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COMPULSORY PREGNANCY LOBBY AIMS FOR TOTAL BAN ON ABORTION

"I believe the Bill is phoney", declared Andrew MacKay, Conservative MP for Berkshire East, during the Second Reading debate on the Abortion (Amendment) Bill in the House of Commons last month. The Private Member's Bill to reduce the time limit on abortions to eighteen weeks was introduced by David Alton, Liberal Member for Liverpool, Mossley Hill, and an ardent Roman Catholic. It was vigorously promoted outside Parliament by assorted religious pressure groups. They spent vast sums on advertising and frequently involved young children in the pro-Alton campaign.

Mr MacKay went on to say that the Bill did not stand up to close examination. He could not understand how Mr Alton "can just have plucked out of the air the time of eighteen weeks. If he believes that abortion is murder, surely it is murder at sixteen weeks, fourteen weeks or twelve weeks. What is worse is that the limit of eighteen weeks will do grave damage to those parents who have conceived a grossly disabled child in the past, wish to have further children, and know that there is a one in four chance that that child might also be grossly disabled. . .

"Tests can only just be carried out at eighteen weeks. Those tests take many weeks before conclusion can be drawn and then, if need be, a traumatic and difficult decision must be made by the parents to arrange an abortion. Under the Bill, many decent, reasonable, caring people will find that they are unable to have an abortion."

Mr MacKay said he was not in favour of abortion, but for freedom of choice for people to decide.

"It is a traumatic decision for the parents to have an abortion, not just for the mother, but for the father as well. . . It is up to parents to decide

whether they wish to have a grossly disabled child".

Another element of the Bill worried Mr MacKay. "If passed", he declared, "the Bill would be the worst piece of class legislation that the House has put on the statute book for many a long day. My affluent, middle-class, and I hope by and large intelligent constituents would have no difficulty in arranging an abortion, either privately or elsewhere".

Members were aware that there are young girls with a low IQ, who "are not aware of what contraception is. Often the girl does not realise that she is pregnant for several months. She is scared, frightened to speak to her parents, and frightened to go to her doctor. . .

"That will be the little girl who will suffer from the Bill, not my affluent constituents. . . The vulnerable, the not very intelligent and the inadequate will be driven to the back-street abortionists".

David Steel, the Liberal leader who played a central role in getting the 1967 Abortion Act on to the statute book, said he had not the slightest doubt that if the Alton Bill were to pass into legislation, "it would make a major difference to the operation of the abortion law and would deprive thousands of women of the opportunity to go to their general practitioner and consider the case for termination.

"I do not think it is for us to tell women in particular circumstances, or their doctors, that they should or should not have an abortion".

He added: "It is tragic that this year the family planning services, funded by the National Health Service, are facing cuts.

"The Central Birmingham health authority is negotiating with the Brook Advisory Centre for further cuts for the next three years which will

(continued inside back cover)

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NEWS

REACTIONARY RABBI

The mildest criticism of anything Jewish in a publication like *The Freethinker* invariably provokes howls of "racist" and threats of cancelled subscriptions. But now even the most sycophantic admirers — at a comfortable distance — of the Promised Land are finding it difficult to defend Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinian people. Ironically, international support for Israel comes mainly from countries that have never been foremost defenders of the Jewish people in their hour of need, as in Nazi-polluted Europe during the 1930s. Even more ironic is the fact that Israel is an important trading partner of racist South Africa.

In Britain, the Chief Rabbi, Sir Immanuel (now Lord) Jakobovits, has become the most reactionary and authoritarian of the mainstream religious leaders. His pronouncements on social questions are approvingly quoted by the gutter press, making him very kosher with Right-wingers and sundry upholders of Victorian values. It was no great surprise when Sir Immanuel appeared in the New Year Honours List as a recipient of a life peerage. Already there have been suggestions that he will eventually be joined in the Upper House by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Basil Hume.

It would be quite mistaken to assume that Lord Jakobovits enjoys the unanimous or even majority support of the Jewish community. His arrogant smugness grates on many Jews, particularly those outside the affluent middle and upper classes. A large number of them identify with the viewpoint put by author Chaim Bermant: "There are thousands of Jews in housing estates of East London and hundreds in the poorer areas of Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and Liverpool, but they are hardly recognised as Jewish because of their poverty. . .

"The organised Jewish community is a purely middle-class phenomenon whose rites and usages, both ancient and modern, call for middle-class incomes. Rabbis rarely set foot outside it and, moving as they do, among the well-to-do, they think we are all doing well".

The Chief Rabbi's conception of women's role in society makes a 19th-century paterfamilia appear wildly liberal and enlightened. Women are separated from men in United Synagogues; they cannot sing in the choir or play any role in the service; they are not counted in the quorum for worship. Any attempt to alter their status will be strongly resisted by Lord Jakobovits who succinctly expressed his hard-nosed outlook on social questions in a newspaper interview: "The pendulum is swinging back and we ought to

AND NOTES

welcome and facilitate this”.

All is not well within British Jewry. Non-Orthodox synagogues are firmly established; exclusive sects have gone their own way; many families stay with the United Orthodox simply to safeguard burial rights for which they have been paying substantial (and non-returnable) annual fees. Synagogue marriages have fallen, and between a quarter and a third of Jews are “marrying out”.

So the Chief Rabbi's ennoblement cannot be regarded as recognition of his success as a community leader. Rather it is a reward for his championship of reactionary causes and a ploy to strengthen the phalanx of religious cave-men in the House of Lords.

DOUBLE-CROSS STANDARDS

Peterborough, the *Daily Telegraph* columnist, recently told readers about a colleague's experience of how the Sunday trading laws operate in Lincoln. He wished to purchase postcards, but was informed by several shopkeepers that they were not allowed to sell them on Sunday. Nothing daunted, he continued the search and eventually found an establishment “doing a roaring trade in everything from postcards to T-shirts”. It was the souvenir shop inside Lincoln Cathedral.

Many similar examples of Christian double standards came to light during the Shops Bill debate. While the churches were drumming up support for the Keep Sunday Special campaign, their gift shops were open for Sunday business, selling a wide range of items which could be obtained on any day of the week. Even Roman Catholic leaders, not usually bedfellows of the Lord's Day Observance Society, exhorted the faithful to “keep Sunday special”, in the full knowledge that scores of their church social clubs do very nicely from the Sunday sales of booze, cigarettes and raffle tickets.

Of course it is not only on the question of Sunday trading that Christian hypocrisy is so blatant. The churches and their front organisations have consistently opposed reforms relating to divorce and abortion. But once those rights became enshrined in law, erstwhile Christian opponents have been among the first to take advantage of them. How many Christian couples ignore biblical precepts and resort to the divorce court when their marriage fails? For over twenty years Christian anti-abortionists have worked assiduously to wreck the 1967 Abortion Act. Nevertheless thousands of women from Protestant

Northern Ireland, where the Act does not apply, and the Roman Catholic Republic of Ireland, where even contraception is taboo, travel to mainland abortion clinics every year.

People's right to birth control information and to decide for themselves how many children they want, was won in the teeth of religious opposition. Despite papal fulminations against the “intrinsic evil” of contraception — an attitude also taken by Protestant leaders well into the present century — Roman Catholic bishops and priests recognise that their flocks are no longer prepared to be breeding machines or to plan their families by a church-approved method.

Nowadays a large number of Christians do not even attempt to whitewash the historical record of their creed. But they continue to assert, as indeed do others who are generally indifferent to religious claims, that Christianity provides society with sound ethical and moral values. This holy smokescreen is meant to conceal the hypocrisy and dishonesty of a corkscrew religion.

MOONSHINE IN MEDJUGORJE

Back in 1981 six young villagers in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, reported seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary. The affair started quietly enough, with “Our Lady” allegedly appearing on a hillside outside the village. But this was not just a one-off appearance as “Our Lady” winged her way around the international shrine circuit. She has been making daily appearances at Medjugorje and delivering a monthly homily which is displayed at the church entrance. Since the first sightings, something like eight million pilgrims have descended on the small community, filling the churches and the coffers.

Not everyone believes the visionaries' tall tales. Naturally enough the local Communists are somewhat sceptical, but the most scorching criticism has come from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Mostar. Bishop Zanic is quite blunt: the apparition stories are a pack of lies. What's more, he claims that 34 of the 35 members of the Yugoslav Conference of Bishops agree with him. As for the Franciscan friars who have endorsed and encouraged the visionaries, the bishop declares they deserve “the lowest place in hell” for preaching untruths.

Vicka Ivanovitch, the eldest of the visionaries, makes a daily appearance on her doorstep and passes on “Our Lady's” latest thoughts to gaping pilgrims. Bishop Zanic says Vicka is “sick in the head”, and as a result of the Medjugorje foolishness “the entire Yugoslav Communist Party is laughing at us”.

In Britain the growing Medjugorje industry is also in a cheerful mood, with tour operators like the Yugoslav Travel Club laughing all the way to the bank. YTC arranges weekly departures of pilgrims

from London at £239 a head.

The Medjugorje Centre, which operates from a box number in south west London, advertises its wares in Catholic newspapers. Readers are invited to subscribe to the quarterly *Medjugorje Messenger* (£3.50) and the *Medjugorje Monthly* (£5). The Centre stocks "a wide range of books and videos. . . Our illustrated folder, *The Facts About Medjugorje*, is a best-selling introduction to the subject". The Centre can arrange talks and slide shows, and appeals for "volunteers to join our fast-growing national network of local promoters". There is also a Scottish Medjugorje Centre at Dalmally, Argyllshire.

Vicka Ivanovitch is not the only one who is sick in the head.

DISCIPLES OF ALLAH

The Birmingham Islamic Propagation Centre has published a leaflet, *Islam at a Glance*, for the edification of all who are interested "in searching for the truth and studying Islam". Its style is somewhat similar to that of the Christianity-for-the-credulous tracts which are distributed in the street and door to door. There are the usual references to "peace" and the "brotherhood of man"; Islam, the reader is assured, "brings harmony to man's vision of life". Most religions pay lip service to these noble sentiments; the reality is often very different.

The first of the "Five Pillars of Islam" is a declaration of faith: "I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except God, and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger". Another "Pillar" is the annual payment of what is described as a "Purifying Sum" equal to one fortieth of a man's net savings. It all sounds rather familiar.

Although there is a great deal in the leaflet about Man ("The highest creation of God"), the section headed "Status of Women" consists of a mere five lines. It declares that the potential capabilities and responsibilities of men and women are equally important, "but not exactly the same". The difference between them is explained in another publication by Mohammed Khomeini, brother of the Awful Ayatollah. He argues that women have smaller brains than men and consequently are less stable, more talkative and fearful. They are also an incurably domesticated lot whose greatest joy is doing household chores.

A list of questions put to readers of *Islam at a Glance* includes: "Has man freed himself from all superstitions, imbecilities and absurd beliefs?" Alas, he has not, as the antics of religious leaders and their gullible dupes the world over clearly demonstrate. But the problems of life and human relationships will not be solved by exchanging one set of superstitions, imbecilities and absurd beliefs for those of Islam.

Nothing From the Vatican

KARL HEATH

Pope John Paul II issued a Message in celebration of the World Day of Peace on January 1st. What contribution will it make?

When a lifelong atheist, writing in *The Freethinker*, dismisses a statement from the Pope, some will respond, like Mandy Rice-Davies, "Well, he would, wouldn't he?" The present writer, however, is not unfamiliar with papal pronouncements. John XXIII's Encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra* deserve respect, although I have much less regard for Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. By contrast, the present statement is empty and is quite unlikely to have any effect upon the course of events. If it had been written by some unknown Tom Smith no newspaper in the world, not even the *Little Tottering Echo*, would have mentioned it — that is, of course, judged by its content rather than its authorship. But it is *ex cathedra*, and that is a different matter, even though papal infallibility is supposed to be a thing of the past. All of us are prone to quote authority, but the claim of clerics to special qualifications on morality deserves examination.

It derives from religious alienation, as suggested by Ludwig Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841) and others. The notion is that the churches enjoin us to detach our best human qualities from ourselves and attribute them to God, while we retain possession of, and responsibility for, our shortcomings. When religion generates its institutions, churches, priests and popes enjoy vicarious credit, basking in the radiance of God's perfection and capable of inspired homiletics beyond the powers of the laity. The Pontiff, after all, is the Holy Father, the Vicar of Christ and God's right-hand man ever since St Peter.

It is significant, therefore, but not surprising, that the present statement is a sustained plea for religious freedom, not so much for individuals as for religious institutions. John Paul II writes: ". . . when I addressed the Heads of State who signed the Helsinki Final Act, I intended to emphasize among other things that *authentic religious freedom requires that the rights deriving from the social and public dimension of the profession of faith and of belonging to an organized religious community must also be guaranteed*" (p7); and ". . . speaking to the General Assembly of the United Nations I expressed my conviction that . . . *when religious freedom is being discussed . . . the institutions that are by their nature at the service of religion should also be brought in*". (p8).

The Pope appears to suggest that limitations upon

religious freedom are imposed by secular authorities. He quotes his predecessor, Paul VI, asking: "How can a State call for total trust and collaboration when . . . it proclaims itself atheistic?"

The Pope forgets, or ignores, the fact that throughout history the great enemies of religion, the great oppressors, suppressors and persecutors of religion have been the religious themselves, attacking other religions, or, more often, other sects in their own religion. Every religious war in history has been between the religious on both sides. There has never been a war by atheists against religion. It was not atheists who, in 1208, launched a genocidal crusade against the Christian Cathars of Languedoc — it was Pope Innocent III. It was not atheists who, in 1631, sacked Magdeburg and slaughtered 25,000 of its Protestant citizens — it was Count Tilly's Catholic army. Some will protest that this is old history and that today we have the ecumenical movement and toleration. Yet today there is more freedom for Christians in atheist Russia than in Iran; there is more freedom for Islamics in Russia than in Israel; there is more freedom for Catholics in Poland than in Belfast's Shankill Road or other Protestant parts of Northern Ireland.

And what about freedom of expression for non-believers? The BBC, for which, I grant, the Pope is not responsible, claims to operate a policy of "balance" in presenting controversial issues. Yet every year the BBC channels broadcast seven hundred hours of straight, unchallenged Christian programmes. There is not the slightest attempt at "balance", no replies, no rival performances, no dispute, no argument — just unrestrained indoctrination. On the rare occasions when some discussion is permitted — perhaps ten hours in a year and then as often as not under the auspices of a cleric — the orthodox complain of "lack of balance". Even if eighty per cent of the British public were practising Christians this would still be unfair. If atheists had freedom of expression through the media, some inroad could be made into the slough of irreligious apathy among the British public. The churches would also doubtless gain adherents through the stimulus of competition.

The Pope's statement maintains that religious freedom is the corner-stone of human rights and essential for peace. The Roman Catholic Church is not pacifist, nor does it have to be. Peace-lovers do not need to be pacifists, but they do need a clear conscience. Catholic scholars have long debated the concept of the "Just War". Nevertheless, the Vatican's record is puzzling. The entrances to American Air Force bases carry the message "Peace is our Profession" — an Orwellian obscenity. The United States claims to have dropped upon little Vietnam a greater tonnage of bombs than was dropped on all targets in all theatres of World War

II put together. Add napalm, Agent Orange, helicopter strafing, "pacification", "body-counts", "kill-ratios" and "search and destroy" and it doesn't sound like a "Just War". Yet Cardinal Spellman vigorously defended American action in Vietnam and travelled there to boost troop morale. The Vatican has not hesitated to reprimand and discipline brave priests in Latin America who have supported the victims of American-backed dictatorships. I do not recall that the Vatican expressed even one word of concern about Cardinal Spellman.

Progressive League's Example

Although the Progressive League is not, strictly speaking, part of the secularist-humanist movement, there is some overlap of membership and mutual support. Its motto, For Progress With Liberty, will certainly appeal to *Freethinker* readers in this ugly era of growing intolerance, authoritarianism and censorship.

The annual report, presented to the annual general meeting in London on 23 January, records an outstanding year in the League's history. There was an impressive programme of conferences, meetings, cultural and social events. Every month it published *Plan*, a lively magazine edited by Margaret Noyes.

All this involves a considerable amount of voluntary work, for the League has neither office premises nor full-time staff. There is a lesson here for those organisations which, despite financial and other advantages, don't come within a mile of the Progressive League for enterprise and dedication.

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There is a tendency in Britain to regard religious fanaticism as an aberration that afflicts other countries like Iran, the United States and Northern Ireland. So far we have been spared Moral Majority excesses, but John Campbell warns that Christian pressure groups are learning fast from fundamentalist zealots in God's own country.

Coming back to Britain from America over the last few years always seemed like a breath of fresh air. Mary Whitehouse and her merry band were a dying breed, while in the United States the Jerry Falwells and the Jim Bakkers were going from strength to strength. Even when you took into account the covert activities of Community Standards groups, Britain's Moral Majority seemed quaint in comparison to the growing power of their American cousins. Regrettably, this is no longer the case.

Last August I was bemused to find that Lyndon Bowring, a former leader of the Elim Church Movement and now director of CARE, was visiting the Californian headquarters of Focus on the Family, one of the most dangerous of the American groups. It has a staff of five hundred and a turnover of \$35 million a year to promote the cause of "parents' rights".

Focus is run by a Dr James Dobson. This fundamentalist paediatrician's views on how to control children and resist secular humanism are published in ten books and can be heard on a daily half-hour radio broadcast relayed by some eight hundred stations in seventeen countries. Dobson organised President Carter's Conference on the Family, held at the White House. He was appointed by President Reagan to the Advisory Commission for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, and the Citizens' Advisory Panel for Tax Reform. He doesn't seem to realise that cutting welfare benefit could lead to delinquency, but is determined to stamp out both to prove that godly people suffer from neither.

Dobson, however, insists that his most "gratifying responsibility" to date was serving on the Meese Commission, which produced a report on pornography. Like his friends Dr Cline and Andrea Dworkin, Dobson believes that pornography is causing disintegration of the family in the western world. Dobson regards television as an even greater threat. It apparently weans American teenagers off Walt Disney and into pre-marital sex. He is convinced that any and everything that inhibits marriage and parenthood must be banned, and that homosexuality, venereal disease, drug abuse and teenage sex are all part of a world-wide Communist conspiracy, sapping the strength of America. Together with other Commissioners, he even wanted the final report to state

what the appropriate sexual behaviour for an American was! But however "gratifying" the experience of viewing pornography for the benefit of the nation, it did not stop Dobson complaining to the *Washington Post* that the meals provided by the Commission were "very meagre" and that there had been a delay in refunding his expenses for trips to pornland.

What, then, was Lyndon Bowring doing at Focus on the Family headquarters? It certainly was not to view Dobson's souvenirs from the Commission! Bowring aims to turn CARE into the largest and most powerful moral pressure group in Britain — and Dobson is the man to tell him how to do it.

Ever since CARE emerged from the moribund Nationwide Festival of Light five years ago, Bowring has been copying the style and tactics of the American Moral Majority groups. Just in case CARE lost its charitable status for political lobbying, the organisation was split in two: CARE Trust to receive the cash, and CARE campaigns to mobilise evangelical Christians across the country. Bowring has also spent the last three years attending every evangelical festival to which he could gain an invitation, in order to promote unity amongst the various wings of the movement. In this task he is able to count on the support of Clive Calver, head of the Evangelical Alliance. Together they have launched numerous front organisations, the most recent being the Pro-Sunday Coalition. Perhaps the most important new group to watch out for is the School Support Service, which aims to encourage an influx of evangelical Governors into schools before the Government's new education policy becomes law. Before then, the Governor's task is to pay close attention to the nature of school assemblies and sex education lessons. Evangelical churches are also being lobbied to initiate and support Christian Unions in local schools. Campaigning behind the scenes, CARE can take some credit for last September's Government circular on sex education. It warned teachers not to give girls (*sic*) under the age of sixteen contraceptive advice without their parents' knowledge for fear of criminal prosecution.

Bowring's mid-term aim is to repeat the Moral Majority's success in influencing elections here in Britain. In the last twelve months five hundred "Core" groups have been established in Parliamentary constituencies. It is their personal visits to the candidates and monitoring activities that will aid the progress of the Alton Bill in this Parliamentary term. The "Core" groups were also behind those "protesting parents" who have been attacking gay rights.

These groups and individual members are served by a 24-page glossy magazine, "updates", "campaign notes", prayer guides, booklets and complaint sheets/

guides for TV companies, MPs, etc. They are direct mailed in typical American style. Funding is encouraged in the same manner, complete with pre-paid envelopes. Ministers and church leaders are sent special mailings to encourage congregational support for particular issues, petitions and lobbies.

Contemporary campaigns undertaken include ending abortion, banning surrogacy, strengthening the obscenity law to conform to "Community Standards", eliminating dangerous teaching practices including discussion of homosexuality, tax reform to strengthen the family, and no trading on Sundays. The American influence is obvious.

What is not so obvious is CARE's distrust of the present Government. Here CARE departs from Mary Whitehouse, whose hatred of Labour politicians blinded her to some of the more morally destructive effects of Conservative policy, not to mention the personal habits of their MPs. Although CARE would love to control welfare in Britain, to ensure it only reached "the deserving", it is not too happy with Mr Tebbit's insistence that the unemployed "get on yer bike" or large companies parade their wares on Sundays. A series of conferences in the latter half of 1987 helped spread the message. CARE's aim is to have an influence on all aspects of Government policy, rather than chase pornographers or TV companies through the courts. This is what makes them so dangerous at the present time.

Despite their majority, the Conservative Government will realise sooner or later that they cannot count on CARE's uncritical support, as they could the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. If Lyndon Bowring succeeds in his aim to head the evangelical lobby, the threat of fundamentalists spreading their votes around is not to be ignored. He has already suggested CARE supporters become involved in all political parties and seriously consider standing as candidates themselves.

British politics has taken a decidedly American turn; it will be a relief to return to the States and watch Pat Robertson's failure to secure the Republican nomination — not to mention the war of attrition between my favourite TV evangelists.

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AIDS is God's punishment for sinners, declared Archbishop Guiseppi Siri of Genoa in a farewell homily. He was front runner in the 1978 papal enclaves before the votes were transferred.

The Baleful Bishop of London

DANIEL O'HARA

It's good to see the intellectual bankruptcy of the Anglican Bishop of London, Dr Graham Leonard, so ruthlessly exposed by a member of his own church, Professor John Bowker, Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.

In an article in *The Independent* (2 January) Professor Bowker amusingly suggests that P. G. Wodehouse might have made a better bishop than Dr Leonard. I would go further: Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster would have been no worse, and Jeeves, of course, would have been incomparably better.

But Professor Bowker is not just out to make fun: his article has a much more serious purpose. It is a critique of Dr Leonard's Fulton Lecture in which the bishop, "hot for certainties", calls for a return to "moral absolutes" and rejects as mere subjectivism the views of anyone who does not share his simplistic, Andertonian views. According to the Bishop, "subjectivism" leads to "the tyrannical exercise of violence against others, because it appeals to what it takes to be self-evident, and allows no external, absolute court of appeal". The bishop is apparently vaguely aware that fearful tyranny has been perpetrated by both Catholic and Protestant absolutists, but seems a little too willing to excuse the excesses of the Inquisition on the grounds that the wrong things were being done for the right reasons. Professor Bowker pertinently asks whether a Jew, burning on one of Torquemada's fires, would have seen it as having greater merit than burning in one of Hitler's ovens. The bishop is unclear about this.

Professor Bowker rightly observes that the bishop offers not a single example of "subjectivism" leading to tyrannical violence: indeed, the evidence is completely the other way. Stalin, Hitler, the Khymer Rouge and the Government in Pretoria have all rejected subjective dissent with as much passion as the Bishop of London. Moral philosophers, of whom the bishop is patently not one, are much more sensitively aware of the difficulties inherent in moral discourse than to assume that any agreed "certainties" could ever be arrived at, let alone justly applied.

Much as one admires Professor Bowker's careful dissection of the absurdities inherent in the bishop's position, one wishes that he were able to go the extra furlong and see that all irrational systems, of which Christianity is one, are bound to throw up absolutist responses to complex human situations. A better course of action than Professor Bowker's attempts to spring-clean a collapsing church, built on the sands of faith, might be to move out into a safer house built on the rock of reason!

Two Hundred Years of Byron

T. F. EVANS

The short life of George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) was marked by controversy and scandal. His bicentenary is an occasion to celebrate England's great Romantic poet and Greece's national hero.

Some time ago, it used to be almost automatic for histories of literature to include a statement to the effect that there were three English writers who had a great reputation in Europe. These were Shakespeare, Byron and Oscar Wilde. Shakespeare, of course, unread or unseen, cannot be questioned. Wilde, it was thought, enjoyed the acclaim of foreigners simply because he was a victim of English narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy. The same, more or less, was true of Byron. In all, the judgments were considered to be just another example of the idiocy of foreigners and the total inability of anyone else to recognise the true nature of English genius. Where the reputation of Byron is in question, however, it could be that the wrong-headed foreigners have been proved right.

Two hundred years after his birth, it is rarely disputed that Byron is among the truly great writers in the English language. He has been praised by important critics from Matthew Arnold to W. H. Auden, and Arnold's opinion that the first names among the poets of the nineteenth century would be those of Wordsworth and Byron might now provoke less argument in relation to Byron than to Wordsworth. Auden said that he fashioned a style of poetry "which for speed, wit, and moral seriousness combined with lack of pulpit pomposity is unique". The flower of this style was the long satiric poem, *Don Juan*, which another critic has called the most thoroughly readable work in the whole of English literature. Even T. S. Eliot, who always found it difficult to think of a good word to say of a poet to whom the adjective "romantic" was applied, could not refrain from praising *Don Juan*.

In fact Byron was not a "romantic" poet in the sense that the word was applied to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. He thought of himself more as a writer in the classical style, and spoke scathingly of these other poets, although he had a great fondness for Shelley. Apart from his poetry, however, it was just as much his personality and way of life that gained him the description "romantic" and invested the term, "Byronic" with a special significance. From the beginning, there was a melodramatic light about his life, and he did nothing to dispel it. He came of a turbulent marriage. At birth, he sustained an injury that resulted in the permanent deformity of a club foot. This proved no bar to athletic prowess. He performed his great feat

of swimming the Hellespont and, at school, he had been, in his own words, "a very fair cricketer". As a limp did not prevent his succeeding in athletic contests, so, too, did it fail to handicap him in his sexual life. He married, but the marriage failed in great scandal after a year. There were numerous liaisons; it is almost certain that he committed incest with his half-sister and there is evidence of homosexual practices as well as diabolism.

The scandal surrounding the disputes between his wife and himself engendered a life-long hatred of what he considered the cant (a favourite word) of English society, and led him to spend the greater part of his adult life in European countries where sexual licence seemed to be less a matter for public concern. He was always dedicated to the idea of freedom, and one of the best known things about him is that he died at Missolonghi, in Greece, of a fever contracted on an expedition to rid the Greeks of their Turkish rulers.

Byron wrote a very great amount in a short life of only 36 years. Among his poems are several lyrics that are among the best loved poems in the language. It is necessary to mention the first lines only: "When we two parted", "There be none of beauty's daughters", "She walks in beauty like the night" and "Oh! snatch'd a way in beauty's bloom". He wrote longer narrative poems and satiric pieces as well as a number of verse dramas. He wrote with very great facility and told a friend that "all convulsions end with me in rhyme" and that he wrote stories in verse "to solace my midnights".

Byron wrote fluently in prose as well as in verse. The editor of an excellent selection from his prose published by Penguin declares that he "never wrote a dull word", and if this somewhat hackneyed phrase has been used of plenty of writers who have provided much evidence to cast doubt upon it, it is true of Byron. In his many letters and journals as well as other prose, there is a raciness, a spontaneity, an interest in all aspects of life and a deep sympathy that reveal the essential nature of the man who was thought by some to be a monster of vanity and conceit. The selection includes also the text of the speech that Byron made in 1812 upon taking his seat in the House of Lords. The issue was a proposal to introduce further measures against frame-workers who destroyed their machines, the Luddites. Byron spoke in defence of men who were driven by "unparalleled distress" and "absolute want". He begged the Lords to reflect that "even a mob may be better reduced to reason by a mixture of conciliation and fairness than by additional irritation and redoubled penalties".

He spoke out also against religious persecution.

The preface to cantos VI, VII and VIII of *Don Juan* reminds his readers that

Socrates and Jesus Christ were put to death publicly as *blasphemers*, and so have been and may be many who dare to oppose the most notorious abuses of the name of God and the mind of man. But persecution is not refutation. . .

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, a long poem, the first cantos of which appeared in 1812 and brought Byron immediate fame overnight, records the life and wanderings of a figure very like the poet himself. In the later, longer and greater *Don Juan*, Byron presents the adventures of a central figure who is not much more than a link to connect a series of romantic, sometimes scurrilous, and always highly entertaining episodes. It is written in a form of an eight-line stanza which Byron borrowed from Italian models and made distinctively and peculiarly his own. The long poem, which was unfinished but which still runs to over two hundred pages of small print in double columns, contains about 125,000 words, considerably longer than many novels. There are many features of the poem that cry out for comment, but one or two may be selected. Byron was a poseur, but he was not a pretender. He tried, as we all do, to present himself to the world in an aspect of his own choosing, but he did not dissemble about his essential nature. He had the great, and for an artist, the invaluable, gift of saying serious things in a manner that was light-hearted but fundamentally never superficial. Thus:

Some have accused me of a strange design
Against the creed and morals of the land,
And trace it in this poem every line;
I don't pretend that I quite understand
My own meaning when I would be very fine;
But the fact is that I have nothing plann'd,
Unless it were to be a moment merry,
A novel word in my vocabulary.

To the kind of reader of our sober clime
This way of writing will appear exotic;
Pulci was sire of the half-serious rhyme,
Who sang when chivalry was more Quixotic,
And revell'd in the fancies of the time,
True knights, chaste dames, huge giant
kings despotic:
But all these, save the last, being obsolete,
I chose a modern subject as more meet.

Byron will almost certainly remain a controversial figure. Not even the richness of the comment that is to be brought forth in this year of celebration will answer some of the questions about him. Thus, it is always necessary to try to decide to what extent the excessively individual "Byronic" approach, for all the generous liberalism of the poet's own political and social attitudes, could lead to the other extreme of personal rule and, indeed, dictatorship. There is no space to discuss such ques-

tions here, but it must be admitted that these questions have to be asked. Yet, the best in Byron far outweighs the worst. One of his most devoted students even wrote of his "Christian virtues". Here to conclude this note, is Byron on the reactionary, tyrannical regimes, especially in England, in the years following the Napoleonic wars:

Would she be proud, or boast herself the free,
Who is but first of slaves? The nations are
In prison — but the gaoler, what is he?
No less a victim to the bolt and bar.
Is the poor privilege to turn the key
Upon the captive, freedom? He's as far
From the enjoyment of the earth and air
Who watches o'er the chain, as they who wear.

LETTERS

SEEING HUMANISM STRAIGHT

First, I would like to repeat the opening of my original article, "'Humanism' and 'Freethought'" (December 1987): "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".

I am glad David Tribe (Letters, January) goes some way towards accepting the term Humanism. But it can only do its job if it is properly used.

I will not dispute with him on the history of the various brands of "irreligion" — I am sure that "positive" and "negative" were as intimately interconnected then as now. In fact I would suggest that, in logic, the distinction is spurious, for "To say something is to deny something", as the philosopher Karl Popper pointed out (in effect).

I agree that some Humanists are excessive about being "negative"; and I admit that I sometimes am hypersensitive. But, though there is no difference in logic, there is a rhetorical value in being "positive", which is worth observing.

Actually, however, my article did not touch on "positive" and "negative". (Anyway, "freethought" is a very "positive" word.) The first half was arguing that it is an inept distortion of language to try to impose on "freedom of thought" anything exclusive of God; and, as Humanism makes distinctive claims which are exclusive of God, therefore freethought and Humanism cannot be equated. Really very simple. May I here note a misprint that slipped my notice: in paragraph six I wrote that freethought etc "can be supported by theists" not "...atheists".

The second half of my article was really much more important. I went on to show how the distinctive features of Humanism are of fundamental significance — "positive" and "negative" are irrelevant here.

Nigel Sinnott's letter requires little substantial reply. His "fact of history" quite misfires. Certainly it is true that in the '60s and '70s societies using the word "Humanist" arose, some renaming or supplanting "rationalist" societies, which had replaced "freethought" societies. But this does nothing to support his identification. On the contrary one might say, the development suggests something new.

The misguided error that slipped into *Humanist News* does nothing to help him — for it was no more than that. Harold Blackham wrote in immediately pointing this out; and he is in a position to know, for he was a

(continued on page 28)

ARMAGEDDON? ESSAYS 1983-1987, by Gore Vidal, Andre Deutsch, £11.95

Of the twenty essays in this collection, few, other than those on Tennessee Williams, Henry James and Anthony Burgess, will ring immediate bells in European ears. The essays on Nixon, on the dilemma of the American Jews and their attitude to the "lunatic Right" and on the Reagans before they reached the White House, will provide interesting insights on some aspects of "how things tick". But the central essay, "Armageddon", provides the title of the book.

Christian fundamentalism in America goes back to the mid-nineteenth century and now commands the allegiance, according to a survey in 1984, of 39 per cent of Americans, all of them firmly believing in the imminent death of the world by nuclear fire. This movement not only appeals to the guilt in modern industrialised nations, but it makes many millions of dollars for its TV personality leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and others.

In brief, the doctrine they preach is that the ultimate battle between Good and Evil will take place at a small village in Israel named Armageddon — first foretold by Ezekiel — and that Christ will come to rescue true believers who will, after that battle, be free to praise God forever without having to be interrupted by unbelievers. Good will be represented by America and the one-third of all Jews who will acknowledge Christ. Evil, it need hardly be said, is represented by Russia.

Reagan's part in all this is made clear in the opening paragraphs: "When Ronald Reagan's career in show business came to an end, he was hired to impersonate, first a California governor and then an American president who would reduce taxes for his employers, the Southern and Western New Rich, much of whose money came from the defence industries. There is nothing new in this arrangement. All recent presidents have had their price-tags, and the shelf-life of each was short. What was unusual was his employers' cynical recognition that in an age of television one must steer clear of politicians who may not know how to act president, and go instead for the best actor available for the job, the one who can read with warm plausibility the commercials that they have written for him. . . They selected an actor who has never shown the slightest interest in actual politics as opposed to the mechanics of political elections in the age of television. That is why Reagan's economic and foreign policies have never made the slightest sense to anyone who knows anything about either. On the other hand, there is evidence that, unlike his wealthy sponsors, he has a sense of mission that, like Jesus's, is not of this world".

FREETHINKER

Reagan, a self-confessed and passionately convinced "born again Christian", has swallowed the whole of the Armageddon lobby belief and made public the now well-known description of Russia as "the Evil Empire" which has to be destroyed. The precise details of his conversion and beliefs are set out by Grace Halsall, herself from a fundamentalist family, in *Prophecy and Politics, Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War*, published by Laurence Hill & Co. Vidal quotes statements by James Mills when president of the California State Senate, to the effect that Reagan spoke of his Armageddon beliefs with passion, and when a fundamentalist preacher prophesied his election to the presidency, "shook and pulsed".

In the last section of his essay, Vidal describes the "bright sunny day in Hell, where I had come with nine hundred worthies from several dozen countries, to listen to Satan himself, Gorbachev" — the famous Forum on 16 February 1987, in Moscow. At that Forum, Gorbachev described the two preceding years of intense thought and argument that had led the Russian Government to work for the total elimination of all nuclear weapons because their existence posed a threat to the whole human race — a conclusion underlined by Chernobyl.

But that was before the 1987 Summit when a tentative agreement to scrap INF weapons was made — and has still to be ratified — but where Reagan refused to budge an inch on SDI. The reason for his obstinacy is clear when one considers the function of SDI. It also makes clear why Reagan was so enraptured when SDI was first explained to him. In brief, ICBM's take thirty minutes from launch to target but are under satellite from launch. This makes it possible for the Russians to launch their ICBM's before the American warheads land and so ensure a parallel destruction of American targets. The problem is therefore how to reduce or eliminate that thirty minutes. Laser beams generated by underground explosions have devastating destructive power, can be reflected from satellites and targeted very precisely. They also travel at the speed of light so that an enemy would have no warning and would be unable to launch a reply. So Reagan's desire to see nuclear weapons abolished while refusing to include SDI reveals either a colossal stupidity or ruthlessness that parallels the decision by America and Britain to drop atomic bombs on Japan (after peace overtures had already been made by the Japanese) in order to discover the long-term effects of nuclear weapons on human beings.

Since the Russians have not dropped a nuclear bomb on undefended people the question arises

REVIEWS

"Which is the real Evil Empire?" So democratic Americans have a long haul ahead of them if the human race is not to end with Reagan and the wealthy oligarchy that at present makes policy in America.

MICHAEL DUANE

THE AFTER DEATH EXPERIENCE, by Ian Wilson. Sidgwick & Jackson, £12.95
AS IN ADAM ALL DIE. . . by S. Ramsay Blackley. The Book Guild Ltd, £9.50

The author of the first of these two books made his name with books on the so-called Turin Shroud, and told me in a recorded radio discussion on that subject that the evidence he had uncovered for the authenticity of that relic had forced him to convert from agnosticism to Roman Catholicism. (My reply, "Rather a materialistic basis for faith, isn't it?" was cut out of the broadcast version.) Though his latest book on that subject is far less certain in its findings than his earlier writings, he has yet to relinquish the faith. Indeed, his selection of historical and scientific facts and theories, and the emphasis he gives them, are always directed towards an apparent conclusion that happens to underpin current Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

The book under review continues Ian Wilson's remunerative production line of popular, glossy, well illustrated publications that contrive, by blinding the average reader with science in a smokescreen, to lend a spurious air of academic respectability to religious sensationalism. He always builds up a selective picture, finally discounting most of the alleged evidence he puts forward, but keeping enough of it in reserve for a concluding question-mark at the end of each chapter.

The title *The After Death Experience* was given him, he says, by the commissioning publisher; but it is significant that he has kept the sensational title, though in the body of the book he has to employ the more scientific label "near-death experience" for the well-known "out-of-the-body" phenomenon for which the title of the book is popularly used. At the same time he suggests, quite absurdly, that these undoubted psychological experiences of the near dead might relate to "some real *after-death* state". And because part of his technique is always to include a few Aunt Sallies, he also drags in alleged evidence for both spiritualism and reincarnation — which, of course, he then proceeds to knock down, since these claims run counter to Catholic doctrine. In the course of this exercise, he gives rational explanations and supporting evidence for fraud in many cases, and

some of this material could be useful for rationalists dealing with other apologists, though it is mostly available elsewhere.

The "out-of-the-body" experience is frequently reported by patients who have been resuscitated after a few minutes of cardiac arrest. But it is quite susceptible to rational interpretation. Though the patient may remain half-conscious, and can afterwards often report the things said by members of the medical team, the temporary deprivation of oxygen to the brain prevents him from experiencing his body in the normal way, so it is not surprising if this unprecedented lack of feeling in his body gives him the sensation of floating above it and actually looking down on it, and may (especially in the case of religious believers) include dream-like images of dead friends or relatives in another world, such as paradise.

Any other explanation of the "out-of-the-body" experience would mean our abandoning the basic known fact that thought is an outcome of brain activity and repudiating our understanding of the relationship between mind and body and, indeed, of causality itself. But, of course, suspending the normal rational framework of ideas that human beings have built up on the basis of reality is what religion is all about.

Among the questions it raises is this: why do we need, for the interpretation of reality, all our elaborate physiological and biochemical mechanisms, including the human brain, if the "soul", once out of the physical body, can manage so well without them?

One particular give-away of Ian Wilson's selective method and of his personal criteria for belief is his comment (page 153) on the near-death experience of a cockney woman who reported seeing the entrance to paradise, described by her as a nasturtium-lined path leading to the door of a "nice prefab". Wilson finds the cockney idea that heaven resembles a cosy postwar prefabricated bungalow as a "difficult-to-take feature of the cockney lady's story". And he goes on, "For the rationalist-minded, including myself, it does seem to be asking a great deal to believe that the afterlife might take such a prosaically 'earthly' form". No doubt he would have found an ivory tower more credible.

The other book under review, written by a man who himself has had a cardiac arrest, covers much the same area of concern, but from a genuine rationalist viewpoint — and therefore with less expectation of the best-seller status that pays for a glossy production and expensive illustrations. But it is written with wit and robust good humour, and includes some amusing instances of religious beliefs on life after death. (It is available from the bookshop at *The Freethinker* address.)

BARBARA SMOKER

Letters

main force introducing the word Humanism. He comments "My choice of it was derided by the NSS with the kind of contempt Mrs Thatcher showed for her 'wets' ". Unfortunately his letter was missed from the next issue of *Humanist News*, but it will be appearing in the following, in March.

Now Sinnott's bleat about my not laying detailed evidence substantiating his distortions of Humanism. I would have thought the onus lay on him. But since he asks, I will point out that in the British Humanist Association General Statement of Policy we state that we "strongly support international conservation policies"; under the cross-head "Industrial Society" we call for responsibility in environmental issues; and elsewhere in this document we express concern for "human and animal welfare".

Perhaps Sinnott was misled by the title of the BHA publication, "People First". But if he ventured to read it, he would find that second place went to systems and bureaucracies, not to animate and inanimate nature. It opens with a powerful statement of the need for concern for the environment and "nature's age old systems".

Finally, the first president of the BHA was Sir Julian Huxley, who may be best known for establishing UNESCO; but as an eminent zoologist he also helped found the World Wildlife Fund. These few examples are all I have space for. I am glad Tribe supports me in recognising that Humanism is not anticonservationist.

I must leave some space for Karl Heath and Glyn Emery. I am surprised the former has not heard of our work on education, marriage ceremonies (our booklet will be appearing on 14 February) and the Open Society. Our lack of funds and exclusion from the media always makes the presentation of our ideas difficult; but our literature makes clear the range of our concerns.

I find Emery impossible to comment on briefly. His claim for Hegelian roots to Humanism is highly provocative. I think he has missed a basic point in the moral significance of evolution; but this would require a full article in itself.

HARRY STOPES-ROE

IN DEFENCE OF HUMANISTS

With "friends" like Nigel Sinnott, who needs enemies! His article, "Why I am Not a Humanist" (November 1987) contains a gross misrepresentation of the Humanist position concerning our place as human beings within the environment, and on its conservation.

What evidence can he produce that any Humanist, or Humanist publication, implies that humanity's position within evolution "justifies mankind's destruction of the world's forests, some of the most biologically valuable and breathtakingly beautiful places on earth"; or "that the human race has an evolutionary destiny to conquer and subdue nature"?

The statements below, picked almost at random off my shelves, show that Sinnott has been, to quote Harry Stopes-Roe ("Humanism" and "Freethought", December 1987), "frankly dishonest in representing Humanism as encouraging exploitation of the Earth, and life on it".

Humanism, by Barbara Smoker (National Secular Society): "Humanists are strongly represented in the pressure groups concerned with pollution, conservation, overpopulation, and other aspects of ecology. (For instance, it was a member of the British Humanist Association who started the Conservation Society.)"

Humanist Manifesto II (Rationalist Press Association): "The world community must engage in cooperative

planning concerning the use of rapidly depleting resources. The planet earth must be considered as a single ecosystem. Ecological damage, resource depletion, and excessive population growth must be checked by international concord. The cultivation and conservation of nature is a moral value; we should perceive ourselves as integral to the source of our being in nature. We must free our world from pollution and waste, responsibly guarding and creating wealth, both natural and human. Exploitation of natural resources, uncurbed by social conscience, must end".

A Secular Humanist Declaration (RPA): "... we are aware of, and oppose, the abuses of misapplied technology and its possible harmful consequences for the natural ecology of the human environment. . . ."

People First: A Humanist Manifesto (British Humanist Association): "... if we go on as we go on at present the collapse of life on this planet is a certainty. We exploit the world's wealth ruthlessly, we squander resources, we pollute the environment, we disrupt nature's age old systems. . . . Without action now we shall destroy our planet".

British Humanist Association General Statement of Policy "World Population and Resources": "We recognise that most natural resources are not inexhaustible, and therefore strongly support international conservation policies. . . ."

The World and You: A Humanist Perspective (BHA): "The difference between the two possible futures is the difference between the greedy exploitation of the world's resources for the benefit of privileged people and nations and the careful development and sharing of the world's resources for the benefit of everyone".

Sinnott asks Harry Stopes-Roe (Letters, January) for "detailed evidence" that he had presented "a travesty of Humanism". Evidence of the kind given in the lines above, of the Humanist sense of responsibility for our environment, could of course be given from scores of other sources, from Corliss Lamont's *The Philosophy of Humanism* to "The Humanist World" section in the World Wildlife Fund's book, *Worlds of Difference*.

The famous Humanists of this century — Sir Julian Huxley at UNESCO, Lord Boyd-Orr at FAO, Lord Ritchie-Calder, Bertrand Russell and Fenner Brockway with their lifetimes of work for international understanding and cooperation — are they examples of "the conceit of humanism"? Their lives all give the lie to Sinnott's extraordinary distortion of the Humanist position.

JOHN WHITE

MANKIND'S DEBIT ACCOUNT

H. A. Gurney's letter (December 1987) betrays elements of the self-delusion more commonly associated with religious followers. By asking "To whom or what can we turn but ourselves?" he appears to be adopting the semi-deification central to Christian belief, whilst the claim that we are making existence better for all forms of life ignores the vast mass of evidence readily available and continually growing. His observations prompt the belief that he has succumbed to the comforts of relative affluence or the power of advertising.

A catalogue merely of Man's grossest iniquities far outweighs his intellectual attainments underlining the comparative rarity of the latter. The existence of potential is no measure of superiority in any field, our own potential may be more fully realised when we cease to be dazzled by technology, accept our lot as one form of life among many and learn to live in harmony with the world around us. Meanwhile, the materialism which epitomises the human race generally, in concert with manifestations of other undesirable

characteristics, surely merits judgement of it as the greatest catastrophe ever sustained by this unfortunate planet.

History, combined with a survey of the world today, casts serious doubt upon Man's ability to govern his affairs intelligently. This being so, perhaps the movement should be more outspoken on world affairs than is now the case.

R. H. BARR

WRONG DESCRIPTION

Does not *The Freethinker* adopt too narrow a meaning of the word "evangelical"?

There are, after all, liberal (in the religious sense) evangelicals. And in Germany the name invariably used for the most numerous Protestant church is not Lutheran but Evangelical.

It would seem that "fundamentalist" is the word which *The Freethinker* should ordinarily use instead of "evangelical". And where such people are particularly given to preaching, "evangelist" would be the word.

And, of course, many of the beliefs categorised by these words are held by Catholics also.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

THE LANGUAGE OF SEXISM

Yes, women are concerned about unemployment and cuts in expenditure, and the policies of a Government that is led, as we have noticed, by a woman. But many of us are also concerned, and hurt, by the efforts of too many men to put us down and treat us like foolish little creatures. It is very sad that the Editor of *The Freethinker*, of all people, should periodically get so hot under the collar about genuine attempts to understand and counteract sexism, that he indulges in abuse such as the gross misrepresentation of Brent Council's action to try to try to educate and improve in this area (*News and Notes*, December 1987).

Please, Mr Editor, try to understand that language is used, and understood, in very different ways in different contexts. Let me illustrate with two recent personal examples. I see myself (and I don't think I'm alone in this) as a middle-aged business executive, expensively and fairly smartly dressed, with a general air of confidence and social ease. Picture me about to entertain some people to lunch in a smart London hotel, waiting behind a few others to put my coat into the cloakroom. To each of them the attendant says "Thank-you, Sir"; — to me "Thank you, luv". Or waiting for a taxi at Heathrow. The boss-man organising the queue into taxis shouting clearly "Where to, Sir?" to each of the people in front of me. To me — "Where to, darling?" There are occasions on which being called darling makes me feel really good. This was not one of them. Failing to accord a woman the same courtesies as one does a man in the same circumstances is sexism. IT HURTS!

DIANA ROOKLEDGE

JAMES ANDERTON, PROPHET OF GOD

One of the more bizarre results of the discussion that has arisen on the appearance of AIDS in this country is the re-emergence in the press of the type of Christian whose idea of God puts him on the same level as Himmler or the torturers of children. Now and again the bland face presented by church hierarchies is ripped aside, and we are made aware of the hard core of dogmatism and fundamentalism that is always present. Cruelty to unbelievers, or "sinners", is never far away. Hell fire, purgatory and the like are still active.

The other danger has appeared in, of all people, a

Chief Constable who thinks he may be a prophet of God. Setting up as a prophet is a simple business. No one can prove otherwise. If you can find enough fools to believe you — and in some circumstances that seems not too difficult — and you can become an Ayatollah Khomeini. To find a man in authority making such a claim of unreason should mean his immediate removal from office. Instead he enjoys the public support of the Prime Minister who knows, of course, that God is an Englishman, although her friend Ronald Reagan is equally certain that he is an American.

ALEX STEWART

After a long period of instruction, James Anderton, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, was received into the Roman Catholic Church last month. — Editor.

God and the Guides

SARA WOOD

Humanist parents are often confronted with the problem of finding a suitable youth club or group for their children. Despite misgivings about uniforms and church parades, they often settle for one of the mainstream organisations. Sara Wood did not conceal her lack of religious belief during ten years' membership of the Girl Guides. She relates how that movement responded to her honesty and integrity.

I made a promise to do my duty to God when I was ten years old, and didn't think twice about it as all I wanted was to join the Guides. I worked and gained many badges, including the Queen's Guide Award, the highest that can be obtained. At the age of sixteen I started on the Young Leaders training course, the purpose of which is to help the qualified in running their company. The subject of religious belief was never brought up, although I should have been told that a non-religious person could not become a qualified leader.

At the age of eighteen I started by Adult Leaders training, with a view to gaining my warrant as a qualified leader and therefore allowed to take charge of my own group of Guides. The Adult Leaders course took two years to complete. A list of activities had to be undertaken and I had to attend special training sessions. I had always gone to church with the Guides and was prepared to take any Guides to their place of worship. The girls were of mixed religions and we all got on well as the subject never came up at Guide meetings. We always had Bible reading and a prayer, but that was all.

The District Commissioner sent my training card to headquarters and my warrant was eventually sent to her. It was during this time that the Commissioner, who was new to the district, found out about my Humanist views.

We were at a Guide camp last September and as it rained very heavily the tents could not be put up. So we had to stay in a local church hall. On Sunday, the Commissioner said we were all to go to church. I did so, but did not join in the prayers or hymns

which I did not know anyway. After the service, the Commissioner said my behaviour was terrible, and I said that I thought the services was a waste of time. The Guides didn't come to camp just to go to church on Sunday, as many of them don't attend when they are at home. I was then asked if I believed in God, and I replied that I did not. She then called in the other leaders to a meeting I was not allowed to attend. After the meeting I was informed that everything was all right and that I could become a group leader.

At our meeting the following Wednesday I was given leaflets to read; they concerned why a Guide leader was to believe in and do her duty to God. I was told to read them and try to find a way of believing in God or I would not receive my warrant. They wanted me to believe in their God and become a Christian.

At this point I became very annoyed, considering all the time and effort I had put into the movement. I wrote to the Chief Commissioner in London and my letter was sent to the Edinburgh headquarters. The reply was that it is a fundamental principle that Guides have to believe in a spiritual being higher than man, therefore I could not receive my warrant.

A local meeting was held for the Guides and their parents as they had seen a report on Scottish television news and in one of our newspapers. However, I was not allowed to attend. A few weeks later I went to another meeting to return some books and to wish the Guides all the best. I was not allowed to speak to them.

So ended ten years of loyal service to the Girl Guide movement.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

speakers include

David Yallop

(author of *In God's Name*)

Ted Goodman

(chairman, Campaign Against Censorship)

Barbara Smoker

President, NSS

The Coburg Hotel,

Bayswater Road, London

Saturday, 19th March, 1988

6.30 pm for 7 pm

Vegetarians catered for;

advance notice essential

Tickets £13.50 each

NSS, 702 Holloway Road,

London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 6 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Mary Hayward: *The Feminist View of Censorship*.

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.

Glasgow Humanist Society. The Unitarian Centre, 72 Berkeley Street (near Mitchell Library), Glasgow. Sunday, 13 March, 2.30 pm. Annual General Meeting. Tuesday, 22 March, 7.30 pm. Humanist film: *Making Bigger Circles*.

Humanist Holidays. Easter Holiday at Norwich from Thursday, 30 March until Monday, 4 April. Details obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 39175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Monday, 14 March, 7.30 pm. M. P. Bennett: *Thomas Paine, the Man and His Ideas 250 Years On*.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 25 February, 7.45 pm. Terry Liddle: *Rastafarianism*.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Current Controversies in Evolution, a series of ten lectures by Mike Howgate, Thursday, 7 pm - 9 pm. Fee: £1 per lecture (including refreshments). Details obtainable from SPES.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 March, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Fanny Lines: *Strengthening the United Nations*.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 21 March, 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.

Newspaper reports are always required by *The Freethinker*. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, *The Freethinker*, 14 Courden Road, Coventry, West Midlands, CV1 4AW.

Abortion Debate

result in a forty per cent reduction in that Centre's activities in the city of Birmingham.

"If we want fewer unwanted abortions, let us have fewer unwanted pregnancies".

Clare Short (Labour, Birmingham Ladywood) drew attention to the activities of Right-wing elements in the United States who bombed abortion clinics and photographed women entering them.

She said: "The growing New Right in Britain is saying that women should stay at home and bear children and care for elderly and disabled people. They are not in favour of public expenditure. They want to push women back into a traditional role and deprive them of the freedom to control their lives".

Edward Heath, a former Conservative Prime Minister, said that Mr Alton "has not disguised the fact that because of his religious beliefs he is entirely opposed to abortion. . .

"I am aware of the religious beliefs that are expressed and held so strongly. Crusades do not always lead to the most desirable results, as we know from history. Above all, they lead to considerable intolerance".

Jo Richardson (Labour, Barking) said she was sorry those Members who take a restrictive view of abortion were not present in the Grand Committee Room a few days earlier "to hear the moving and humbling testimony of mothers who have had abortions because they decided not to continue with their pregnancies after foetal abnormalities were detected.

"We heard from mothers who have since had or were going to have perfect babies. They said that if, because of the law, they were forced to carry on with their earlier pregnancies and were now, against their will, trying to cope with handicapped children, they would never have risked another child.

"They still grieve over the loss of their first baby, but they are all glad that the back-up of screening and our present compassionate laws gave them the opportunity to make their individual choice and go on with confidence to have more children.

"Who will sit in judgment on the first such woman to seek an illegal abortion if the Bill is passed", she asked.

On the question of diagnosis of pregnancy in mentally handicapped women, Jo Richardson said it was often delayed either because they were unaware of their condition or failed to seek medical advice.

"A child born to a mentally handicapped mother runs a high risk of being mentally handicapped and of having other congenital defects of varying severity. Pregnancy, delivery, and fostering or adoption can have devastating effects on a mentally handicapped woman and her partner, and more commonly, on her ageing parents who have devoted all their young lives to the care of their child. Any reduction in the upper time limit for therapeutic

abortion would have a traumatic effect on this small but important group of people".

Recalling the era of dangerous do-it-yourself and botched abortions, Jo Richardson said: "I am of the generation when knitting needles, coat hangers, turpentine and iodine were used, resulting in a number of deaths".

Alice Mahon (Labour, Halifax) told the House: "I nursed one of those statistics. I spent the longest night of my life looking after a young woman who died at the age of 23. That is what a return to those days would mean".

On a free vote, the "pro-life" Members, who included the usual complement of capital punishment freaks, had a majority of 45.

Commenting on the result, Diane Munday, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service press officer, said: "I consider the fact that we got 46 per cent of the vote to be a victory in face of the enormous resources which were put into the campaign by the anti-abortion lobby. These included £100,000 on two newspaper advertisements alone. They distributed a million of their gory postcards, and in one appeal for money said they were throwing everything into the campaign which I am told cost three quarter of a million pounds.

"In my opinion it was a thoroughly dishonest and emotive campaign. It is a pity that more MPs were not in the chamber when Tony Newton, the Health Minister, put the real facts. There were never more than twenty Tories in the chamber, but they all came piling in for the vote.

"It was quite clear that a large number of MPs voted for the Alton Bill on the basis of his claim that he is willing to make concessions at a later stage. This claim sounds somewhat thin, as concessions could have been put into the Bill which he took a long time to draft.

"I was forcibly struck, as during all previous abortion debates in the Commons, by the chasm between the lives of these self-satisfied, well dressed and obviously well-fed men, and those sad and desperate women who sit in BPAS waiting rooms every week".

Sharon Spiers, director of Tories for the Abortion Act (TACT '67), said that the Bill could still be defeated, but there was much work to be done.

She recalled that only twenty Conservatives voted against the Corrie anti-abortion Bill at Second Reading. But 65 voted against Alton.

"Another measure of our success", she added, "is that never before did a Conservative MP vote against an anti-abortion Bill at Second Reading. Five did so on this occasion".

Madeleine Simms, a former chairman of the Coordinating Committee for the Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act, referred to the 37 Labour MPs who voted for the Alton Bill and against their party's

policy. She said: "It is to be hoped that the Labour Party, which is now 'the listening party', will listen to women and de-select such candidates.

"We are delighted that seventeen Northern Ireland MPs were able to take the time to vote on an English issue, when the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply to Northern Ireland. It is gratifying that two of the three Northern Ireland speakers were clergymen.

"We are also delighted that Cecil Parkinson voted against abortion, for as we all know, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repenteth. . .".

Rather than making concessions, it is more likely that the Alton Bill will be regarded by religious zealots in the anti-abortion movement as a step towards a total ban on abortion in Britain. Nuala Scarisbrick, national administrator of "Life", described the late abortion of defective foetuses as

extermination of handicapped people. David Alton has stated publicly that he opposes abortion of defective foetuses. His fellow-Catholic, the Duke of Norfolk, was quoted in the Sunday *Observer* (24 January) as saying: "The aim for all Catholics must ultimately be a complete ban on abortions being carried out in this country".

Professor Stuart Campbell, of Kings College, London, warned that five hundred more babies will be born every year if Alton's Bill becomes law. Seventy per cent of them will die by the age of five.

"These are terrible deaths", declared Professor Campbell who is an expert on foetal abnormality.

"There is incontinence and skin sores. These babies go through agony before death".

Perhaps the compulsory pregnancy lobby should be re-named the cruel pregnancy lobby.

Schools Merger: Education Authorities and Catholic Parents Defy Archbishop

In a fierce controversy over the future of Roman Catholic schools, Councillor Charles Gray, leader of Strathclyde Regional Council, has hit back at the Church and its magazine, *Flourish*. In a letter to Archbishop Thomas Winning, Councillor Gray and a co-signatory, Councillor Neil Toppin, asserted that an article in the magazine was deliberately mischievous, "to create a false impression and panic in the Catholic community". The writer of the article had twisted the truth.

The confrontation between Church and Council resulted from a schools review which was set up to consider the implications of falling school rolls. Fr Tom Connelly, the Church press officer and spokesman for Archbishop Winning, claims that many Catholics regard any kind of reorganisation as the thin end of the wedge that will bring down Catholic schools. He is wary about the Strathclyde Labour Group's reassurances that this is not the case, because the Labour Party has a policy of integration in schools.

Fr Connelly says the danger of integration "is that people imagine the schools which are not Catholic are Christian schools. But they are not, and it's unrealistic for us to expect the non-denominational schools in a multi-racial society to have a Christian ethos when you may have more Muslims than Christians in a school.

"It is a fact that Scotland today is no longer a Christian country, in the sense that the vast majority of people are not baptised in church. So we are not talking about Protestants, we are talking about pagans".

He said the situation may arise where priests would have to ask, from the pulpit if necessary, if

Catholics should go on supporting the Labour Party.

Councillor Gray, himself a Catholic, dismissed Fr Connelly's remarks as "Mafia stuff". Such a step would be a "dreadful mistake" from which the Church would not recover. It would be opposed by many lay Catholics and even some priests. He warned that local authorities would defend themselves against strong-arm tactics by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Labour Party is being supported in its defiance of the Church, not least by a group of Roman Catholic parents who have asked Archbishop Winning to stop pressuring the Strathclyde education authorities. Their children are attending the non-denominational Commonhead school which was merged with the Catholic St Colette's after the latter was destroyed by fire two years ago. The Archbishop now wants the Catholic children transferred to St Claire's Primary school.

Robert Ford, leader of the Commonhead parents, says "the two schools run so well together. It is good for the community". Jean Fitzpatrick, of the St Colette's action group, endorses this view.

It is claimed that the schools merger has led to a marked reduction of religious bigotry in the area.

But according to a Church spokesman, Archbishop Winning "is totally opposed to integration of any sort. His view is that it undermines the effectiveness of the Catholic schools and as a result is undesirable".

The Israeli State-run radio has announced that 871 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union during 1986. But only 224 decided to settle in Israel.