proxies have been found in the form of mothers superior.
 - 5 Many denominations have let it be known that "showers of blessing" in revivalist hymns are to be interpreted in a material as well as a spiritual sense. The fact that your sovereign, president, dictator, army commander, employer or landlord is of the same persuasion is usually taken as a plus point. At any rate, the contrary is decidedly a negative one.
 - 6 Christian Science was the first sect to discover the attraction of pseudoscience and to detect an underlying lack of confidence in medical practitioners. Jehovah's Witnesses took up the latter point. In preaching to the godless, the Moody Bible Institute with its "Fact and Faith" films pioneered in the modern pretence that religion

and science are compatible. For centuries before this, the contrary view was about the only tenet most religionists and freethinkers had in common. Now, in many parts of the Christian world, theologians are even proclaiming that science is the offspring of religion; and a resuscitated Genesis I is being crutched into schools in the guise of "Creation Science".

- 7 Sex, or the denial of sex, has played a prominent role in ecclesiastical power politics. Priestly "vocations" are discovered by adolescents before eros. The Salvation Army seeks to arrange marriages directly, but most other sects do so through pious parents. Many "celibate" popes got something on the side. Those who didn't were a fanatical lot.
- 8 Though constantly preaching Divine Providence and the power of prayer to their dupes, the churches make the fullest use of lawyers, insurance companies, investment advisers, property developers and accountants in their own organisations. They're not, however, always keen on auditors. While charging the laity fees for their own services, clerics tend to expect reciprocation on a voluntary basis.
- 9 Whatever their other deficiencies, the denominations are no slouches when it comes to public relations and the exploitation of big names. If there is an afterlife, many of the famous sceptics of history now claimed as devout believers must be turning in their graves.
- 10 The "old firm" in Rome sets a splendid example for the other sects in sitting tight while the gales of controversy rage, then using offence as the best means of defence. If John Paul II had not been pope, he would have made a splendid used-car salesman.

Squeamish readers should remember that the "silly" cults of today are the "sinister" denominations of tomorrow. Early in the second century, Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan describing a small and harmless sect in the Eastern Mediterranean. Its members became known as Christians.

Freethinker Fund

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Total for July: £141.

BOOK

BLUNDERING INTO DISASTER — SURVIVING THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE NUCLEAR AGE, by Robert McNamara. Bloomsbury Publishing, £12.95

As I write, it seems likely that some variant of the “double zero option” will be acceptable to the superpowers, and the world will take a first step towards restricting its atomic arsenals. It is a very small step, we must remember, when the 50,000 warhead stock is still being increased by about two a day on each side. But it is to be welcomed as a change of direction and the first sign of political good sense.

Also as I write, the Iran-Contra hearings are drawing to a close, and it is fairly obvious that their outcome will be a “whitewash” of President Reagan, if of no one else. But he, and his fellow born-again Christians, have been exposed as not only inept and incompetent, but as living in a world of lies and deceit, of bribery and corruption, and of covert murder. After Irangate I am more afraid of the Americans than of the Russians, for I fear that there may be a Rambo, like Colonel Oliver North, in the Pacific who “does not require approval from the centre to carry out an atomic strike” and may do so on a patriotic “high”, or simply because his out-of-date Honeywell computer gives a false signal.

It is this fear of a human or mechanical blunder, leading to the destruction of mankind, which has provoked Robert McNamara to write this extended essay. As Secretary of Defence under Kennedy and Johnson, he was responsible for some of the early development of America’s nuclear war policy. He appreciates now that many decisions were driven by the fact that the nuclear option was generally cheaper, and more readily sold to Congress, than the more complex developments of conventional arms. Since “*the US must prevail . . . should deterrence fail and strategic war with the USSR occur*”, American policy was for more and better nuclear weapons without regard to the long-term consequences.

No doubt similar considerations drove the Russian nuclear programme although, except for the anti-ballistic missile (ABM), they always followed behind the Americans by two to five years. In short, there was no consistent, comprehensive rationale for the Western nuclear build-up. The first third of the book is devoted to this story and to an analysis of the misconceptions associated with it. What is missing is any appreciation of the role of the pro-nuclear lobby — the manufacturers, the scientists and the Services who, after all, put the options before the politicians.

Most people do not appreciate that the NATO response to a Warsaw Pact attack with conventional weapons will be nuclear. This strategy has hidden

FREETHINKER

behind the doctrine of deterrence and flexibility of response. But deterrence, flexible or not, is a nonsense because there is no way Europe (or the USSR or USA) can survive once the nuclear weapons start flying. The atomic arsenals are now of such a size and power that they negate their military purpose: they cannot be used without leading to the destruction of what they are intended to protect. Nuclear war is a lunatic absurdity, and it is good to have someone of McNamara’s authority saying so.

The US Department of Defence’s response to this negation of the power of atomic weapons is the Strategic Defence Initiative, popularly (and misleadingly) called Star Wars. There is here an excellent and easily followed exposition of all the technical problems that confront any attempt to build a defensive shield over the United States, which is President Reagan’s objective. Few believe that such a defensive umbrella is a practical proposition; even the optimists reckon that in a war at least ten per cent of warheads will reach their objectives, and that is enough to settle mankind’s account forever. So people like Henry Kissinger, more realistic than the President, support Star Wars because they reckon that even this imperfect defence will be a valuable supplement to their existing offensive nuclear forces. It is a measure of such feeble military and political thinking that no one seems to appreciate that an agreed reduction of the number of warheads by both sides to, say, one tenth would achieve the same end as any partially successful Star Wars programme.

If the West’s nuclear policy is bankrupt, what do we now do? McNamara proposes that we should aim for “a stable balance at the lowest possible level”, and develop “a strategy that will reduce the unacceptable risks we now face and begin to restore confidence in the future”. This pious conclusion completely fails to recognise that war is a political problem, or more exactly “that war is the extension of politics on the plane of force”. Fortunately, Secretary Gorbachev has understood this and has decided that war, and specifically atomic war in any shape or form, can no longer be used to resolve political problems. That is why he has used military concessions to activate political change, and it is this sea-change in the political climate which is taking us along the first steps towards nuclear disarmament.

McNamara will not go the whole hog with Gorbachev, and rejects his proposal that we should aim to eliminate nuclear weapons by the year 2000. He thinks “we would live in the fear of waking up one day to find Mr Gorbachev brandishing the world’s only nuclear warhead”! You may not think

REVIEW

The Golden Age

that this is a likely scenario (particularly after Chernobyl), but this sincerely held viewpoint illustrates just how great the political gap is that has yet to be filled.

These mature thoughts of a senior member of the American establishment, who clearly recognises that the chief purpose of the military is no longer to win wars but to avoid them, will surely contribute to the political understanding we need. He is fortunate in having a publisher who has felt it worth putting these thoughts into a book which is a pleasure to handle. I hope many will be attracted by its format and will acquaint themselves with its ideas: informed public pressure is now more necessary than ever at this turning point in history.

JAMES SANG

precedence over people, property valued more than lives, commodities acquiring a weird life of their own. As we approach the 21st century half the world is under-nourished or starving; half the world is ill-educated or illiterate. Most of the world's people have no adequate outlet for their talents or opportunity to realise their aspirations. This is a scandal and surely a reproach to humanists.

As the humanist Thomas More realised in *Utopia*, man's inhumanity to man derives from fatal flaws, not in man's nature, but in his social organisation. Man is corrupted and debased by the State, as created in class-divided society. Tinkering is not enough; today's humanism means commitment to social revolution, if we have the courage, the conviction and the hope to aspire to a Golden Age for future generations.

Freethought in Fiction (3)

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

The Democracy

Austin Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh are among the freethinkers appearing in a less than flattering light in the debut novel of Richard Whiteing.

It is difficult to understand today why the novels of Richard Whiteing were once so well regarded. Time has not treated him well. Whiteing's humour does not have the timeless quality of W. W. Jacobs' wharf-side wiles, and his much-vaunted realism pales beside that of the East End novelist, Arthur Morrison.

Whiteing's most popular book, *No 5 John Street* (1899), is plagued by a preposterous plot, shadowless characters and a dated romanticism. In it a well-to-do gentleman takes on the honorary task of Agent-General to Pitcairn Island. He has to report to the islanders on life in the hub of the Empire in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. And so he can speak for poor as well as privileged, he moves incognito into a "four-storied hovel in the very heart of a slum which lies between two of the finest thoroughfares of the West End".

The narrator uncovers and chronicles the lives of the poor, the upstanding and the feckless, in something of the fashion of a chatty wildlife guide. The *dramatic personae* extends to such stock figures as the bomb-throwing anarchist and the young woman suffering at the hands of a callous employer. Interesting now only as a representative of the literary genre, *No 5 John Street* was hailed at the time as the

epitome of the realist novel. So great was the hunger for sympathetic treatment in fiction of poverty and social injustice, that the book became recommended reading in such bastions of ethical radicalism as the Socialist Sunday Schools.

But the particular focus of this article is Richard Whiteing's first novel, *The Democracy*, which appeared pseudonymously in 1876. It describes in scornful tones London's radical and secular movements of several years earlier. The story is of young Paul Nethersole, and his progress from son of an oil shop proprietor, through the most extreme of ultra-radicalisms, to become a Parliamentary standard-bearer of the radical cause. His political career is abruptly cut short when he declares to a radical audience: "if you were at once to become absolute masters of your own political destinies, you would imperil your future, and perhaps that of the whole race". And the book closes on a distinctly unhappy note.

An important agent in Paul's political peregrination is Thomas Frere, a radical publisher and bookseller. Paul finds lodgings in Frere's cramped commercial premises in a Holborn courtyard:

The shop, in truth, is simply a perfect magazine of disloyalty and infidelity for vulgar use. It has few of the finer weapons for this social war; no sighted rifles and Damascus blades of religious and political controversy, but of the pikes and bludgeons of argument for the equipment of the unlettered rabble, abundant store. Jones, having written his "Humbug Exposed",

knows it is of no use to offer the work to the publishers of "Supernatural Religion". It is the same with Pegler's "Robespierre no Renegade"; but as in great cities no foulest rag may remain unsold for want of a person willing to buy it, so these things may become merchandise through the instrumentality of Frere & Co.

In his peculiarly unrevealing autobiography, Whiteing refers in passing to what was obviously the model for Frere and Co, a shop kept by "one of the many Holyoakes . . . in a house in the network of courts between Fleet Street and Holborn". And so it seems Thomas Frere is a representation of Austin Holyoake, younger brother of G. J. Holyoake (hence perhaps "Frere"), who for several years until his death in 1874 printed, published and sold the *National Reformer* and other freethought literature at 17 Johnson's Court in Holborn.

Other characters are similarly based on contemporary figures. The obsessive Robespierre Pegler — "I am the proletariat in arms. I am death to tyrants" — appears to be a poisonous caricature of the Chartist and radical, Bronterre O'Brien. And a sincere but sinister character given the name of "Sledge Hammer" bears more than a casual resemblance to Charles Bradlaugh, his *nom de guerre* echoing Bradlaugh's own of "Iconoclast".

"Sledge Hammer", Whiteing informs his readers, is often visited "by strange cosmopolitan creatures who have been in half the political prisons of Europe, and who can never see two matches lying on a table without piling one on the other to make the model of a barricade". His regular stamping ground is also described:

Faiths have their temples and the negation of faith had its lecture-room, known as the "Hall of Intelligence". Advertisements in the books (Paul) read were constantly telling him that he must consider himself a mere beginner in the science of unbelief until he had listened to Sledge Hammer's oral exposition of its grandeurs and its mysteries. It was Sledge Hammer who wrote that "Secret History of the Monarchies of the World", where, though he professed to deal only with earthly kings, the thoroughness of his inquiry into the origin of their imperfections had furnished him with a choice crop of scandals about celestial thrones.

There can be little doubt that Bradlaugh, and his secularist and republican lectures at the Hall of Science, are the target of the parody.

The secular ceremonial at the Hall of Science also comes under scrutiny:

Sledge Hammer's system was equal to all needs, and it contained even a form of words to be recited at open graves: "There you lie, my friend; and you'll never get up again", was the sense, freely rendered, of this not too cheerful farewell.

And there's an amused account of the dances, elocution classes and other social and educational

activities which made the Hall such a popular and successful headquarters of metropolitan secularism.

How Whiteing came to be in a position to give such an informed, if jaundiced, picture of the free-thought movement, it's impossible to say. Perhaps it was an offshoot of his journalism. Or perhaps he cribbed from the writings of the Reverend Charles Maurice Davies on *Heterodox London*, which contain much of the incidental information recycled in *The Democracy*.

As for Whiteing's own outlook on life, that too is obscure. Some of his later novels are sympathetic to socialism. And running through his work is a strong ethical perspective. At one stage in *The Democracy*, Paul Nethersole argues that democracy needs its own church: "If another faith has such a Church already", he declares at a Reform meeting, "why should not ours, which, as it is the faith in humanity, is the noblest, purest of all?" There's no disdain here, nor in the authorial judgement in the closing pages of the novel which seems to be something more than simply a comment on the failings of the principal character:

Oh, how hard is the path of perfection! Better do nothing than attempt great things to leave them only half done. . . .

A man rising from the people to lead the people must be absolutely faithful to his mission — must love it with his whole heart and mind, not turn aside for beauty, wealth, or honour — must have, not only an eye to detect the nobleness of the cause beneath its base environment of circumstance, but a soul to endure all for its sake — cold, watching, hunger, thirst, and the social obloquy sharper than these. And woe to him who, wanting but one thing in this equipment of heroic qualities, shall attempt the heroic task.

The Democracy is a "book of promise, but not of much positive merit", in the view of the author of the entry on Whiteing in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Certainly reading through the novel, with its three volumes amounting to 800 pages, is something of a test of endurance. The consolation is Whiteing's curious but compelling depiction of popular republicanism and irreligion. He also offers a powerful reminder of the central role of free-thought within mid-Victorian radicalism.

THE FREETHINKER

Volume 106

1986

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AIDS: the "Kick 'em When they're Down" Syndrome

TERRY SANDERSON

The Church Society, an Anglican organisation, has recently issued a leaflet entitled *AIDS and the Judgment of God*. It tells us that as well as the Final Judgment, God will send "interim judgments" to punish those "individuals and communities" who displease him. In this case the "pestilence and plague" is being visited upon practising homosexuals to punish them for their "disobedience" to God's law.

Various quotations are selected from the Old Testament to support the idea that homosexuality gets God's back up. Although there are no New Testament condemnations, Jesus is said to have ratified the rantings of the prophets in the "Sermon on the Mount". So, as far as the Church Society is concerned, there is no biblical get-out clause for gays.

At first glance God seems to be very choosy about the sinners he decides to punish; it seems that homosexual men who love each other in a sexual sense are far worse offenders than, say, the mass murderer Idi Amin, who at present enjoys a comfortable life in Libya. But, of course, the Church Society has an answer to that: "Some receive judgment in this life, while others wait their turn in the world to come". To the logical mind it all might seem a bit arbitrary, but there again I suppose its balanced out when you consider those unfortunate Christians who live blameless lives but still manage to fall victim of ghastly ailments. Presumably they'll be getting their reward in heaven at the same time that the sinners will be getting their comeuppance.

One thing I've never understood about the "God's wrath" theory of AIDS is this: If God has sent AIDS to punish and destroy homosexuals, isn't it something of a blasphemy for Christians to try to help those who are stricken with the disease to survive any longer than they would otherwise do? After all, God sent AIDS to kill the sinners, didn't he, so what business have Christians in interfering with his will? This is something that the many good people who label themselves Christian, and who are engaged in AIDS research, support groups and education, must ask themselves.

The Church Society itself seems a little confused on the issue. It says: "to advocate precautions instead of repentance and renunciation of immoral behaviour is surely to compound our condemnation".

So at least we know that safe sex displeases the Almighty because it might allow people to continue "sinning" without collecting their earthly just deserts. I don't know why God should be so concerned about condoms, though, for surely he can "get" the cautious sinners in the Afterlife and duff

them over a bit then?

However, all is not so straightforward for the Church Society: "All medical intervention leading to the relief of suffering is also a mercy of God against the results of the Fall, from which all sickness and death originate". So it seems that God sends dire punishment with one hand, and encourages it to be thwarted with the other. Surely some mistake? But no, the Church Society persists: "Such intervention is right and proper in the case of AIDS sufferers, however they contracted the disease. The search for a cure is equally right". But surely, using the Church Society's own argument, the search for a cure is the ultimate blasphemy?

Not only homosexuals contract the disease, of course. In Africa it afflicts men and women in equal numbers, and there is no evidence of widespread homosexuality. Other theories have been put forward for its prevalence on that Continent. One is that there is a vital genetic difference between African and Caucasian races which makes Africans more vulnerable to infection. Another is that malnutrition has so weakened the immune systems of these people that AIDS is more easily caught. A third is that mass inoculation over many decades was carried out with dirty and oft-used hyperdermic needles.

Any of these explanations would seem to expose God as a rather cruel, callous and indiscriminate killer of men, women and children. Of what sin is the whole continent of Africa guilty? It must be something terribly wicked, but the Church Society excuses God with: "That some innocent people contract the disease through infected blood transfusions for instance, is a bitter fact of the fallen world". Now what in Heaven is that supposed to mean? Does it tell us that God sometimes makes mistakes? Or does it tell us that God doesn't care who he torments, so long as he gets the sinners? There is no explanation in the pamphlet as to why God should choose to visit polio, infantile leukaemia or cot deaths upon children. I suppose that's just another "bitter fact".

The Church has yet to get its act together over AIDS. Would-be demagogues like the Rev Tony Highton are trying to panic the bishops into a McCarthyite witch-hunt of gay vicars, by issuing unverifiable figures about 20 vicars having AIDS and 6,000 vicars being gay. Needless to say, such statistics caused a sensation in the tabloids, but sensibly the General Synod refused to allow Mr Highton's panic-mongering to push them into regrettable action. The Church must think deeply about AIDS. The choice is clear: they can choose common sense and compassion, or they can choose persecution and blame.

What in the Name of God . . .

ERIC WESTMAN

When arguing with atheists and agnostics, many Christians deliberately confuse the terms "god" and "God". The former might be described as any vague "maker and ruler of the universe", not clearly defined and ranging from Zeus to a dog's turd — "god" is whatever you care to make it. The uppercase "God" is, on the contrary, very clearly defined, and can mean only one thing — or three things, as we shall see shortly.

The usual ploy of the Christian is to get his opponent to admit that there is possibly "something behind the universe", and to then triumphantly declare that the doubting one thus believes in "God", whereas at the very most he has allowed the possibility of a "god" — quite a different matter.

My standard reply to the Christian's question that leads to this trap is that I have no more knowledge of who or what made the universe than the Christian has, that neither of us knows whether anybody or anything did make the universe, and that I do not feel the need to invent any such maker or to accept anybody else's invention, even if the Christian does. I also point out that if my opponent is content to regard some vague "something behind the universe" as God, then he cannot possibly be a Christian, since the Christian's God is a clearly defined object in which the Christian is obliged to believe, and that he may not believe in anything other. This Christian God is a multiple affair consisting of three "Persons". The First Person is Jehovah, the Jewish god; the Second Person is a creature of both flesh and spirit (whatever that might be) begotten by the First Person, who must therefore have had sexual intercourse with an adult human female — unless he utilised an artificial insemination process; the Third Person "proceeded" (again, whatever that means) from the First and Second Persons, and yet was the Person that impregnated the human female so that she gave birth to the Second Person, who already existed. Now, if my Christian friend wants to believe all that — as indeed he is required to do — then he is welcome to do so, but it is a far cry from the vague "something behind the universe".

Not only that, but all three Persons together comprise God, while any one Person on his own still comprises God. It makes strange mathematics: $\text{God} = \text{God} + \text{God} + \text{God}$; $\text{God} - \text{God} - \text{God} = \text{God}$; $\text{God} \div 3 = \text{God}$; $\text{God} \times 3 = \text{God}$; 33.3 per cent of God = 100 per cent of God; 66.6 per cent of God = 100 per cent of God.

Does our Christian opponent really accept this? Does he even understand it? I doubt it. Perhaps he should swap his God for a god.

In a similar manner, the Christian tries to provoke

his opponent into allowing that some vague preacher might once have existed and even have been crucified. Thereupon, of course, the Christian delightedly announces that his opponent has just affirmed his belief in Jesus.

But can this vague preacher — of whose existence, too, there is no proof — he equated with the Jesus of the Christian religion? The latter is clearly defined: the Second Person of the Christian Trinity, begotten by the First Person with the assistance of the Third Person, and born unnaturally of a human virgin. He was eventually executed; after a few days, resuscitated; carried on a human life for some time; then suddenly flew up into the air and never came back. At the moment he is in heaven (whatever and wherever that is) and will eventually make the return trip to Earth and become Ruler of the World.

Anything less than that is not the Christian Jesus; a vague itinerant preacher will not do: it has to be all or nothing at all. Those who are content with the shadowy figure have no more belief in the Jesus of Christianity than do those who deny his existence outright. Far from proving that the doubter does believe in Jesus, they actually prove that they themselves do not!

LETTERS

THE CREATIONISTS' NON-ARGUMENT

I have been on holiday and unable to reply promptly to Tim Lenton's letter (July) with some brief refutations of his nonsense about the earth being only a few thousand years old.

All of the "indications" he mentions are based on the usual creationist ploys of factual error, deliberate lying and especially the wilful ignoring of damning contrary evidence. The "efflux of helium-4 into the atmosphere" misconception ignores the fact that helium, being a light gas, escapes into space at a known and readily calculable rate. The "decay of the earth's magnetic field" sophism is a favourite one and is based on the factually, physically and mathematically incorrect extrapolations of one Thomas Barnes. It is also flatly contradicted by palaeomagnetism which has proven conclusively that the magnetic field has been increasing and decreasing in intensity and switching polarity like a yo-yo over the last few million years and the present decline has no relevance to the age of the earth whatsoever.

The "formation of river deltas" deception ignores the role of plate tectonics and there is no problem with radiocarbon which can be checked back against sediments in lakes for tens of thousands of years. The "influx of elements to the oceans" fallacy ignores the residence times of the elements. The elements do not reside in the sea forever, they get precipitated onto the ocean floor or absorbed into oceanic ridges at various rates depending upon the element. The ocean

floors are in turn endlessly recycled by plate tectonics. As for uniformitarianism, I have yet to encounter a creationist who understands it and who knows its limitations. Mr Lenton clearly does not as he tries to apply it to things like magnetic field changes and salination rates where we have good and clear-cut reasons for believing that the rates have not been constant.

Finally, as I said above, the creationists routinely ignore contrary evidence. In the case of the earth's magnetic field the evidence which demonstrates the variability of the field in the past has been well known for many years. It is conclusive, easily verified and to be found in any standard geology textbook. It is taught to first year geology students and is famous because it helped to clinch the case for continental drift. It is utterly inconceivable that creationists could be unaware of it yet they continue to use their magnetic field argument even though they must know, from the results of palaeomagnetism (and also archaeomagnetism) that it is demonstrably false. If this is not flagrant lying by the creationists then could Mr Lenton please tell us what is?

STEPHEN MORETON

"LUDICROUS" NCCL

It is a pity that the Campaign Against Censorship's annual report (July) focuses too much on the Peter Wright case. Most humanists would like to see the absurd Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act abolished. But there must be considerable differences of opinion as to whether Peter Wright ought to be allowed to publish his book and reveal the innermost workings of our security services. They are a legitimate part of our national defences and there is no point in them being irreversibly undermined by disclosure just for the sake of "a good read".

This brings me to my second point. The CAC ought to have directed most of its firepower at the ludicrous National Council for Civil Liberties, now hopelessly politicised and compromised, literally riddled with Fifth Columnists.

Britain is now the only western country that bans pornography, and yet the NCCL's executive has never been allowed to pass a motion condemning this state of affairs.

The NCCL should be allowed to sink into ignominious oblivion, and the Campaign Against Censorship should regroup and take on much of its original campaigning commitments.

ANTONY MILNE

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 4 October, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Karl Heath: The Golden Age.

British Humanist Association. Autumn School at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, 26 to 29 October. Theme: Religion, Humanism and Morality. Speakers: Jim Herrick, Martin Horwood, Don Liversedge, Dymphna Porter, Harry Stopes-Roe, Nicolas Walter and John White. Details obtainable from the BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8 5PG, telephone 01-938 4791.

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. Friday, 11 September, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting followed by social.

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

Harrow Humanist Society. The HAVS Centre, Pinner Road, Harrow. Wednesday, 14 October, 8 pm. Nicolas Walter: Anarchism and Humanism.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 6 October, 8 pm. Public meeting.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at a central Brighton hotel. Information obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL25 5AA, telephone 0242-39175.

International Humanist and Ethical Union. International Conference at the State University of New York, Buffalo, USA and the Sheraton-Brock Hotel, Niagara Falls, Canada, 2-6 August 1988. Information obtainable from Free Inquiry magazine, PO Box 5, Buffalo, New York 14215, USA.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 29 October, 7.45 pm. Bill Abbey: A Century of Esperanto.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Monday, 12 October, 7.30 pm. Public Meeting. Subject: Northern Ireland.

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47343.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 21 September, 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. 34 Cissbury Road, Worthing. Sunday, 27 September, 5.30 pm. Speaker and discussion on Freedom of Information.

Workers' Educational Association. The Manor House, West Street, Alford, Lincolnshire. Saturday, 26 September, 2 pm until 5.30 pm (two sessions), Thomas Paine in Britain, France and America. Tutor: Edward Royle. Fee: £2.40. Details: Miss P. Goodyear, 58 Chantry Road, Alford, telephone Alford 3339.

• A third edition of Borg Forder's catalogue of second-hand freethought books and pamphlets has been published and is obtainable from 15 Sunninghill Avenue, Hangleton, Hove, Sussex, telephone 0273-770796. Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope (9in x 4in).

moral consideration is surely that they are capable of experiencing pain and pleasure, misery and happiness; they have a sense of personal identity; and they can recognise other conscious beings with plans and purposes similar to their own. None of this applies to embryos. That is why people (whatever some of them may theoretically assert to the contrary) do not, and cannot, accord the same moral respect to embryos as they do to mature human individuals.

"The early embryo does not have even the most rudimentary nervous system, so cannot possibly have any consciousness, let alone feel pain or distress. Experiments on test-tube zygotes therefore cause no suffering of any kind. Such experiments are in marked contrast to those which undoubtedly do cause suffering to vast numbers of laboratory animals each year. Yet few of the religious fanatics who are so vociferously opposing human embryo experimentation also oppose animal vivisection.

"Those who insist that all human IVF embryos must be implanted in the mother presumably maintain the absolutist principle that all human life is sacred and in God's hands. They often see no reason to look into the biological facts, but simply assert 'Life begins at conception'. However, this is not so: life is a continuum'. Life is present in the sperm and in the unfertilised egg. Fertilisation is just one stage in the human life cycle.

"The fact that life is a continuum is perversely used by some religious fundamentalists to argue that, since the development of the embryo is gradual, there is no specific point at which an entity changes from being an entity of no moral significance into an entity which has such significance. What this suggests to freethinking rationalists, however, is not that we should accept that it is impossible to make any moral distinction between the early embryo and the newborn baby, but that we have to recognise that our moral attitudes towards the gradually developing being must likewise change and gradually develop. Thus, the existence of a continuum cannot mean that two exceedingly different entities belonging to that continuum must be treated in exactly the same way".

The NSS can see no rational objection to the use of embryos in research programmes, whether "spare" embryos or those deliberately produced for research purposes. It also asserts that there is no rational objection to disposing of them after the research is finished.

"On the contrary", the Society declares, "there is a moral obligation actually to carry out this last procedure, since to preserve damaged embryos to develop into damaged human beings would certainly not be morally permissible".

Sect Children Rescued

Australian police have rescued six children from the isolated hideaway of a secretive religious sect known as The Family. Aged between 12 and 17, they had been kept in seclusion since they were babies and brought up under a strict regime. They were in a dazed and confused state.

The sect's founder and leader is a 66-year-old woman, Anne Hamilton-Byrne, who is referred to as "The Teacher". She claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.

The house where the children were being kept had been home and school to fourteen children over a period of years. Most had been adopted by sect members on the instructions of Mrs Hamilton-Byrne. She ordered that they all should have their hair dyed blonde, and believed they would start a "new order" for humanity after a nuclear holocaust.

The sect's teachings are a hotch-potch of Yoga, Buddhism and Christianity. At one time there were over two hundred members, mostly middle-class professionals who dedicated themselves to "The Teacher" and enabled her to acquire a large number of properties in Australia, the United States and Europe.

The Family has a temple and its practices involve the use of drugs, including LSD. During the early '70s it ran a private mental home.

Christian Standards at Work

A Christian "good-neighbour" scheme run by St John's Urban Ministry in Gwent has been accused of job-fixing, moral blackmail and harassment of employees.

The organisation, which arranges help for disabled people, operates from offices in Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Pontypool. It is funded by the Manpower Services Commission.

Former and current employees claim that they have been forced to work in intolerable conditions, including vermin-infested offices. Some of them say they have been passed over for promotion because they are not churchgoers. Others claim they have been threatened with dismissal for seeking union advice.

Attempts to impose "Christian standards" on employees have included a ban on lunch-time pub visits. One girl was told off for wearing shorts during the hot weather.

Vivienne Hayward, a team leader at Pontypool, was suspended for speaking to the press. She said: "All the top jobs are given to people involved in church activities, and they're trying to stamp their moral values on the work-force".

The Urban Ministry has denied the allegations.