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APATHY, NOT ATTACK, IS NEGATIVISM, DECLARES NSS PRESIDENT

“Give me down-to-earth negativism every time”, declared Barbara Smoker in her presidential address to the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society at Conway Hall, London, on 14 November. “It is undeniable that the negative approach is not invariably unworthy”, she said.

Miss Smoker recalled that about 25 years ago she was named as one of the Ten Top Non-Smokers of the Year, obviously for the publicity in her surname.

“The *Daily Mail*, realising that I was opposed not only to tobacco but also to religion and the Establishment, carried a full-page feature article on me, describing me as an utterly negative person, against the defence of the country, against prisons, against Christian values, and even (horror of horrors!) against Christmas. Though I was rather flattered by the article, a number of my friends wrote in to the paper, complaining that it had given an entirely false killjoy image of me.

“The point is surely that the only kind of unremitting negativism is apathy, not attack”, she added.

“Everything that is attacked has its obverse, ‘positive’ side. If you are against war, you are for peace; if you are against privilege, you are for equality; if you are against censorship, you are for freedom of speech; if you are against superstition, you are for reason; if you are against humbug, you are for honesty; and if you are against mystical obscurantism, you are for freethought.

“The National Secular Society is often denigrated for not being more ‘positive’ — and this gibe comes not only from its religious opponents, but also from many of its friends in the humanist movement. They presumably mean that instead of wasting our time attacking unreason and injustice we should simply enjoy whatever reason and justice we can find. But

that is fiddling while Rome burns. It is re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. It is saying ‘I’m all right, Jack’ while others are far from all right.

“People can provide their own positive pleasures in accordance with their own tastes, if only society allows them the space and freedom. It is the essential work of the NSS to clear space and remove obstructions to freedom. A gardener may enjoy planting out flowers and produce, but unless he — or someone else on his behalf — has already weeded the ground and is willing to go on weeding around the plants as they grow, the garden will never flourish”.

Only the churches are anomalously permitted to enjoy both the freedom to speak out on political issues and the privileges of charity status. Recently, however, the Charity Commissioners, whether as a result of increasing liberalisation or simply of staff needs, seem to be letting other charities get away with undisguised political statements that would, a few years ago, have jeopardised their charity status.

The following resolution was passed: “This AGM instructs the Council of Management to investigate the possibility of the Society’s becoming a registered charity”.

During discussion of this motion it was pointed out that if a charitable organisation — or at least, one that was non-religious — were to lobby Members of Parliament to promote legislation, that would almost certainly cost them their charity status, but if such an organisation merely argued the advantages that would ensue if the law happened to be amended, that could be considered educational, and therefore charitable.

However, it was also pointed out that under its present Constitution the NSS “demands the complete separation of Church and State”, so an application for charity status would presumably necessitate a sweeping amendment of the Society’s Constitution.

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NEWS

CHURCH IN A STATE

In a *Sunday Times* article, liberal Anglican Edward Pearce has depicted the Church of England as a "charitable" and "kind-hearted" institution that has never "seriously persecuted". This extraordinary claim was made more in justification of the title ("The Ideal Home for Agnostics") than respect for historical truth.

In these ecumenical times the Church of England adopts an air of injured innocence when its record of authoritarianism and persecution is mentioned. Even Catholics, Jews, Methodists and assorted non-conformists whose forerunners suffered at the hands of the State church, join in the deception and conspiracy of silence.

The Church of England still has its consistory courts, the authority to confer academic degrees and the privilege of presiding at national ceremonies. It can also unfrock a priest or sell houses and flats over the tenants' heads. But to the man on the Clapham omnibus, the C of E is as much a national joke as a national church. Small wonder, therefore, that some Anglicans are ready to welcome even top-hatted atheists into the fold.

GOOD NEWS FROM SCOTLAND

Dr Callum G. Brown, a lecturer in history at the University of Strathclyde, has recorded a dramatic decline in religious commitment in Scotland. Writing in *The Scotsman*, Dr Brown concludes that, on the basis of present trends, membership of the Church of Scotland at the end of the century will be at least half what it was in 1960.

The Church of Scotland has lost 35 per cent of its membership since 1956. Last year alone the communicants' roll fell by over sixteen thousand. The loss of baptisms since 1959 is put at 60 per cent and of Sunday School attenders at 65 per cent.

Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist and Episcopal churches are also losing members.

The Roman Catholic Church, generally regarded as the most dynamic of Scotland's large denominations, is also facing a serious situation. It is not only that the Catholic population has declined; since 1968 the number of priests has fallen by 200 and the number of seminary students by a third.

The decline in religious observance and church attendance in Scotland has been accelerating since the turn of the century. The churches failed to recruit, and by the 1960s members and their

S AND NOTES

children were leaving. The proportion of church marriages fell sharply, and this was followed by fewer baptisms. In 1900, one in two Scottish children attended Sunday school and Bible classes. Today the figure is around one in ten.

Sunday evening services are no match for television programmes, while families prefer visiting friends or going for car outings to attending afternoon services. Dr Brown writes: "Since the 1960s the Scottish Sabbath has all but vanished in the Lowlands, and it is now in rapid decay in the Highlands".

Initiatives to attract people back to the pews have been ineffective. Despite reforms and ecumenical gestures, "parents in their thirties and forties who did not get married in church, did not get their children baptised, did not send them to Sunday school . . . now have no connection whatever with organised religion".

Dr Brown offers little comfort to Scottish Christians. He declares: "The truth is that Scotland has been secularising extremely rapidly since the 1890s".

THEN AND NOW

Newspaper advice columns abound with examples of human dottiness as well as despair. Agony Aunts, as they are known, wrestle with readers' problems, which range from the mundane to the bizarre. Many of their worries support the adage, "Religion is the problem, not the answer".

A correspondent recently sought advice because her life was being made miserable by a group of office workers who had "found Jesus". In addition to the usual prosletysing activities, they were constantly praying and calling on the Lord to solve any problem that arose during the working day. Thus when the office photocopier broke down, the zealots prayed over it. The machine's restoration to working order (by an engineer) was hailed as a miracle, with shouts of "Thank you Jesus!"

Now comes news that clergymen — privileged as always — have their very own Agony Aunt. She is Sarah Horsman, a medical graduate from Bristol University. Dr Horsman runs a confidential telephone service for clergymen with marital, financial and other problems. "Our job is to give them a shoulder to cry on and help them to get back on the rails", she says.

Agony Aunts are, for the most part, compassionate, tolerant and worldly wise. Certainly they are more approachable than were their predecessors of a

century ago. A selection of answers to seekers of guidance, published in the *Girl's Own Paper* between 1883 and 1887, illustrates the point.

"An Earnest Inquirer" is given the brush-off: "We fear we cannot help you, save to advise the use of plenty of exercise and cold water".

Much the same treatment is accorded "Trottie", whose problem is veins showing on the back of her hands: "We suppose that you are thin. Try to fatten yourself".

One inquirer is told: "Your letter shows a sad and unhealthy state of mind and body. . . Read your Bible. . . Pray earnestly for help to resist wandering and unhappy thoughts".

"Tollora", obviously perplexed by the smoking habit, is informed: "Except for medicinal purposes, such as in cases of asthma, it is at least un-English to smoke cigarettes, a habit introduced among us by certain continental countries".

One lady is advised: "Take a tepid bath every morning, and walk after breakfast with your husband to his office. Do not be idle in mind or body. . . Probably one of your troubles is that you do not realise the constant beauty and sweetness of service. 'Ye do serve the Lord Christ'. If needful, do your needlework on the sofa, and do not cry more than you can help; crying is a peculiarly useless occupation".

A kind offer by "Min" is rejected: "We fear we cannot accept your offer of a white rat, nor can we advise you what to do with the others".

"Young Girl" is warned: "At your early age (fifteen years) the less you read in the way of novels the better".

Sometimes a helpful reference is provided, although we shall never know the exact nature of an inquiry by "Katherine" who is informed: "The whole subject has been treated in 'The Fairy of the Family' in vol iv".

Agony Aunts in Victorian times were much concerned about correct behaviour in polite society. "An Organist" is told: "Persons of the upper rank of society never say 'good afternoon' among each other. It would be considered vulgar".

To bow or not to bow? "Topsy" is told: "Unless you were previously acquainted, he was impertinent and intrusive in bowing to you". On the other hand, "Violet" is assured: "Of course you should have the politeness to bow, in passing, to any man who is engaged with you in your Sunday-school teaching and church decoration".

No doubt "Distressed Maiden" was even more distressed by the stern reply: "We have no cure to offer for holes in the skin of the face by picking at it with a needle".

Today's Agony Aunts seem a soft lot when compared to the starched and corseted upholders of Victorian values.

BIG SISTER IS LISTENING

The "silly season", like the Christmas shopping spree, becomes longer every year, and it appears that those of the Sexists Under The Bed Tendency are determined to extend it from 1 January until 31 December.

Their latest "victory" is in the London Borough of Brent where a new ruling is being imposed on council staff. In future they must not use "demeaning expressions" like "love", "dear", or "darling" when addressing other employees. Snoopers and narks, grandly if euphemistically described as "sexual harassment support officers", all women, are to be installed in each department to detect such enormities. Investigatory panels will be set up and special courses arranged for members. Parkinson's Law rules, OK!

It will be interesting to see the reaction, particularly by women, if any attempt is made to impose femspeech in the Midlands and Northern regions of the country. In these areas, terms that are "demeaning expressions" in Brent are used in everyday speech by women as well as men. Birmingham women, for instance, don't believe in calling a spade a shovel; if a "sexual harassment support officer" said they should not address male colleagues as "love" or "dear", she would be told to bugger off and mind her own business.

The majority of women have far more serious concerns than the obsessions of nit-pickers in Brent. They are worried about unemployment and cuts in expenditure on the health, social and educational services, policies of a Government that is led, if you haven't noticed, by a woman.

THEOLOGY OF WEALTH

Michael Bassett, a former Soho pornography dealer who is now pastor at the Victory Evangelical Church in Hampstead, north London, preaches that it is the wealthy, not the poor, who are blessed. And he practises what he preaches.

God wants us to be wealthy, "have a nice home, with microwave and dishwasher", says the pastor who runs a £12,000 Mercedes and lives in a £200,000 house.

Members of Bassett's congregation were upset by the revelation that their money pays for taxis to take his daughter to school and £20 a day for a nanny to look after his young son. One poorer but probably no wiser worshipper declared: "He and his wife Denise live like something out of 'Dallas' or 'Dynasty'. He pays himself £26,000 a year and the congregation are paying for his jet-setting lifestyle".

Police are investigating Pastor Bassett's affairs. The Victory Evangelical Church is a registered charity.

Reflections on the

David Alton's Private Member's bill, which comes up for Second Reading in the House of Commons next month, is the latest attack on the 1967 Abortion Act. Outside the Commons, the Liberal MP and ardent Roman Catholic is being strongly supported by Christian pressure groups dedicated to the restoration of Victorian values, which led to back-street abortions.

It has surely all been said, written and seen by now. Not a day passes without something appearing in the media about David Alton's attempt to inflict Roman Catholic dogma on all the rest of us. The *Guardian* is probably the most peculiar and unpredictable newspaper in the abortion context. Its editorials are pro-choice as are many of its features, but its news coverage, which is what matters most, can be hostile to the abortion law reform cause to the point of being thoroughly misleading. A good example of this was the coverage it gave to an opinion poll the *Guardian* paid for itself. It headlined this survey with the words "Backing for Alton Makes Change Inevitable." I read this gloomily until I looked in detail at the findings. This showed that only 44 per cent of the public favoured an 18-week limit, though they had not been asked whether they also favoured an exception for handicap. A curious omission in the circumstances, since several recent surveys have shown that 80-90 per cent of the public thinks that no woman should be forced to have a severely handicapped baby. So, what this *Guardian* Marplan survey actually showed was minority support for Alton — with this minority almost certainly shrinking still further had the relevant follow-on question been asked. It could be excused on the grounds that this was a characteristic error on the part of the *Guardian*, not famous for its numeracy. In that case it is even odder that letters sent in pointing out how inaccurate the headline was were all suppressed. Almost worthy of *The Times* in the bad old days when its editor was a Roman Catholic!

It has to be admitted, however, that the choicest bits tend to appear in the religious press, where, alas, they can be savoured by only a small minority of all newspaper readers. In the Roman Catholic *Universe* of 23 October beside a picture of David Alton and his favourite foetus — the one that he carries with him around all the television studios of Britain — lo and behold, the statement by Alton that at 18 weeks' gestation a foetus can "recognise the mother's voice and familiar sounds." Quite some foetus that must be! In the same issue, David Alton delivers himself of the view that "Currently in our hospitals, babies of 20 weeks' gestation are being saved." By this time, and after all this debate, he must surely know that this is untrue, and that nowhere in the

Progress of Alton

MADELEINE SIMMS

world, not even in the Vatican City where so many miracles occur, has a baby been delivered live at 20 weeks. There are said to be a handful of survivors after 23 weeks, and after 24 weeks survival is not uncommon. But the lungs of a foetus are not sufficiently developed to enable survival to occur before 23 weeks, and claims to the contrary have never been taken seriously within the medical profession, let alone authenticated. David Alton has been constantly challenged as to why he has chosen the arbitrary date of 18 weeks' gestation. So it is natural that he should wish to believe that 18-week foetuses can chat up their mums from the womb, and 20-week foetuses skip along to nursery school.

My own Member of Parliament, who is also a European MP and sits for the constituency bordering Mrs Thatcher's, has written to inform me that he will support David Alton because he disapproves of the 1967 Abortion Act on moral grounds. The Act "was one of the causes of the growth of permissiveness and promiscuity in the late 1960s and 1970s. It has created much hardship for childless couples who find adoption more difficult. The law . . . has given the fathers no legal rights in the future of the foetus. . . Do we really want Britain to be the abor-

tion centre of the world? . . .", and so forth. So I wrote to ask him whether he would at least support an exception for severe handicap. The reply to that was "It is a matter I will agonise over." The week before, in his and Mrs Thatcher's local newspaper (*Hendon & Finchley Times*, 8 October), there was reference to the fact that "the strain of caring for a mentally handicapped child contributed to the death of a pensioner couple." Said the chairman of the local Parents' Group in Barnet: "This should never be allowed to happen again." But we all know it will, as long as such MPs regard it as "moral" to force women by law to have severely handicapped babies they do not wish to have, particularly in a society where there are very few services for them and where such services as do exist are being cut to shreds. That's "morality" for you!

I end with my usual plea. Write to your MP to let him know your views, argue with him if necessary, and please send the replies to Cerys Williams, c/o Co-ord, 27-35 Mortimer Street, London W1, where they will be carefully noted and filed and will come in useful when the parliamentary whipping starts. The Second Reading debate is expected to be on 22 January. Every letter and every vote counts!

We Didn't Take Abortion Lightly

YVONNE DAVITT

Mrs Davitt told a local newspaper that her blood was boiling after she saw David Alton on television discussing his bill to reform the 1967 Abortion Act. She explains why.

David Alton seems to think that abortion is a decision that is made easily. I can assure him it is not.

Earlier this year I had to have my baby aborted. When that was done I was almost 20 weeks pregnant, **two weeks later than the time limit David Alton would put on abortions.** My baby was a hopeless case and didn't stand a chance of living because the **head and brain were not developed correctly.**

David Alton cannot realise what such a decision means to people like me, my husband and our family. This was our first baby and was very much wanted.

It's not a case of being put under an anaesthetic and waking up when it is all over. There has to be induced labour, which means giving birth to the foetus. It's not pleasant physically or mentally because the mother knows that there is going to be no baby at the end — only the memory of what has happened.

It's very traumatic for the family too, especially

the husband. Luckily I have a very caring husband and a family who helped.

If David Alton's bill becomes law it will mean that people like me will have to go through pregnancies with the knowledge they are carrying something that will not have a chance of life. It will be so pointless and cruel.

Every woman has the right to make her own decision. She is the one who has to live with it.

What justification have David Alton and people like him for trying to take away this right?

John Parker, a former Father of the Commons, collapsed and died last month at the age of 81. He was Labour MP for Romford, and later Dagenham, until his retirement. John Parker introduced two Private Member's Bills to reform Sunday Entertainment laws. He was largely responsible for the Legitimacy Act (1959) which enabled children born out of wedlock to be legitimised on the subsequent marriage of their parents. His many interests outside Parliament included the National Trust, the Historic Buildings Council and the Inland Waterways Amenity Council. He was also a former president of the Fabian Society.

Hounds and Humbug: Homosexuality at the General Synod

JIM HERRICK

"Scandal of Gay Vicars". "Poofs Can Stay". These are samples of the headlines, which were concocted when the Rev Tony Higton, Rector of Hawkswell in Essex, proposed a motion in the General Synod condemning homosexuality and calling for "appropriate discipline" against those clergy whose behaviour is not "exemplary" (i.e. those who are homosexual). Perhaps "gutter" is too polite an adjective for the British popular press, which, alas, has to be called popular, judging by sales. Gutters, though they carry unpleasant garbage, do have their uses. One of the least useful aspect of Mr Higton's motion was to provide — as he must surely have known it would — material for such nasty headlines. When the next gay person lies injured in hospital, attacked by some gay hating thug, no doubt. Mr Higton will lie safe, sound and smug in his bed, secure in the knowledge that he has done his moral duty.

Essex, where Higton pursues his mean-minded, moralistic mission, is renowned as an area where there was once much witch-hunting. True to local tradition, Higton, while hypocritically claiming "I am not calling for a witch-hunt", set the scene for exactly that in his attempt to expose the prevalence of homosexuality in the Church of England and hound out priests whose behaviour was not exemplary. "Exemplary", remember, for Higton does not mean being honest, generous, or compassionate: it means denying affection to someone you might be attracted towards. Higton is a leading member of the group calling itself Action for Biblical Witness to our Nation, which produced a report entitled "Sexuality and the Church". The report demanded the prevention of ordination not just of known gay people, but of any candidate who "justifies homosexual practices". Only homophobics may enter here.

Fortunately, Mr Higton's motion was not passed and a more moderate amendment put forward by the Bishop of Chester was preferred by an overwhelming majority of the Synod members (403 to 8). However, this less hard-line amendment displayed all the inconsistency, illogicality and lack of understanding that characterises Anglican discussion of homosexuality. The Bishop's motion affirmed "the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships" and stressed that "sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship". Anglicans now include such statements in essentially anti-gay proposals as standard practice: the strategy is designed to head off criticism of anti-gay prejudice, by including criticism of heterosexual relationships outside wedlock. But the evidence is that the majority of the population have at some

stage enjoyed extra-marital sexual relations. And why not, provided care is taken not to hurt other people's feelings or pass on sexually transmitted diseases?

The Bishop's motion also stated that "homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion". This is another standard ploy in the Anglican arsenal to fire at homosexuals: it allows the Anglican to alight on the comfortable but confused distinction between homosexual "acts" and homosexual "orientation". You condemn the sin (i.e. the genital act) but love the sinner (i.e. the homosexual). This totally false distinction was made by the Bishop of Chester in his typically misleading comment that "while I have no sympathy whatsoever with the flagrant promotion of homosexual life-styles, which draws many into its activities who are not orientated that way, we must recognise the enormous pressure of sexual urges in those who are genuinely and strongly homosexually oriented. . .".

The notion of the genuine and the non-genuine homosexual is a nonsense. Human sexuality is composed of a range of response, with a spectrum stretching from predominantly heterosexual to predominantly homosexual with many positions in between. Homosexuality is defined not by true or genuine orientation, but by who you find yourself falling in love with and going to bed with. Incidentally this "flagrant" promotion of homosexual life-styles, which so shocks the moralists, usually amounts to no more than being reasonably honest and open about one's relationships. Nothing like the flagrant promotion of attitudes by evangelical Christians. Good for you, if you have an "I Love Jesus" sticker in your car window; but woe betide you if you advertise "I Love Gays" in the same way. And it's nothing like the flagrant cross-dressing practised in front of altars.

Presumably, one of the reasons why churches are so anguished by the whole subject is the high number of homosexual priests. Maybe the incense-swinging, high-camp, high-church Anglican is as much of an untypical stereotype as the mincing hairdresser. Homosexuals, remember, may be lorry drivers, air pilots or even MPs. No figures have been produced to demonstrate the number of gay priests — but if it's above average, that might be due to the experience of being an outsider and the possible lack of a family causing gay men to be attracted to a profession where caring and pastoral work are perceived as important, rather than the opportunities for transvestism or inhabiting a single-sex community. The Church's inability to come to terms with the idea of women priests is comparable to its homophobia: both

stem from a tradition of rigid and inequitable views of gender roles, going back to the myth of Adam and Eve.

How deeply Anglicans are still bogged down in the mire of this tradition was seen by the large vote (324 to 46) against the Rev Malcolm Johnson's amendment calling on the church to encourage commitment, stability and permanence in all relationships. ("All" of course means the inclusion of homosexuals: how even the best of them are forced to talk in code and nuance!) Mr Johnson, who allows the Gay Christian Movement to use the Church of St Botolph's in the City of London as their base, was one of the very few speakers to affirm the value of gay relationships. He asked "why we cannot accept the fact that homosexuals will by their nature want to form sex relationships and will need positive guidance from us as they do?"

The meagre support given to Johnson's amendment is a measure of the success of the evangelicals in increasing their numbers in the laity's representation in the Synod. A powerful moral majority is abroad in Britain today. It is relatively quiet and unstrident in comparison with its American counterpart, but it is creeping into the corridors of

power rather than shouting through media megaphones. Consider the omission of any change of Sunday hours in the Bill to rationalise and extend licensing laws, and the sudden last minute inclusion of references to religious education and morning assemblies in Baker's Education Bill.

As in so many matters, it is unclear where Dr Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, stands in relation to the moral majority lobby, and his comment on Johnson's amendment was predictably opaque. Runcie, whose insult to homosexuals that they should view themselves as "handicapped" a few years ago will not be forgotten, epitomises the Anglicans' muddle. On the one hand, he insisted that "to be homosexual by nature is to be a full human being"; on the other hand, he could not deny that homosexual acts are condemned in the biblical and Christian tradition and could not accept that homosexual unions are simply alternative life-styles to Christian marriages. On the one hand, on the other hand. There must be special pastures reserved in heaven for Anglican bishops, fields bountifully supplied with fences on which the bishops' bottoms may rest, while they dine with runcible spoons on a cloudy soup of "ifs" and "buts".

The Warriors Take Over

KATHLEEN H. SINNOTT

Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka has overthrown the democratically elected Government of Dr Timoci Bavandra, declared Fiji a republic, made Christianity the official religion and suspended freedom of assembly. Kathy Sinnott, who now lives in Australia, has happy memories of Fiji but is worried about its future.

After giving a slide show on Fiji in Yorkshire some years ago, I was asked by a Baptist minister if the Fijians still went about with no clothes on.

Mention Fiji today and many Europeans picture a faraway South Pacific island occupied by primitive people in need of civilisation. I would argue that Western society could become far richer, in non-economic terms, if it was prepared to learn something from the traditional Fijian lifestyle and values.

Fiji in fact consists of hundreds of islands and islets, some of which I saw in 1969-70. With a small party of Australians and Britons, I visited the Mamunuca Group, Ovalau, and various parts of Viti Levu (the main island), including the interior. Apart from a short stay in the capital, Suva, I stayed in the villages. The hospitality of the Fijians was overwhelming and their warmth and generosity have never been surpassed on any of my travels.

The Fijians ceded their islands to Britain in 1874 because they felt threatened by neighbouring Tonga. The British then imported Indians to work as cheap

labour on the sugar plantations. The present Indian population is mainly descended from these indentured labourers, although more recently Indians with professional, technical and commercial skills have migrated to these islands. Nevertheless, most of the Indians have been born in Fiji and regard it as their country. Since the 1940s Indians have narrowly outnumbered the indigenous Fijians (Melanesian and Polynesian in origin). The total population, including minority groups, is 714,000.

In 1969 I was struck by the contrast between the two main racial groups, each leading completely separate lifestyles. The Indians lived in towns or on sugar plantations and the Fijians mainly in small villages.

Life for the Fijians was centred on the land, which was highly productive. There never seemed to be any shortage of food or building and craft materials. The Fijians were protected under a British statute which prevented the Indians from owning more than one-fifth of the land.

The Indians, on the other hand, were better educated than the Fijians and were the traders who kept the economy going. Today they predominate in certain occupations, such as law.

Even when the two races lived in the same township they still kept apart. For example, Tavua, in northern Viti Levu, was in effect two separate

villages, each with its own distinctive building style, but situated incongruously side by side. As it was holiday time we camped in the high school. Normally this school catered for 400 children with three Indian and five Fijian teachers, but the head teacher informed us that there was no intermingling of Indian and Fijian children in the school.

Although there was no social mixing of the two groups, I was unaware of any animosity between them. There seemed to be an unwritten understanding by which they coexisted side by side.

The early missionaries appear to have had a gentleman's agreement to carve up the islands between them and not to encroach on another denomination's territory. Hence there was only one church in each of the villages where we stayed.

I well remember the Catholic village of Tokou, on Ovalau, where we arrived feeling tired, dirty and dishevelled after travelling all day by bus and boat. We were welcomed by smiling women who threw garlands of frangipani flowers around our necks. One of the men then took his machete and slashed open fresh green coconuts for us. The village had been specially decorated for our visit: the central *bure* (one-roomed thatched house) was adorned with palm leaves and woven hanging baskets full of tropical flowers and fruit. Bamboo seats had been made that day and decorated with hibiscus flowers. In honour of our arrival the villagers had even installed a special concrete lavatory flushed from a tin can.

We were given gifts of fish, prawns, crayfish and tropical fruit. The Fijians were the perfect hosts, giving us a helping hand with bags and camping gear, showing us around and providing refreshment and entertainment. Every evening we were invited to a traditional kava ceremony in the central *bure*, followed by Fijian music and dancing. On the Sunday morning the whole village turned out in their colourful *sulus* to wend their way along the beach road and across a grassy area to the Catholic church; but that evening we were entertained as usual in the traditional way.

The following week we stayed at Yadua, a Methodist village on Viti Levu. On our arrival the Fijians were friendly and helpful, but something of the spontaneous welcome was missing. It was Sunday, so they asked if we would stay up until midnight and then they would hold a dance for us.

I wonder how many Fijians are aware of what has happened in their country this year, as many of the villages are very isolated. On the island of Ovalau, for instance, little villages are tucked into hollows nestling between jungle-clad volcanic hills and the sea. Their only form of transport is small punts with outboard motors.

I have visited the village of Natavoli which, although on the main island, was even more isolated. After we ran out of road, we took to the river and

when the river was no longer navigable we had to bash our way through muddy rain forest and across numerous streams. To the locals we were oddities who used tooth-brushes, slept on inflatable mattresses, and were unable to walk across rugged country in bare feet. (Our unusual possessions were never locked away in the villages, yet nothing ever went missing.)

We left Natavoli on *billi billis* (bamboo rafts) and hung on as we raced down the rapids of the Waingqa Gorge, crashing into rocks and tipping over, with waterfalls cascading down on top of us from overhanging cliffs covered with vines and creepers.

In early 1970, when I learnt that the United Nations was pressing the British to get out of Fiji, I was worried. Could members of the Foreign Office or the UN really appreciate the unusual and delicate social balance? Had any of them visited Fiji and stayed in the villages? Sadly, the events of this year have shown that I had every reason for concern.

Even in 1969 I suspected that the Fijian way of life was under threat. Tourism had already begun to make subtle changes. For example, when we stayed in Takou we never went thirsty: there were always children ready to climb a palm and knock down some coconuts. When we arrived in Suva we were greeted by a small boy who smiled as he held out his hand: "Two bob, me climb coconut tree, you take photo."

In Takou we learnt that money was not important; £1 would last weeks and consumer items could be listed on one hand: washing powder, soap, bread, meat and clothes. However, I wonder whether the villagers would say the same today: I suspect not. They were expecting a large P & O ship to berth at Levuka in February 1970 and the village was to become a tourist resort.

As it is nearly eighteen years ago since I saw Fiji, I consulted a reliable friend who had visited remote parts of the country more recently (but before the military coup). She informed me that since 1970 various institutions, such as schools, banks and the public service, had staff quotas of fifty per cent Fijians and fifty per cent Indians. Thus Fijians and Indians were working together in the towns, they were mixing socially and, very recently, there had been some intermarriage between the two groups. Once again no animosity was evident between the Indians and Fijians. Village life for the Fijians was still much the same, but the more able children were being educated out of their traditional environment.

In 1970 Chief Poula Beka was one of five members of the Great Council of Chiefs who accompanied Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to London to receive the new Fijian constitution from the Queen. He foresaw trouble when the Foreign Office insisted on a common electoral roll for all Fijians. "We do not have a democratic tradition," the Chief told Ian

Mackay of the *Age* (Melbourne, 17 October 1987), "our tribal tradition is much more feudal." But he added, "Whatever happens in Suva, the village will always be here." I hope he is right. Unrest does appear to be confined mainly to Suva and to some extent to Lautoka and a handful of townships.

Colonel Rabuka believes he has been chosen by God to restore Fiji to the Fijians, but his actions raise many fears. Rabuka and the Taukei movement certainly have control of the Fijian army; but I wonder whether the Colonel has the full support of the local Catholics, both Fijian and Indian, for his Sabbatarian measures banning Sunday trading, sport and public transport.

Dr. Tupeni Baba (Minister of Education in the Bavandra Government) believes that Rabuka has no more than 25 per cent support from the indigenous Fijians and that the military régime would not be endorsed by the Great Council of Chiefs if it were able to give a ruling.

I did not need to be told that Colonel Rabuka is a Methodist: I guessed. He is in fact a lay preacher

and many of the members of the Taukei movement are also staunch Methodists.

The Hindu and Muslim sections of the Indian community must feel alienated by the Colonel's decision to declare Christianity the official religion. Rabuka also banned fireworks just in time to put the kybosh on the traditional Hindu Festival of Lights. According to Dr Baba there is now no freedom of worship in Fiji for anyone who is not a Christian.

I am also concerned about other infringements of civil liberties such as restrictions placed on the press, trade unions and political meetings.

Colonel Rabuka has appeased the fears of some Fijians that Indian numerical dominance might leave the Fijian, in Chief Poula Beka's words, "second man in his own land." If, however, the Indians are left politically naked they may vote with their feet, taking business confidence and their professional talent with them, and the Colonel may find that he is an emperor who cannot afford new clothes.

LETTERS

THE HUMAN EMBRYO

S. J. Nicholls (Letters, November) picks a lot of holes in the National Secular Society's submission to the DHSS on proposed legislation on embryo research.

First, he says that our suggestion of the limitation of research to the 35 or 38 days' development stage is no less arbitrary than the Warnock recommendation of 14 days. Any point of time chosen is obviously arbitrary, since development is gradual, but the criterion should be relevant, and we contend that the beginning of the development of a functional nervous system at about five weeks is the most relevant factor in the embryo's gradual acquisition of rights, while the 14-day criterion of an end to the possibility of twinning is, except for those who believe in "ensoulment", utterly irrelevant and therefore arbitrary. When Mr Nicholls says that consciousness in the embryo "may well begin early on", he surely cannot really mean before a functional nervous system has even begun to develop?

As for his statement that "there is no qualitative change in the developing embryo throughout the whole gestation period", this is obviously absurd. Though there are no sudden changes, there are certainly important qualitative changes taking place throughout the gradual development. Is an acorn the same as a mature oak-tree? If so, why do we care so little about the trillions of acorns wasted each year, yet mourn the destruction of mature trees in the recent hurricane?

Mr Nicholls suggests that a newborn baby is equal in worth to a child of three, but I would firmly deny that. At birth a baby has very limited awareness, has no idea of any future, and has no real stake in life, while a normal three-year-old is a little person, with personal relationships and a concept of life and time — the very things that give human beings full status and rights.

Mr Nicholls derides the comparison between an early embryo and a fragment of flesh from a grazed knee —

but in fact they contain the very same reproductive DNA. Only their environment is different. You could produce a new human being from the fragment of flesh if you went through the right cloning processes. "You might as well compare a twig with a seed", he says; but why not? Doesn't he know you can propagate a new plant from a cutting as well as from a seed?

Finally, Mr Nicholls says that if we want to limit embryo research to the five-week development stage, we are inconsistent unless we campaign against induced abortion beyond that stage. But no one advocates deliberately bringing about a human conception in order to abort it. Abortion is always regarded as the lesser of two evils — the greater evil being to force a woman to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. We rightly demand even more serious grounds for an abortion in the later stages of pregnancy — for instance, that the mother is a schoolgirl, that the pregnancy was the result of incestuous rape, or that the foetus has been diagnosed as defective. Whereas embryo research is carried out for the sake of human knowledge in general, an abortion is carried out for the sake of the actual mother or of the potential baby. We would never countenance biological experimentation on a human being for the sake of human knowledge in general; only for that person's own welfare.

BARBARA SMOKER
President, National Secular Society

THE TERRORISTS' SAVIOUR

The dreadful slaughter at Enniskillen last month is the type of event that exposes the curious contortions of Christian theology. Clerics, and some of the bereaved, tell us that God will judge the perpetrators and deal with them accordingly. On Remembrance Day, when the Enniskillen bombing took place, I watched a television documentary about the aerial bombings of Germany during the Second World War when tens of thousands of innocent people were killed. I never hear Christians suggest that the airmen responsible will be subject to God's vengeance. If there is a moral differ-

ence I would like to know what it is.

A further point: Sometimes the IRA, INLA, or the UVF bombers claim to have become "saved" or have found God (usually after the police have found them first) and have the assurance of eternal life. How many of their innocent "unsaved" victims can be assured that eternal torment is their lot? From the bomber's point of view his dastardly deeds could be construed as having been a good thing, since he might not otherwise have plunged to the depths where he "saw the light." He is, therefore, better off than his hapless victim as far as his eternal Christian destiny is concerned.

It is seldom that such questions are put as bluntly as this, yet why not? I can guarantee that the Christian response to such issues will be a load of ecclesiastical waffle or just plain silence.

R. McDOWELL

DEMOCRACY — UNIONIST STYLE

It is ludicrous for Paul Rowlandson to suggest (Letters, November) that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has given the Irish Government anything more than a symbolic role in Northern Ireland. Britain is currently refusing to reform the no-jury Diplock Courts, one of the Republic's prime objectives when the Agreement was signed. Ireland, however, seems ready to approve a treaty which would enable its citizens to be extradited without a good case being first established against them, something Britain would never allow happen to its citizens.

The Agreement was conceived to prop up the SDLP against the challenge from Sinn Fein. It is therefore in the interest of the SDLP to exaggerate its importance, yet their deputy leader, Seamus Mallon, has admitted: "The Agreement is in danger of dying of boredom", because so little has been achieved by it.

Rowlandson complains that the Agreement was signed "against the democratically expressed wishes of the vast majority". What is striking about Unionist attachment to democracy and majority rule is that the only majority which seems to count is their own, and democracy is respected only when it produces the result they want. To them, democracy is synonymous with the collective will of the Protestants. For instance, Ian Paisley's "Democratic Unionist Party" was originally called the Protestant Unionist Party. The change of name did not denote any change in ideology.

When Parliament passed the 1912 bill giving Home Rule to Ireland, Unionists did not then accept the will of the majority. Instead they formed the illegal Ulster Volunteer Force of 100,000 men, armed by Britain's arch-enemy, Germany, with whom we were soon to be at war.

By threatening a bloodbath, Protestant Unionists forced the creation of Northern Ireland. This went against the democratically expressed wishes not only of the British Parliament and the majority in Ireland as a whole, but also of the majority in the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone, South Armagh, South Down, Derry City and the south and west of County Derry, to mention only those areas which could easily have been incorporated into the Republic instead of Northern Ireland.

The Unionists then turned Northern Ireland into a police state where Catholics were discriminated against in jobs, housing and civil rights. When Catholics began the civil rights agitation in the mid-60s, a revived UVF conducted a terror reign of bombings and random murders of Catholics, while the Unionist Government

used its police force to attack peaceful civil rights marches.

Rowlandson attacks "English Nationalism". He obviously believes that only Protestant Unionists are entitled to pursue their own interests. Why should we continue to prop up the rotten Unionist borough when our own people are suffering so much poverty and deprivation? In my experience, there is a vast body of opinion in Britain that is sick to death of Protestant Unionists. They are responsible for the situation in Northern Ireland.

R. A. McCARTNEY

THE COST OF EDUCATION

There was a serious error in my letter on Ireland (November) which states that in the Republic of Ireland "it costs a minimum of £100 a year to send a non-Catholic child to a non-Catholic secondary school. It costs Catholic parents nothing to send their children to Catholic schools". It should have read that it costs a minimum of one thousand pounds a year to send a non-Catholic child to a non-Catholic secondary school. It is not tax deductible either.

PAUL ROWLANDSON

STATISTICS

Since this is not the place to give lessons on the use and abuse of statistics, I would merely advise Tim Lenton (Letters, October) to carefully digest a school book on the subject. The dubious use of statistics he refers to in that and a previous letter is entirely his own, so if he wishes to be considered honest he must remove any suggestion of perversity in his ignorance.

His definition of "1,000 billion to one against" as "unutterably remote" is an emotional personal opinion and nothing to do with statistics. He goes on to paraphrase what he said in his original letter, and my previous criticisms therefore still stand.

As Richard Dawkins so brilliantly demonstrates, amongst other things, in his book, *The Blind Watchmaker*, very low probability events not only do produce complex systems, but it seems almost inevitable that they should. Mathematics is frequently surprising, so Tim Lenton needs to be suspicious of his gut reaction. Topics concerning events with probabilities far, far tinier than in our everyday experience always seem to bring out the irrational in people.

P. L. LANCASTER

This correspondence is closed.—Editor.

NO ALTERNATIVE

Unlike Nigel Sinnott (Why I am Not a Humanist, November), I am a humanist, and for some of the reasons he gives for not being one. One reason, I suppose, is that I do believe in Man, and that compared to all other species that have evolved he is indeed a "marvellous pinnacle".

While I agree with Mr Sinnott that Man has already caused a great deal of harm in the world, and through his "atomic warmongering" may cause an enormous amount more, he has also shown himself capable of "great good". For those of us who are atheists, to whom or what can we turn but ourselves?

Of course we are still very far indeed from being the "master of things" as Swinburne claimed, but we have made great strides in achieving a better world in making existence better for all forms of life. So long as humanists persist in those efforts, why should we jib at the label?

H. A. GURNEY

FREETHINKER REVIEW

BOOK

BLESSED ASSURANCE: AT HOME WITH THE BOMB IN AMARILLO, TEXAS, by A. G. Mojtabai. Secker & Warburgh, £10.95

"Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine" is a popular hymn among Bible Belt fundamentalists of Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle, home of the most awesome nuclear weapons assembly plant in the world; just one contradiction in the fantastic mish-mash of disparate elements constituting this book. If this sounds like a criticism of the author, nothing is less intended; the juxtaposition of irreconcilables exists in Amarillo's reality, a reality which Miss Mojtabai dissects coolly with clarity and elegance.

"Panhandle" is an American term for an extension of a territorial area like Namibia's Cassivi Strip or Israel's Gaza Strip. American state boundaries are mainly lines of latitude and longitude, combined with a few natural features, usually rivers. These divisions have produced panhandles in Texas, Oklahoma, Idaho and West Virginia, the last so ridiculous that it is called the Panhandle State. The Texas Panhandle, as big as Belgium, lies on the Great Plains in north west Texas, bounded by New Mexico and Oklahoma, a treeless steppe exposed both to Arctic blizzards and blistering heat where the wind is incessant. An American cavalry officer, exploring this desolate region in 1849, declared it "uninhabitable for ever".

After Texas had been annexed from Mexico, the white men defeated the Plains Indians by destroying the buffalo, and, in the Panhandle, by a celebrated massacre of a thousand of the Indians' ponies in 1874. Then three railways converged to bring prosperity to Amarillo. An inventor of barbed wire bought up 96,000 acres of land, enclosing the ranges to control grazing and permit scientific cattle-breeding. Petroleum, natural gas and helium were discovered. Today, Amarillo has a population of nearly 200,000 and the Panhandle has enjoyed nearly a century of comparative affluence.

During the second world war, Pantex, an ordinance factory, was established near Amarillo. It later became the sole nuclear weapons assembly plant for the whole United States. Special white trains and hundreds of unmarked trucks leave Pantex every week, loaded with weapons for planes, land-based missiles and Trident submarines. The plant is notorious for its sinister "gravel gerties", underground cylinders capped with up to 21 feet of washed gravel, where plutonium is mixed with high explosives and which are designed to collapse in the

event of an accident, thus preventing radioactive emissions but also entombing the workers.

The people of Amarillo do not talk much about Pantex, but they are liable to boast of being Russia's prime target in the event of war. This is a prospect they accept with fatalism or, in the case of Christian fundamentalists, anticipate with a strange ecstasy of prophecies fulfilled, confidently expecting to sail heavenwards in "the Rapture", while the ungodly perish below. Miss Mojtabai allows the preachers of the First Baptist Church, the Second Baptist Church and the First United Pentecostal Church to speak for themselves. They claim to believe every word in the Bible, but in practice are selective in their texts. Not for them the Gospels, especially not the Beatitudes; they prefer the Old Testament prophecies of divine retribution and the New Testament ravings of Revelation. The first coming of Christ was a failure. In the second coming, now imminent, he will not be "gentle Jesus meek and mild", but an avenger presiding over Armageddon when the ungodly will perish in indescribable torment before he establishes his millennium.

There is no "Christian charity" here, no love of one's fellow man. The meek and the peace-makers are not blessed in Amarillo, Texas; instead there is a savage pride in being "saved" or "born again", and relish at the punishment of sinners. One is reminded of the words attributed to St Thomas Aquinas: "That the saints may enjoy their Beatitude more richly, a perfect sight is granted to them of the punishment of the damned".

These people are given to terse aphorisms — "folksy" in American language — appropriate to the fierce individualism of the pioneers, but dangerous when allied to an abysmal ignorance of the outside world.

They don't know it, but they would probably quite like the Russians, cousins of the Steppes, if they met them. But their "enemy" is a phantasm nurtured in ignorance. The author quotes a senior administrator at Pantex who claims that the Communists have infiltrated America by stealing the birth certificates of American citizens who died "unknowingly" and substituting baby Communists who grow up ostensibly as law-abiding Americans but whose aim is to destroy the United States.

Blessèd Assurance is a depressing and frightening book; the mixture of advanced technology and primaeval thought processes may seem a sure recipe for a nuclear holocaust. The future of the world, if there is to be a future, depends upon the strength and resolution of the enlightened.

KARL HEATH

Freethought in Fiction (6)

The Atheist Shoemaker

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

Fables of death-bed conversions were much enjoyed by evangelical Christians in the late-Victorian era. Andrew Whitehead concludes his *Freethought in Fiction* series by relating how a Methodist minister's account of a prominent freethinker redeemed to Christ did not go unchallenged.

The Reverend Hugh Price Hughes was the embodiment of muscular Methodism. His sincere desire to popularise Christianity was combined with a knack for self-publicity. Influenced by the revelations of the squalor endemic in much of inner London, Hughes sought to make religion more relevant to the poor. His base was the West London Mission at Cleveland Hall, which once had been a freethought venue.

It was to promote the work of the Mission that Hughes wrote *The Atheist Shoemaker: a page in the history of the West London Mission*, which appeared first in the summer of 1889 in the pages of his own paper, the *Methodist Times*, and soon after as a pamphlet. The tract embroiled Hughes in a five-year-long controversy, as the freethought movement, and particularly G. W. Foote's *Freethinker*, sought to challenge its veracity. In the end, both Hughes and Foote must have regretted the vigour with which they locked into dispute.

The Atheist Shoemaker is a simple religious allegory, pleasantly presented and without rancour. It would have attracted little comment but for the author's insistence on its accuracy. The story concerns a "well-known London atheist", as Hughes describes him, who is given the pseudonym of "John Herbert". His wife, through attendance at concerts at the West London Mission, gets to know the "Sisters of the People" working there, and starts attending religious meetings. When her husband falls ill, she turns to the Sisters for help.

At this early stage of the narrative, Hughes goes out of his way to commend Herbert:

It was a characteristic indication of the nobility of Herbert's character that he never resented the step his wife took in publicly confessing Christ. He always argued that everybody should have full liberty to obey his own conscience, and to do what he thought was best. . . . It would be difficult to find a more beautiful illustration of true magnanimity than this aggressive atheist, assisting and protecting his wife in her weekly attendance at a Methodist class-meeting.

Hughes breaks from the conventional Christian depiction of atheists as debauched and depraved. He goes on to explain that Herbert has not so much rejected God, as repudiated the conventional Chris-

tianity which conspires in the continuance of social inequality. "If there is a God," Herbert exclaims, "why does He allow Capital to suck the very life-blood of Labour? Why are so many of the poor damned even in this life, herded together in foul, ill-ventilated workshops, compelled to toil for long weary hours, and blighted with starvation wages?"

Through the kindness and compassion of the Sisters, Herbert gains a new perspective on religion. His one last reservation to conversion is the charge of cowardice he feels sure his former colleagues will lay against him:

"To deny God in health, and then when you can do no more, and are dying helpless and useless, to come to Him then — it is mean, it is cowardly, it is contemptible. It is what I have always hated and loathed. I cannot do it."

Yet in time he does accept God, and even resolves to burn his large library of atheist books "in order that no one else might ever be injured by them."

John Herbert's new-found faith is challenged when, in ever worsening health, he is admitted to a convalescent home on the south coast only to discover that the other inmates are perpetually engaged in doctrinal argument. He ponders: "what are these Christians doing to silence the bitter cry of outcast London?" But his recollection of the Christian counselling of the Sisters buttresses his belief. Eventually the Sisters arrange lodgings for him and his wife in Devon. And there, after much stoic suffering, he dies, declaring with his last words: "Tell Sister Beatrice and the Sisters that now when I have come to the end I fear no evil, for God is with me." Hughes and the Sisters had been praying for John Herbert's recovery with more than their customary piety:

It seemed to us of such immense importance that he should himself go to his old workshop, and to the Hall of Science, and to Clerkenwell-green, and to all his former haunts, and with his own lips to tell the story of his conversion. We well knew with what incredulity and ridicule the story would be received from any other lips by many of his old companions.

Incredulity was indeed the response in the freethought camp. Here was a story of the conversion of a prominent secularist, yet he was not named and no-one could suggest his identity. The story appeared to rest on the testimony of the Sisters, while on the crucial point of Herbert's importance in the freethought movement there was seemingly no evidence but the word of his widow. In many other respects, the story was too neat: it illustrated how the Mission's concerts could lead to religious involve-

ment; how the ministrations of the Sisters could lead to conversion; how Methodism was grappling effectively with social issues while the other denominations remained over-concerned with doctrine. It had the flavour more of propaganda than of biography.

The controversy over Hughes's booklet would no doubt have died away but for the persistence of G. W. Foote, who was never one to bury a bone when he saw the chance of making a meal of it. He wrote a pamphlet in riposte discourteously entitled *A Lie in Five Chapters?* Foote denounced Hughes's story as an invention designed solely to raise money for the Mission. He highlighted all the anomalies; cited the sectarian Methodist bias; puzzled over the presentation of verbatim conversation; commented on the convenience that Herbert had died without broadcasting news of his conversion; above all, expressed astonishment that an atheist of such prominence should escape identification.

"Atheism is as much a terra incognita to Mr Hughes as equatorial Africa," Foote opined. And he emphasised the inherent implausibility of the tale. "The orator of the Hall of Science, the match for Bradlaugh, gives in to a Methodist young lady who boasts not a shred of argument, but asks him to 'accept Christ, the Son of God', before the sick man is persuaded that there is a God to have a son or a daughter."

Hughes refused to reveal the identity of Herbert on the curious grounds that "the relatives of the deceased and other people interested would not care to have their names in print." But after years of persistent sniping from Foote, Hughes relented to the extent of putting the evidence for his story in front of an assessor. Hughes chose for this task a man who could be expected to command respect on all sides, one whom he knew to be "a gentleman and one devoted to fair play", whom indeed he had met at a reception at Lady Aberdeen's — no less than the grand old man of British secularism, G. J. Holyoake.

If Hughes held Holyoake in high regard, Holyoake was more than happy to repay the compliment. In later years he asserted:

Mr Price Hughes wrote nobler words in testimony of the possible morality of Atheists than any other Wesleyan preacher ever did. *The Atheist Shoemaker*, despite some errors of inference, contains the first historical instance of the Christian concession of ethical heresy.

Holyoake's verdict in January 1894 was entirely in favour of Hughes. After interviewing Herbert's widow and the Sisters who had visited him, Holyoake asserted that the shoemaker had indeed been an active secularist, and that there was nothing inconsistent in the account of the conversion. The Reverend Hugh Price Hughes, Holyoake added, was entitled to be implicitly believed on his word.

It seemed that Hughes had played the trump card. But far from ending the controversy, Holyoake's intervention simply fanned the flames. Foote returned to the fray with renewed determination, remarking on Holyoake's advanced age and poor eyesight and criticising him as "susceptible to Christian compliments." For week after week, the front page of *The Freethinker* was given over to new revelations of inconsistencies in Hughes's story. And when Foote had put together the final version of what he called "a study in lying with a full and complete exposure", he raised finance to issue 100,000 copies of the pamphlet for free distribution.

Foote's great success was in identifying John Herbert. His real name was Charles Alfred Gibson. He had died in Sidmouth, at the age of 27, in March 1889. Whoever Gibson was, Foote established that he had never enjoyed prominence as a freethinker. He cited the evidence of Gibson's father and of a work-mate to the effect that Gibson had never been an active atheist. He accompanied Gibson senior to Gibson's old landlady near Kings Cross:

She stated that Charles Alfred Gibson was at first greatly vexed with professed Christianity, because no one had called on his wife when she was ill. "But was my son an Atheist?" asked Mr Gibson. "Oh no," she replied, "not an Atheist." "Did he disbelieve in God?" "Oh no, he always believed in God," she answered, and added, "it was the Christianity of the day he was set against." In fact she heard him say, "I'm not against Jesus Christ."

And there Foote rested his case.

Hughes continued to argue that Holyoake's investigation had vindicated his account. Certainly Foote's own inquiries confirmed many of the incidental details of the story. It was not simply a clerical invention. It seems that rather than setting out to deceive, Hughes had seized on a story of a sinner saved and recited as facts what were really excited fancies. But if Foote got the better of the controversy, it also showed him to be obsessive to the point of eccentricity. Foote's relentless pursuit of Hughes was not universally admired even in his own camp. "One can but look on with a feeling of pity mingled with contempt," commented the *Agnostic Journal*, "at the sight of 'Cat-and-Ladleites' and 'Holy Wastrels' squabbling with each other in an inane way over the most paltry issues."

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“Humanism” and “Freethought”

HARRY STOPES-ROE

Nigel Sinnott's discussion of Humanism in last month's *Freethinker*, is vitiated at the start: he thinks that “Humanism” is a new name for the freethought movement!

I will look at the movements that Sinnott mentions as within freethought — militant irreligion, agnosticism, rationalism and secularism — as well as freethought. Thus I will hope to illuminate the relation of Humanism and freethought. I will then look very briefly at Sinnott's rather odd view of Humanism.

First, “freethought” itself. I emphasise immediately that freethought is a tradition of great honour, with value and significance quite apart from its important contribution to the emergence of Humanism. But it does not exclude those who are religious. Sinnott acknowledges this, if somewhat condescendingly. He should not be grudging, for it is arrogance to use the word “freethought” to suggest that a whole class of people (the religious) are touched by prejudice. Some are; some “freethinkers” are. Similarly, we who reject religion on “rational” grounds tend to think that “rationalism” excludes religion; but it does not, as the Rationalist Press Association well knows.

“Secularism” is more complex. It has two aspects. Nowadays it is usually associated in the public mind with the freeing of society and morality from religious domination — it may even suggest “militant irreligion”. But according to Holyoake's original intention, the word should denote a positive alternative to mere atheism. The former has an obvious link to both freethought and Humanism, for neither can flourish where religion dominates. But Humanists cannot claim that they are the only people who want the separation of Church and State, etc. Some very religious people do — though there is a fundamental tension between religion and the Open Society. Observation suggests that excess “militancy” in “irreligion” tends to go with unfreedom of thought.

“Agnosticism” is, properly speaking, simply a particular rejection of dogmatism. It, too, should be shared with the religious; as T. H. Huxley made quite explicit in his later writings on the concept.

In sum, therefore, “freethought” is a very wide movement, as Sinnott says. In fact, all these movements except atheism and secularism in Holyoake's sense (and perhaps “militant irreligion”) can be supported by atheists. Surely “militant irreligion” is not the key to “freethought”?

Either way, “Humanism” cannot be identified with “freethought”, or any other of these movements, except (possibly) “secularism” in Holyoake's sense. Humanism by its very existence is in opposition to religion. But its opposition arises because it

is a positive *alternative* to religion; it has elements which are *exclusive* of “God”. Freethought has no characteristic beliefs, which could exclude “God”.

This brings me to another main movement which feeds into modern Humanism, which Sinnott did not mention: the ethical movement. Thus, Holyoake's secularism, and Humanism, are sharply distinguished from “freethought”, because though each requires freedom, each establishes distinctive beliefs, and distinctive purposes when exercising freedom.

I think “freethinkers” sometimes forget that freedom without a purpose is Hell. To recognise that one is free to do anything, and yet have no wish to do any one thing rather than another, is a form of madness.

If one is fortunate, one's upbringing will have endowed one with the makings of a framework of satisfying purposes. Most people accept the *basic* purposes in life which they find in themselves as they reach maturity, and merely churn these around a bit, changing some of the derivative ones. *There is nothing wrong with this*. But there are two limitations to this happy state. First, some people do start questioning their own assumptions, and wondering if *theirs* are the beneficial ones. Second, some are concerned about their own influence on the value assumptions of their own society, and in particular the next generation.

This questioning is vital, if it initiates constructive thought. Though there is nothing wrong with not thinking, *thought* on these questions is the only way we (humanity as a whole) can *work* towards a *better* life. The foundation of a better life is a society guided by a morality that is in accord with our nature.

However, there is no clear and unambiguous answer to the basic questions: “What is our nature? How should we best live?” Humanism and Secularism (in Holyoake's sense) claim to be answers — and so do Christianity, Islam, Ideological Marxism, etc.

None of us can be secure in our basic values. But we can be fair and honest in our comments on the life stances which are implicit in the way we and others each live. Sinnott presents a travesty of Humanism; but I cannot now go into details. He is frankly dishonest in representing Humanism as encouraging exploitation of Earth, and the life on it. Certainly some Humanists are a little naive in their failure to see the distinction between believing in humanity, and believing in the moral powers humans have (including wisdom, sympathy and goodness, as well as intellect). But Humanism seeks to define our moral powers, and inspire us to enjoy them. It is based on human responsibility, not human supremacy.

Charles Oxley Dies

Charles Oxley, a prominent figure on the Christian Right, has died at the age of 65.

He was closely associated with Mary Whitehouse's organisation and other Christian pressure groups. Oxley's chief obsession was "law and order", and few surpassed him in fervour for the restoration of capital punishment. When Parliament defeated an attempt in 1979 to bring back the death penalty, he declared: "The sanctity of human life demands the death penalty. I believe that is the true interpretation of the Christian faith as set out in the Bible".

Charles Oxley also conducted a campaign against Michael Foot when he was Leader of the Labour Party. He said Mr Foot supported "a secularist organisation which has some very far-reaching, anti-religious objectives", and called on Christians to take "firm and resolute action to prevent the further erosion of our country's traditional Christian values".

A group of partners in Jim Bakker's Praise the Lord television ministry have filed a law suit. They contend that PTL officials conspired to launder millions of dollars for the Rev Jim's personal use.

Freethinker Fund

It was announced last month that the price of *The Freethinker* will be increased from 1 January. However, the extra revenue will certainly not bridge the gap between income and expenditure. Contributions to the fund, prompt payment of postal subscriptions and, above all, an increase in circulation, are essential if the paper is to continue as a 16-page monthly.

Over the years readers and writers alike have been extremely generous in contributing money, time and ability to *The Freethinker*, enabling it to publish important articles, provide a forum for debate and an outlet for secularist ideas. Continued support will ensure the paper's publication for the remaining twelve years of this century and beyond.

We thank all contributors to the Fund during 1987. The latest list is given below.

J. Anderson, R. J. Beale, T. J. Davies, R. Delaurey, J. Dobbin, F. Docherty, G. Greig, R. W. Hamilton, H. Hilton, E. McCann, K. Mack, T. Millar, G. Vale and W. S. Watson, £1.40 each; D. Berman, £1.80; J. L. Broom, £2.80; B. E. Clarke, £4.40; J. H. Charles, R. W. Forder, Hampstead Humanist Society and F. E. Seward, £5 each; T. Atkins, A. J. Rawlings and M. Schofield, £6.40 each; E. C. Hughes, £7.70; R. J. Condon and W. Steinhardt, £10 each; H. A. Newman, \$10.

Total for October: £105.10 and \$10.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton, Sunday, 3 January, 5.30 for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

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.

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.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Monday, 14 December, 7.30 pm. Mary Lane: Justice for Children. Monday, 11 January, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting and supper.

National Secular Society. Annual Dinner at the Coburg Hotel, London, Saturday, 19 March, 1988.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 December, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Wednesday, 13 January, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. John and Lucie White: A Humanist Celebration of Life and Humanity.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 18 January, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

Our 1987 Christian Liar of the Year Award is presented jointly to Colonel Oliver North, of Iran-Contra fame, and the less famous Rev D. Mock, of Belfast. Colonel North told a Congressional committee that he had not lied in evidence, but used "additional input that was radically different from the truth". Last month the Rev Mock wrote in the Belfast Telegraph that Northern Ireland bombers and gunmen are neither Catholic nor Protestant, "but agents of atheistic evil".

Jesusites Spread Fear and Misery

Despite scandal and public warnings, religious sects are becoming increasingly active. Thanks to the benefits of charity law, dubious fund-raising techniques and the unpaid labour of brainwashed dupes, weirdo religion is big business.

Lord Denning, a former Master of the Rolls, has denounced the Exclusive Brethren sect as "a danger to society which splits up families and did a great deal of harm". He was responding to an appeal for help from a Slough, Buckinghamshire, woman who is living in fear after leaving the sect. She described the Brethren as "a group of absolute fanatics who spread a religion of hate".

The woman, mother of nine children from an arranged marriage to a sect member, made three suicide attempts. She asserts that many members are driven to suicide by "the unbearable strain of fear, finance and loss of family". One Hampshire man hacked his wife and children to death. Another banished member threw himself under a train in Cheshire.

Parents of the Slough woman would not allow her to marry the man of her choice. He was a Christian, but did not belong to the Brethren. "I was in love with him, and told my parents. They just said I could not do it. I was so torn between losing my family and this man that eventually I just gave in. The Brethren then arranged a marriage for me, which they will do if they think someone is in danger of straying outside the fellowship".

Her life was "a nightmare" of compulsory religious meetings and interrogations, she said. "I had to drag my children to all of these meetings and if you were not there the Brethren would send around a special attendance officer to question you".

Her husband threatened a divorce because she went out of doors without wearing a headscarf and did not attend a disciplinary meeting. There were constant warnings that such behaviour would result in her losing the children.

Sect members are forbidden to watch television, go to the theatre, or listen to music. They must not socialise with outsiders or eat meals with non-members. Women are not allowed to cut their hair short, wear make-up or jewellery, or go out of doors with their head uncovered. Celebration of Christmas or other festivals is banned.

When a prohibition on keeping pets was introduced, members had to have their pets put down.

The former member told how on one occasion a public confessional was arranged. Members were compelled to confess their sins to the meeting. But even public confession did not satisfy the Brethren.

"If the Brethren thought you had not confessed enough, they would come around to your house and

interrogate you until you were exhausted", she said.

One of the woman's most distressing experiences was at the funeral of a member of her family. During the service it was inferred that her relative's untimely death was God's judgement for breach of the sect's rules.

She said: "I was told that if I was not careful something terrible would happen to me, and that frightened the living daylights out of me. I felt trapped in a nightmare world that I could see no way out of. . .

"I cracked under the pressure and just thought I had nothing to live for, which is why I tried to kill myself.

"I came through these harrowing experiences through having the constant care of a most dedicated consultant".

When confronted with the woman's allegations, a representative of the Brethren declared: "We are simple lovers of the Lord Jesus".

Another pernicious sect, the Northampton-based Jesus Army, continues to attract young dupes and cause considerable distress to parents. It is ruled by a religious entrepreneur named Noel Stanton.

Hazel Adams, a strong opponent, accuses the Jesus Army of recruiting the most vulnerable elements in society, including the mentally disturbed. She is presently assisting a television team preparing a programme about the sect.

She also helps and advises parents who have lost their sons and daughters to the Jesus Army. At present these include Mary and John Williams whose 17-year-old son Ian got involved after attending a rally last summer.

Mrs Williams recalls that he came home from the meeting "like some glazed-eyed zombie, announcing that he had committed his life to the Lord. He was a completely changed teenager all in the space of one day. . .

"That Ian wanted to join a sect that seems to condemn everyone outside it, asks members to submit their money and possessions to it, observes unworldly practices such as avowed celibacy and permission from Stanton to marry, sent shivers down my spine. . .

"How can you talk to someone who is virtually brainwashed?"

A New York judge has ruled that a church could be held responsible for the catastrophic injuries sustained by a man who attended its three-day retreat. After leaving in a state of religious fervour he lay on a railway line proclaiming he was Jesus Christ. Both his legs were amputated by a train.