

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 108. No. 5

MAY 1988

40p

SUPPORT FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS "DIVISIVE AND IRRESPONSIBLE"

The National Secular Society has strongly criticised the proposal in a consultation paper issued by the Labour Party that the State should finance separate religious schools for Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. In a marked change of policy, the Party is to call on Labour-led local councils to support religious minorities setting up their own schools along the lines of Anglican and Roman Catholic voluntary aided ones.

Barbara Smoker, the NSS president, declared in a press statement that establishing such schools might seem at first sight a progressive step. But in fact it would be a most divisive and irresponsible course of action.

"Public funding of these schools would mean their rapid proliferation together with increased pressure put on Asian parents by their religious leaders to remove their children from the State system. Not only would this segregate children of Asian origin from the indigenous population, it would also divide them from one another, importing to this country the religious strife and bitterness that exists on the Indian sub-continent. And it would inevitably exacerbate the existing prejudice and discrimination against Asians.

"Indeed, most responsible Asian-community leaders have been counselling their followers not to support the demands of a fanatical, short-sighted minority for separate education, and most Muslim parents themselves realise that State schooling is in the best interests of their children. For the Labour Party to support segregation is therefore highly irresponsible."

Jack Straw, MP, the Labour spokesman on education, denied that separate schools for the various Asian religions would in effect be ghetto schools, provided they admit pupils on the basis of religion

and not race.

The NSS describes Mr Straw's denial as ludicrous, and asks if he has calculated the proportion of white children in these groups.

"It is surely bad enough that we already have in this country Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Jewish schools that segregate children according to their religious background. The divisiveness that this causes — as is seen at its worst in Northern Ireland — would be far greater in the case of denominational schools for more recent immigrant religions, where segregation would be on the inevitable, if not deliberate, basis of skin colour as well as creed. In 1922 it was decided to divide the mixed schools in Northern Ireland into Catholic and Protestant schools — and, even without the extra difference there of race and colour, we are today reaping the social consequences of that unhappy decision."

Since its inception in 1866 the National Secular Society has campaigned for the abolition of State funding of all church schools. While Christian schools are being financed by ratepayers and taxpayers it is "blatantly inequitable to go on refusing Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Seventh-Day Adventists, Rastafarians, etc, the same right to State-subsidised segregated schooling as Christians and Jews. But the proper solution to this inequity is for Parliament to take steps to phase out State subsidies to denominational schools of every kind, so as to encourage integrated schooling — not to adopt the new Labour policy of increasing the number of denominations allowed their own State-funded schools, with all the social harm that this is sure to build up for future generations".

The NSS argues that the phasing out of all State-funded denominational schools would also make

(continued on back page)



The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

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The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or Editor. Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 15th of the preceding month to the Editor at 14 Coundon Road, Coventry CV1 4AW, West Midlands (telephone Coventry 20070). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

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

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

ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

United Kingdom: twelve months £5. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £5.80; USA: twelve months, \$12. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3, total \$15.

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

NEWS

A STATE OF TERROR

One of the most damning photographs that came out of Germany in the '30s was that of a Jewish child gazing fearfully at a Nazi stormtrooper. Fifty years later the world press has carried a photograph of a Palestinian child gazing fearfully at an Israeli riot policeman. Prime Minister Yitzchak had good cause to say that Israel was celebrating its fortieth anniversary under "a cloud of world disapproval and pressures".

For more than half of its forty years, Israel has been an occupying power. Palestinians were expelled from their territory to make way for settlers who grabbed every square foot of land they considered to be Jewish by biblical decree. The most aggressive colonists have been Jewish Americans; like the Puritans who took their Christian superstition and intolerance to the New World, these "new Israelis" have implanted the worst features of American life in Uncle Sam's Middle East outpost.

The Government of Israel has not even formally denied that the assassination last month of PLO deputy leader, Abu Jihad, was ordered at the highest level. The action was motivated by a desire to frighten opponents of the regime, and with confidence that reaction by the western powers would be restrained to the point of endorsement.

To some extent the Abu Jihad killing overshadowed a similar act by agents of the South African Government who gunned down the Paris representative of the ANC outside her office. Assassination of opponents is not the only similarity of the Israeli and South African regimes. Censorship of news, confiscation of property, mass detentions and reprisals are common features of life in both countries . . . which brings us back to Germany in the '30s.

When, as is virtually certain, the PLO avenges its dead leader, there will be parrot-style denunciations of terrorism by the United States and her satellites. For the "world disapproval" to which Mr Shamir referred is by no means unanimous. During four decades the western powers have excused Israeli aggression. In addition to national governments, Israel's supporters range from American born-again Christian fundamentalists who regard her existence as fulfilment of scriptural prophecy, to influential crypto-Zionists in the main British political parties.

Israel's violation of another country's territory in order to assassinate an opponent was the characteristic action of a State that was itself established by acts of terrorism. No doubt any condemnation by the United Nations Security Council will be opposed by

AND NOTES

the United States with the support of others who regard the victims of Israeli aggression as the terrorists. Such a perversion of logic and morality comes naturally to those who conferred the Nobel Peace Prize on Menachem Begin, a former Prime Minister of Israel and organiser of the massacre of villagers at Deir Yasin in 1948.

OUT OF THE WOODWORK

Terry Little's tribute to the Conservative Family Campaign in last month's *Freethinker* was of particular interest to reader R. W. Aldridge, of Newport, Gwent. He received his copy the day after CFC chairman, Graham Webster-Gardiner, withdrew a libel action against him. Mr Aldridge was more than willing to go to court, but his disappointment has been assuaged by the information he acquired about the policies advocated by Webster-Gardiner and his nasty cronies.

Graham Webster-Gardiner is the archetypal Christian Tory of the '80s. He was active in the Federation of Conservative Students — since disbanded because it was too Right-wing even for Norman Tebbit — and has been a member for supporter of such groups as the Monday Club, Freedom Association, National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and Epsom Christian Fellowship. He is a life member of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and, like most "pro-life" zealots, an ardent advocate of capital punishment.

He stood as Conservative candidate at Newport East in last year's General Election, when his pronouncements caused much merriment in the constituency. During the run-up to the election, Mr Webster-Gardiner imparted his pearls of wisdom via the correspondence columns of the local press. Thus he informed readers of the *Western Mail*: "I think it is now becoming incontrovertible from a medical and scientific point of view that the side effects from most forms of contraception . . . are leading to early death and unnecessary illness in far too many of our citizens". Furthermore, "excessive male sexual activity, particularly masturbation, can lead to eye-sight problems". No doubt the electors of Newport East were suitably appreciative of the expert medical and scientific advice given by the managing director of a mail order firm.

As the election drew nearer, Mr Webster-Gardiner became increasingly confident of success, asserting that God himself wanted Mrs Thatcher returned for a third term. As for his own chances, "we might make it by a thousand votes". But the Almighty,

like some apathetic voter in suburbia, had to be reminded of his duty, so Mr Webster-Gardiner wrote to CFC members imploring their prayers for a Conservative victory. Nor was that all: "In particular we should pray for the destruction of the Labour Party". But the Lord did not incline his ear unto Mr Webster-Gardiner, and the Labour candidate won Newport East by a majority of over seven thousand.

The Conservative Family Campaign has published a leaflet listing some of its proposals which include: "Active promotion of contraception should cease". Here it follows the line of the Nazi regime in Germany which passed a decree that criminalised "all propaganda in favour of birth control and abortion".

On the question of AIDS, the CFC advocates that public funds should be withdrawn from the Terrence Higgins Trust. Victims of the disease "should be isolated in a caring Christian environment". Some idea of what "a caring Christian environment" would mean in CFC terms may be gleaned from questions posed by Graham Webster-Gardiner when he addressed a Conservative constituency association. He asked: "Is AIDS the curse of God, brought on to our permissive society?" This was followed by: "When a cure is found for AIDS, and with many fewer queers around, can we return to being permissive?"

These kindly Christian comments prompted one newspaper columnist to suggest that if Graham Webster-Gardiner did not win a parliamentary seat he could apply for a job with the Manchester police force.

RELIGIOUS BALLETHOO

Two Kashmiri religious organisations have protested against a visit by a Soviet ballet company. The Right-wing Jamaat Islami Party and the Awami Action Committee condemned the performances as "a naked display of vulgarity and immorality which militate against the cultural and religious heritage of Kashmir". They claimed that Muslims were "strongly offended" by ballet.

The Awami Action Committee is led by the Grand Mufti. Kashmir is India's only State with a Muslim majority.

The religious zealots have warned the authorities against arranging ballet performances in future. "We will never tolerate anything that goes against our religious tenets", they say.

Alabama police who found the decomposed body of a 42-year-old man in the family home were told by his relatives that he was not dead. In fact he was "doing much better" and would awake after he had completed dealings with God. "This is a weird case", the coroner commented.

INGLORIOUS ISOLATION

So far as Northern Ireland is concerned, she could have continued to enjoy her privileged position of being the only part of Ireland to enjoy a British standard of living. Instead she chose to put all this at risk in the interests of maintaining a Protestant ascendancy that had ceased to have any meaning anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

* * *

The above statement was not made by a Left-wing politician or a libertarian supporter of the Irish Republican cause. It was written by a former Protestant Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. Terence O'Neill held office for six years (1963-69). During that time he made tentative efforts to convince his political allies and co-religionists that they should move forward from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Steeped in the Orange politics and fundamentalist Christianity that for generations nurtured an arrogant fanaticism incomprehensible to the outsider, the Protestants branded O'Neill a traitor. The Rev Ian Paisley spoke their language and they elected him with huge majorities to three Parliaments.

A brutal attack by the mainly Protestant police on a peaceable civil rights march set off an atrocious war in the most Christian corner of the British Isles. Nearly twenty years later the carnage continues, with a death toll moving inexorably towards the three thousand mark. Military leaders admit they cannot win, Westminster politicians despair and the Stalker affair has shamed Britain. While the health and social services are starved of funds, large sums are poured down the Northern Ireland drain. It is hardly surprising that a MORI poll, published on 25 March, indicated that half the people in Britain want the troops withdrawn immediately or within a set period of time.

Another poll, conducted in Northern Ireland on behalf of Ulster Television and *Fortnight* magazine, shows there is a mood of deep pessimism in the population. Two thirds of those questioned saw no hope for the future. A growing number of Protestants accept that the days of Stormont government are gone forever and are opting for full integration of Northern Ireland with Britain. But the demand for integration, like union, is a largely one-sided affair. Only 27 per cent of the MORI interviewees on the mainland want Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. This response reflects a growing realisation that the Protestant ascendancy party ruled the province in a manner that would not be tolerated in Britain. The isolation and serious problems they now face are largely of their own making.

Reviews and several letters have been held over due to pressure on space.

PO RESPONDS TO PROTESTS

The Post Office has announced that it is reviewing guidelines with which it regulates the franking of letters. This move results from countrywide protests over the "Jesus is Alive" slogan which was franked on millions of letters during March and April.

The Methodist Church has, at the Post Office's request, agreed to alter a postmark being stamped on letters throughout this month. It commemorates the 250th anniversary of John Wesley's conversion. The words "The Methodist Church" have been deleted.

A Post Office spokesman said the change had been "mutually agreed" with the Church. "The agreement was made purely because the Methodists' request for a special franking came so soon after the row over the 'Jesus is Alive' slogan", he added.

A song deriding the Pope's opposition to contraception has been banned by Bavarian Radio because "it is an insult to religion". The offending song is entitled "Go Forth and Multiply".

CHURCH SCHOOL REJECTED

Council leaders in Solihull, West Midlands, have been forced to abandon their scheme to turn a local comprehensive into a Church of England school. A previous decision to lease Lode Heath School to the Church was reversed following strong protests from parents and pupils.

Hundreds of protesters lobbied Council members when they arrived for a meeting to discuss the plan. They packed the public gallery and proceedings were relayed to a meeting in the adjoining room. Cheers and applause greeted rejection of the Education Committee's recommendation that Lode Heath should be leased as an Anglican secondary school.

The plan had been fiercely opposed by the minority Labour group on the Council. Councillor Jim Ryan (Labour) said the Council was forced to drop the plan because of opposition by parents, and the forthcoming local elections.

Councillor Geoffrey Wright (Conservative) said the Council would consider the possibility of siting a Church of England school in the north of the borough. But Councillor Nicholas Stephens (Labour) said it was not wanted, and any moves for an Anglican school should be rejected.

Holy Mother Church can no longer trust the faithful even in Dublin. The Evening Herald newspaper has reported that "fifteen churches have been closed in Dublin City last year because of swindling (sic) congregations".

Irish Secularists Resist Discrimination

In a submission to the Republic's Department of Education, the Irish Campaign to Separate Church and State contends that the integration of religious education with the rest of the primary curriculum is a violation of the Department's own rules for National Schools. It points out that although the National Schools are owned and controlled by the churches, the State is the major paymaster and schools must operate in accordance with rules laid down by the Department.

All children in the Republic have a constitutional right to a free primary education in a church-controlled National School. The State pays all teachers' salaries, most of the maintenance and capital costs involved in school extensions and the construction of new schools.

The Campaign's main complaint is that it is not possible for non-orthodox Christian or non-Christian parents to send their children to a local free National School with a management board that reflects their

religious beliefs, or lack of them.

"The sole exceptions are the single Jewish National School in Dublin, for Jewish parents lucky enough to live close enough to it, and the handful of multi-denominational National Schools in major urban areas".

The CSCS argues that the integration of religion into the teaching programme has encouraged discriminatory employment practices. It asserts that Boards of Management have refused to employ excellently qualified teachers who are not committed to a policy of religious indoctrination.

"Boards of Management of church-controlled National Schools are empowered to direct teachers to teach Religious Instruction, and can refuse to appoint teachers unwilling to comply with this requirement.

"The Campaign to Separate Church and State hopes that the grievous violation of parents', children's and teachers' rights will be rectified".

Freethinker Fund

This month *The Freethinker* celebrates another birthday — its 107th. Looking back to that first issue of May 1881, we find many examples of religious intolerance and gullibility not all that different from those of the present day.

"There's nothing like faith", *The Freethinker* comments, reporting that a Dr Hammond has been relating in *International Review* how he gave water from Lourdes to a pious patient, saying it was something else. Her symptoms were at once aggravated, but when he used common water, telling her it was from the miraculous spring, she at once improved.

From abroad there is a report that the Chicago Sabbath Association started a campaign for the strict enforcement of Sunday observance laws. Its campaign leaflet is quoted: "The complaint is not so much that people work on Sunday, but that they play. It is against sinful recreation that we are moving". *The Freethinker* adds that religious bigots are always incensed at seeing the profane enjoy themselves.

Lord Cairns, described as "a pious Christian and a riotous Jingo", spoke at a ceremony to inaugurate the headquarters of the Young Men's Christian Association. He delivered an address to the assembled company on the importance of "individual knowledge of Christ as their personal saviour". The same evening he made a sabre-rattling speech in the House of Lords, in which he blushed for the honour of England because the Government had concluded an honourable peace with the Boers instead of killing the lot of them. *The Freethinker* could not refrain

from mentioning the biblical injunction that everybody without a sword should sell his clothes and buy one.

Since 1881, hundreds of journals have been launched, only to perish or amalgamate. *The Freethinker* keeps going, thanks largely to its voluntary contributors and loyal readership. Bridging the gap between income and expenditure is a problem that is not likely to go away, but donations to the Fund and an increased circulation will ensure the paper's continuation.

The latest list of contributors and the total amount donated are smaller than usual. Our thanks go to them and all who help the paper in any way.

F. V. Ellmore and R. S. Payne, £1 each; Anonymous, H. L. Clements, A. E. B. George, L. Georgiades, E. Hillman and G. N. Huddart, £2 each; R. Devismes, £2.40; A. P. Allen, J. B. Coward and L. J. Johnson-Laird, £3 each; E. C. Hughes, £3.20; A. J. Martin, £4; P. A. Forrest, £4.40; T. Cornish, W. D. Eaton, B. Everest, S. R. Farrelly, S. P. Harvey, R. Huxtable, B. N. Kirby, H. Madoc-Jones and G. T. Reece, £5 each; S. M. Jaiswal, M. D. Powell and R. G. A. Stubbs, £10 each; S. Dahlby, £20; J. Kaminkow, \$28.

Total for March: £132 and \$28.

During Evensong at St Michael's Church, Gidea Park, Essex, worshippers were singing "A Light to Lighten the Gentiles" when all the lights went out. With the aid of a torch and a candle they got as far as "Lighten Our Darkness, O Lord" when a church warden announced that the lights could not be restored until next day.

Noah's Ark Founders on the Facts STEPHEN MORETON

People are sometimes surprised to learn that there are still individuals who sincerely believe the earth to be flat and to lie at the centre of the universe. Genuine flat-earthers really do exist and are based in California. Also based in America's most crank-ridden State are the devotees and promoters of a far more popular but equally ludicrous set of beliefs — the self-styled "scientific creationists".

According to organisations such as the San Diego-based "Institute for Creation Research", the earth is only six thousand years old, fossils prove nothing, and the Genesis account of creation is the literal truth. Being fundamentalists they are compelled to accept every story in the Bible as historical truth; thus Jonah really did get swallowed by a whale, the sun really did stop for a day, and the first woman really was formed from Adam's rib. In their attempts to prove tales which ought to be taken with a pillar of salt, the creationists resort to gross distortions of fact, ignore mountains of contrary evidence, and use the most absurd fallacies and sophisms. Here I shall examine in detail one of their favourite "theories" — Noah's Flood — which is also one of the easiest to disprove.

As historians and archaeologists have long known the ancient Sumerians living in the Tigris-Euphrates valley were subject occasionally to disastrous floods, one particularly severe flood giving rise to the flood story in the "Epic of Gilgamesh" and, after centuries of exaggeration, the story in Genesis. The creationists do not want to know. They believe that the flood took place in 2348 BC, and the fact that Egyptian history carried on through that period is of no consequence — the Egyptologists have got it wrong.

The creationists tell us that prior to the flood the planet was surrounded by a huge water-vapour canopy which maintained a tropical climate over all the earth. In reality such a canopy would require conditions like those on Venus to maintain it and the humidity would have been suffocating. One is also left wondering how all the organisms adapted to extreme cold or dryness survived or even why they were so adapted. Imagine polar bears, cacti and penguins living together in the conditions of a sauna!

A divine meteorite disrupted this impossible canopy and caused massive precipitation. Fortunately, the earth's topography was not the same then. There were no very high mountains so the amount of water needed was not too great. The mountains were thrust up later as the ocean basins opened up to allow the water to drain away afterwards. The creationists ought to learn about plate tectonics.

The "evidence" for all this consists of a few fossil graveyards where whole communities of living things have been wiped out suddenly, and the fact that

flood tales are common around the world. It does not occur to them that most ancient civilisations lived in fertile but flood-prone river valleys — hence the preponderance of flood myths.

Naturally the geological record contains no record of any world-wide flood. The creationists' answer is that the geological record is itself the record of the flood! All the rocks from Cambrian times onwards and all the fossils within them were laid down during and by Noah's Flood. This "flood geology" is supposed to explain the ordering of fossils in the strata. Organisms dwelling on the sea-floor were the first to be buried and so appear at the bottom of the record. Fish are next, then slow-moving land animals, then more mobile ones, and finally the birds, as they can fly and so evade the rising waters the longest. Regrettably for the creationists, the fossil record is hopelessly at variance with this. Whales occur above equal-sized marine reptiles, corals should only be present in the lower levels whereas they occur continuously from the Ordovician to the present day, plants, being rooted to the spot, should all occur together, yet giant tree-ferns and mosses clearly precede flowering plants, and so on.

It is not just the order of fossils that contradicts Flood geology. The Permian rock-salt beds of Cheshire formed by evaporation of sea-water, the Carboniferous Fossil Grove in Glasgow with its still upright tree-stumps, or the giant fossil coral reefs over a mile across in the Silurian limestones of northern Indiana all occur in the middle of the sequence of rocks that creationists tell us were laid down during and by Noah's flood. The mind boggles at how seas can evaporate, trees grow and huge coral reefs form during a planetary flood.

The creationists are fond of telling us how the Ark would have been big enough to take on board all the animals and they reckon it was about the size of *HMS Invincible*. However, they tend to underestimate just how much living matter had to go aboard. An article in *Nature* (11 December 1986) put the total number of species at between one and a half and thirty million, probably over ten million. One wonders how a family of eight can, for about a year, look after a floating menagerie of several million sea-sick animals including dinosaurs!

It is not just land animals that would have had to go on board. The mixing of salt and fresh water together with the vast amounts of sediment would have made the oceans intolerable for most aquatic organisms. Presumably Noah somehow managed to cram on board the ninety or so species of Cetaceans, though I am not sure how the various

pairs of whales were supposed to survive off a single pair of krill or how the krill managed. Plants, too, pose problems. A large supply of fresh plant material would be required for food. Where it was all kept is not clear. Seeds (in hermetically sealed containers to prevent premature germination or decay due to the damp) of every species would be needed, as plants and their seeds would perish under miles of water just as surely as any animal. Those animals requiring specialised food would have a problem. The single pair of ants would not have lasted the pair of ant-eaters long, and pandas will eat nothing but fresh bamboo.

It doesn't end there. How did diseases survive the flood? Did Noah and his family all carry smallpox, diphtheria, malaria, polio, syphilis and all the other diseases of mankind? If so then why did they not die and if not then how did the diseases survive? Were the bacteria and viruses kept in little phials in the fridge perhaps?

Thousands, possibly millions, of creatures are utterly dependent upon the Amazon rain forest for their survival. As any ecologist knows, such jungles take millenia to grow or to recover from damage. What did all those poor creatures do while waiting thousands of years for their habitats and food supplies to regenerate?

Finally, I would like to finish with just one more little fact for the creationists to ponder. In some parts of the world where lakes form around the foot of glaciers one gets a seasonal variation in the sediments deposited in the lake. The sediment deposited in the summer is coarse, being washed in by the meltwater and is rich in organic matter from the stagnant, algae-rich water of the lake. In winter the sediment is the very fine clay left in suspension from the summer and is poor in organic remains. The result is an alternation of layers, each pair of layers representing one year's deposition, and they can be counted back just like the rings of a tree. These sediments, called varves, can contain up to twelve thousand pairs of summer/winter layers and, because they contain carbon, they can also be dated by the carbon-14 method which correlates with them as far back as twelve thousand years.

Do those varves show any sign of a break at around 2348 BC? Not at all. The sequence is completely unbroken. These simple muds, on their own, are better evidence against the biblical Flood than all the creationists' half-geology, semi-meteorology and pseudoscience can ever counter.

Archbishop Methodios, who has been removed as leader of Britain's Greek Orthodox Church, has denied suggestions that he was plotting to depose the Ecumenical Patriarch. Other reports that he had been sacked after a disagreement with the Archbishop of Canterbury have also been denied.

Each month, like a familiar and welcome friend, *The Freethinker* drops around for a chat on the follies and foibles of the Christian world. And it never disappoints nor lacks material provided by the fanatical, bigotted or even well-meaning within the religious community.

The front page during 1987 showed especial concern for issues of sexual morality — artificial insemination by donor (AID) in February; sex education (AIDS) in March; abortion in May; and embryo research in September. All are important issues, and the discussion on AIDS in particular was picked up in subsequent issues. Whilst arguing for compassion for sufferers and sex education for prevention, it was disappointing to find so little debate about the lifestyles by which the disease is communicated. In this respect the current morality of *The Freethinker* is that which — whether dubbed “naughty nineties” or “swinging sixties” — appears to assume that permissiveness is a good in itself. Issues such as drug addiction, casual sexual relations and unstable family relationships are too important to be left to the pronouncements of cranks and those with particular religious axes to grind.

Censorship was another major issue of the year in which Peter Wright continued to prove the limits of freedom in modern Britain, and the need to preserve the editorial liberties of the broadcasting authorities was the leading story in October, supporting the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts. The year also saw the death of Sir Hugh Greene, the BBC Director General who did most to open up ‘Auntie’ in the 1960s, and he received a generous *Freethinker* obituary in March.

Religious education, though, provided — as so often in the past — the running story of the year. It began in January with a defence of the National Secular Society's annual report daring the charge of racism in attacking Muslim schools. National attention was then drawn to the NSS with its attack on the divisiveness of the attempt of the girls' primary section of the ultra-orthodox Jewish school at Stamford Hill to gain voluntary-aided status. Nothing daunted, the Society's president was also willing to risk a further charge of racism by drawing attention to the “inverted racism” of Voluntary Action Lewisham. The whole question of “positive discrimination” — favoured by such experienced and committed liberals as Lord Scarman — is one which needs careful and reasoned debate. Minorities — including religious minorities — need to be safeguarded, but the practical limits of toleration likewise need exploration and definition. Majorities also

The Bishops: an

have their rights. Which brings me to the general election, mercifully ignored by *The Freethinker* except for a little editorial gloating over the defeat of Peter Bruinvels at Leicester East, and one article by Mary Hayward on free speech which repeated a theme that has before now heaped coals of fire upon the editor's head, criticizing "the people who call themselves feminists".

Passing to safer ground, 1987 was a great year for anniversaries. Thomas Paine (born 1737) topped the bill, though the attempt by Tony Benn, in a lecture partly printed in the April issue, to enlist Paine in the campaign for Bennite socialism was sadly wide of the mark and said more about Tony than Thomas. Also celebrated during the year were Edward Gibbon (born 1737), Algernon Swinburne (born 1837), and Rupert Brooke (born 1887)—not to mention the 150th anniversary of the accession of Queen Victoria. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate for *The Freethinker* to quote what G. W. Foote said to J. M. Wheeler as they watched the Jubilee procession in 1887: "Here is something which threatens to swamp us all." Fortunately, it has not done so yet, and so long as *The Freethinker* survives we may rest assured that at least one organ of the media will remain free from the cant and hypocrisy of the popular press. Despite the report in February that the fig leaves of prudery were to be removed from Masaccio's "The expulsion of Adam and Eve" fresco in Florence, followed in August by a reference to "Private Members' bills on obscenity", page three of *The Freethinker* remains as pure as Clare Short's intentions in her attempts to censor the sexist press. But, tell me, what grounds has the editor for believing Julie Burchill of the *Mail on Sunday* in her quoted outburst that "half the tarts in London are convent-educated" (page three, October)? Has she—or he—asked them *all*?

THE FREETHINKER

Volume 107 1987

Bound in dark blue hard covers
with title and date.

Price £7.95
plus 90p postage

G. W. Foote & Co,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

The Magistrates' Association has called for an end to oath taking in court. They consider it to be an outmoded ritual with little or no meaning. A secular promise would carry as much weight. But it is unlikely that the Lord Chancellor will agree to such requests so long as the Archbishop of Canterbury is opposed to abolition.

The Crockford's affair, the Bishop of Durham's outspoken unorthodoxy, internal pressure groups and criticism from the Right of the political spectrum—these are some of the problems that currently beset the Church of England.

It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry. Some of us thought that the Royal Family was the best "soap opera" ever invented, a source of continual interest and amusement. Most of the characters are predictable, but with enough of the original and unexpected to keep attention alive. Now, however, the good old Church of England is moving up the charts, and is rapidly becoming a serious contender for the title, "top of the pops". Fortunately, too, as always in the best comedy, beneath the surface there are issues of great importance, and it is these that linger in the mind when the giggling dies away.

Those who write the script for the continuing Church of England show have certainly excelled themselves in recent weeks. Arguments about the ordination of women or the Church's attitude towards homosexuals are clearly going to run and run.

A major innovation in the serial was the episode of the anonymous attack on the Archbishop of Canterbury and his style of leadership. This attack was made in the unsigned preface to the latest edition of Crockford's *Clerical Directory*, and what started as comedy was given a most distressing twist when the writer of the article committed suicide, chiefly as a consequence of the furore that his contribution had caused. The general tenor of the preface was to the effect that the Archbishop had failed to give a firm lead, and that due to his guidance, or lack of guidance, the Church of England had become a "progressive body"—hard though that is to accept—and had shown at least a tendency in most matters to be swayed and influenced by new trends rather than clinging to established tradition.

At this point it may be helpful to attempt to consider what exactly the Archbishop's critics have in mind. The word "exactly" is a difficult one to use in this context. The preface to Crockford's is long and not the easiest to read by anyone who is not fairly well versed in this kind of inter-mural ecclesiastical controversy. Moreover, it does not seem to be remarkable for its clarity. It is hard to find specific passages in which the reader is told in clear terms precisely what the Archbishop or the Church he leads has failed to do. It is possible, however, to take matters a little further by referring to the old gibe that the Church of England is "the Tory Party at prayer". In recent times, some have reworded this to say that the Church has become "the SDP at

Everyday Story of Ecclesiastical Folk

T. F. EVANS

prayer". With the splits in the SDP which have made even the Labour Party look like a solid monolith of total brotherly uniformity, it is hard to divine the correct application of this phrase, but the very fact of it having been used may support those critics of the Church who contend that it has moved dangerously from "Right" to "Left" in the political sense.

The trouble is, of course, that such a view depends on a firm (if not always spoken) conviction that the Church of England, probably because it is the Church "of England", by law established, must be on the side of tradition rather than innovation, of accepted doctrine and practice rather than of change. It is easy to understand why those who take that view of the position and function of the Church would be dismayed and even angered by the thought that it had moved away from its "moral" duty of supporting a conservative view of life and society in general, adopting a stance nearer to that of those who are inclined to question the existing order. This amounted to questioning the policies of the great single force in the community that is dedicated to preserving the existing order — the Conservative Party which, since 1979, has formed the Government.

The situation is still cloudy. For some years (certainly since 1945) there has been a struggle in British politics between those who sought to make changes in the existing order (the Left), and those who have resisted change or, at least, required it, if irresistible, to take place at as slow a rate as possible (the Right). Since 1979 the position has changed. The Conservatives, declaring themselves the party of radical change (an odd stance for them to adopt) have embarked on a drastic and, in their terms, largely successful programme of change, reversing the reforms that have taken place under Governments of both colours since 1945. Conservative "radicalism" is not the radicalism of the greater part of two centuries, but a determination to destroy what has come to be known as the "consensus" of the post-war years. Those who oppose them are derided as "reactionaries", the term applied to Conservatives themselves for as long as anyone can remember. This is all very confusing. It may be simpler to translate the analysis, however roughly, into religious terms.

An excellent example of the way in which politics and religion became intertwined in current controversies was the publication in 1985 of *Faith in the City*, the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, a weighty document bearing the sub-title "A Call for Action by Church and Nation". The concluding passage stated that "the present acute situation of our nation's Urban Priority Areas demands an urgent response from the Church and from Government".

It declared:

The Church cannot supplant the market or the state. It can, as we recommend, mobilize its own resources in a way that accords high priority to the poor. It must by its example and its exertions proclaim the ethic of altruism against egotism, of community against self-seeking, and of charity against greed.

When the report appeared there was, understandably, some doubt about what was thought to be the general "leftist" tendency of its conclusions and recommendations. It was thought that the Commission showed too great support for "interventionist" policies, whereas the Government of the day was committed, in general theory at least, to the view that it was no part of its duty to interfere in the operation of economic forces or, as it has been put recently, "to buck the market". (Nobody ever said, in clear terms, that God could be relied upon to look after these, as all other matters, but this may have been the general idea.) Critics insisted that the Church of England was moving far beyond its proper role and taking too great an interest in politics. The Church, they argued, should be concerned primarily, probably exclusively, with spiritual or strictly religious matters. The Government was concerned with politics. The two should not trespass on each other's territory.

At this point in the story, but chronologically two years later, there entered the Bishop of Durham, the Rt Rev David Jenkins, who gave it a new twist. He had figured in this particular saga before, although his most striking contributions in the past have been in the field of religious belief, having expressed doubts about the factual truth of the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. It is almost incredible that these views should arouse surprise as we approach the 21st century, whether uttered from under a mitre or not. But as in 1862, when Bishop J. W. Colenso of Natal attempted to disprove the literal accuracy of the Pentateuch, so it was over a century later.

The Bishop of Durham was severely criticised by orthodox Anglicans and told, in so many words, that if he did not accept the truth of what to many people in the Church were thought of as, at best, flights of poetry, and at worse, grossest superstition, he was not fit to be a member of that Church, let alone hold high office.

Just to show how firmly the Highest Authority felt that the Bishop should stick to his fundamental beliefs and not allow doubt to enter his head, York Minster was struck with lightning soon after. This was always a puzzle to some. If the Almighty knew

what he was doing, he must have aimed at Durham Cathedral. Hitting York says little for his accuracy with the disciplinary thunderbolts.

Dr Jenkins was deterred neither by the wrath of the Immortal nor the fulminations of mortals. In a broadcast on Easter Sunday this year he made a serious attack on the social policies of the Government. Finding what he thought to be a deplorable discrepancy between a Budget giving massive increases in income to the very rich, and a revision of Social Security regulations that, in effect, took income away from some of the very poor, the Bishop declared that, in his understanding, "the policy must be wrong". And if members of the Government refused to face the fact, "then they're so clearly wrong that the only word to use is 'wicked'."

It seems, from the somewhat roundabout way in which he made the criticism, that the Bishop was unwilling to be quite as brutal in his condemnation as perhaps he really wanted to be. If this was so, he need not have worried. The press did this part of his work for him. Even a responsible paper like the *Sunday Telegraph* headlined its front page: "PM is Wicked, says Bishop of Durham". To apply to this headline the strict interpretation with which newspapers are always prepared to defend themselves, or which a Government might adopt if it wished to wriggle out of a difficulty, it could be argued in the Bishop's defence that he did not go quite as far as that. Nevertheless he showed no inclination to soften his remarks. He was quite prepared to be understood as one who felt that the Christian religion laid certain duties on believers, and that the Government, dedicated it was thought, to the preservation of Christian ideals of conduct as well as belief, had singularly failed to carry out those duties.

Of course there was no shortage of defenders for the Government. Mrs Edwina Currie, a junior Minister, was quick to point out that on Easter Day, of all days, church leaders had a duty "to speak of the love of God". The Bishop might reply that if the love of God had any meaning, the way in which it could be translated into human life would be by the exercise of a greater charity, one to another, than the Government was apparently showing.

As if Mrs Currie's criticism was not enough to make the Bishop quake in his robes, a shaft from another quarter might have been expected to shiver his apostolic crook into a dozen pieces. This came from a renowned and doughty defender of all that is most worthy and fragrant in English and indeed Scottish life, Mr Nicholas Fairbairn, MP. He declared, with withering irony, that he presumed the Bishop of Durham had already returned to the Chancellor of the Exchequer all the Income Tax rebates that he had been granted in the recent Budget. It is not the job of *Freethinker* contributors to fight the Bishop of Durham's battles for him, but a reply

to Mr Fairbairn's attack might be that the bishops would be ready to make their own financial arrangements public property if the same were done by wealthy and influential people in the City of London who support the present administration. We might see how seriously such a text is taken — admittedly a highly inconvenient one—as that which tells the rich to sell all they have and give it to the poor.

Thoughts not very different from these were in the mind of Andrew Phillips when he gave the 1988 Hibbert Lecture. The Hibbert Trust was set up by the will of Robert Hibbert, a 19th-century Unitarian, business man and philanthropist. He wished "to promote the spread of Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form", and did not want private judgement in religious matters to be restricted. Mr Phillips, a solicitor who has worked in the City of London for over twenty years, entitled his lecture "The Love of Money". Although it was broadcast by the BBC, with an abstract published in *The Listener*, it has not received wide publicity. This is a pity.

Mr Phillips concentrated on the conflict between the Christian ethic in the Gospels and the standards of conduct that operate in the City. With a number of delicious quotations, he shows that business people have to be sure that their Christian values do not "infect"—the word used by a leading banker—the decisions they make in the way of business. One quotation is from an address by Ivan Boesky, a man of great position in Wall Street before matters went wrong. He told an audience of American business students: "Greed is all right . . . You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself".

Coincidentally, the same gospel has recently been enunciated by someone nearer home and perhaps of greater respectability than Mr Boesky. This is Peregrine Worsthorne, editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, already referred to. His paper is a firm upholder of traditional values, and it is odd to read Mr Worsthorne's commendations of greed as playing a constructive part in the creation of a good society. At the same time he commends a sense of superiority as a means of countering declining standards. To this, he gives the term "pride". Skilled theologians among the readership of this journal may be able to chart the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins, but some may feel uneasy at the way in which by clever juggling with words, far more skilful than the arguments of the bishops, Mr Worsthorne is able to transform our preconceived notions. However, we need not worry too much about the deadly sin. Mr Worsthorne has disposed of two; there are only five to go and he should have little difficulty in persuading us not to concern ourselves with these unimportant questions, but to get on with the truly religious duty of making as much money as we can.

Eleanor Boon and the Ladies' Secular Association

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

Victorian freethought was overwhelmingly a male movement. There were some prominent women secularists — Annie Besant and Harriet Law spring to mind. But one of the lesser lights of the movement, Eleanor Boon, was so alarmed by the absence of women, and so determined to promote women's interests, that she set up her own Ladies' Secular Association.

In August 1868 Charles Bradlaugh's weekly paper, the *National Reformer*, published a letter which breached most contemporary notions of decency. It was from a lady, though she chose to identify herself simply as "M.B.", and was on the subject of marriage and celibacy. The letter took as its premise that there were too many people for too few jobs. So how could poverty and over-population be tackled? Not, she insisted, by delaying marriage. "What does Celibacy mean?", she wrote. "It means this, prostitution or insanity".

She advocated instead the promotion of birth control. She advised her readers to educate their children "as they grow up to man and womanhood to understand the importance of limiting the number of their families, that they may have more time to devote to their political and social rights".

This was a bold statement. Bradlaugh and a few others were already known as advocates of family limitation, or "Malthusianism" as it was still known after the curate who had dogmatically asserted that unrestrained population growth would outstrip the means of subsistence. The Owenites and other early radicals had espoused the birth control issue, though not Malthus's social conservatism, but it was only with the legal *cause célèbre* of 1877, when Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were prosecuted for republishing the Knowlton pamphlet on birth control, that the taboos about public discussion of the subject began to weaken.

M. B.'s letter to the *National Reformer* seems to have gained a favourable response. The following week another correspondent, again signing only by initials, suggested the formation of a Woman's Malthusian League — "the initial step *must* come from women", she wrote. M. B. responded to the challenge. She intended forming a Ladies' Secular Committee. "Ladies need not think, because I advocate Malthusian principles", she assured the fainter hearts, "that I am about to form a committee especially to advocate those views. That will be one duty, but not all. We want more unity among our party. The sympathies as well as the intellect want awakening".

She believed it was women who kept the Christian

congregations together, and she particularly envied the churches their visiting societies. M. B. exhorted the readers of the *National Reformer*: "Don't let us be behind our orthodox sisters in this work" —

no real reform in social or religious matters can ever take place till women first take the practical step. Men may stand on platforms for ever and preach the theory, but unless women teach as well, and carry out the practice, we shall never make any progress. Why does Freethought creep along so slowly, for all must admit its outward progress is slow? It is because women have not taken it up. When I attend any of our lectures there is nothing I regret so much as the small number of women in our midst. Why is it? Women attend churches and chapels, and take their children too. Surely the majority of our Freethought friends are not bachelors. Yet I seldom see their wives.

Who was this forthright correspondent? The most likely candidate is Eleanor Boon ("M. B." standing for Mrs Boon or Mrs Martin Boon)—certainly she was the one who took on the organising work for a ladies' secular group. Eleanor Boon was about thirty and of modest means. The daughter of a gunmaker, she'd married a couple of years earlier to Martin Boon, an ironmonger, and they lived in Great Percy Street in Clerkenwell.

If Eleanor Boon was indeed the author of the letters to the *National Reformer*, she displayed a spirited independence of her husband. Martin Boon was making a name for himself as an advocate of "home colonisation" or the settlement of the unemployed as smallholders on uncultivated land, a scheme which M. B. described as "like throwing a pennyworth of meat to a starving dog"; Martin Boon was resolutely opposed to emigration panaceas, but M. B. said this was "undoubtedly . . . the principal means that can be carried out at the present time"; Martin Boon came to be a fierce critic of birth control, while M. B. was, of course, its champion.

Eleanor Boon did not confine herself to letter writing. She was an able lecturer — she told the Paddington Secular Society it was "her decided opinion that women by nature were quite equal with men in mental power, but it was the false training and conventionalities of society that had rendered them seemingly inferior to the male sex"; at the Hall of Science, she made "a neat and well constructed speech . . . declaring herself an adherent to the prudential check as a guard against large families and pauperism"; and at Paddington again, in a lecture "at once erudite and well and ably delivered", she addressed the subject "Is the Religious Sentiment Inherent or Created?"

It was Eleanor Boon who convened a meeting at

the Hall of Science in October 1868 to establish a Ladies' Secular Club. She became the secretary of this new organisation which met at 256 High Holborn at the offices of the National Sunday League, in the building which also served as Edward True-love's radical and freethought bookshop. She gathered round her as fellow sponsors of the venture the renowned secularist, Harriet Law; Emily Faithfull, later to be a pioneer of women's trade unionism; and Mrs Bradlaugh, presumably Charles Bradlaugh's wife, Susan, already an incipient alcoholic.

At the first meeting of what became known as the Ladies' Secular Association, Mrs Boon explained that the objects were "to secure the association of those ladies . . . acknowledging the right of free inquiries in all matters connected with politics, sociology, or theology; also to form a committee to watch Parliamentary and social action affecting women". The feeling of the meeting, however, was that the new organisation should not be exclusively secularist but "open to members of all theological opinions". A 24-member council was established to promote the Association.

Eleanor Boon's initiative and enthusiasm, and her public pronouncements on Malthusianism, brought her a certain prominence. In January 1869, the executive of the National Secular Society invited her to become a vice-president. She wrote back declining: "At present, you know, I am very earnestly engaged in the Paddington Secular Society; I hope also to have plenty of work in connection with the Ladies' Secular Association, and above all, those duties which pertain to the comfort and economy of my own home, demand a large portion of my time".

How much time the new Association took up is far from clear. It abruptly disappeared from the pages of the *National Reformer*. Perhaps the decision not to be exclusively secular made the enterprise of less interest to freethinkers. It seems likely that the Association did not last long. But it was not stillborn. Towards the end of February

1869, a local paper carried a notice of "The Ladies' United and Progressive Association", which met fortnightly at 256 High Holborn "to enable ladies of liberal views to co-operate in promoting the mutual improvement of women".

Eleanor Boon too vanishes from the columns of the *National Reformer* early in 1869. While her husband became known as one of the most earnest of London's ultra-radicals, she seems to have retired to the domestic sphere. By the time the Boons emigrated to South Africa in 1874, Eleanor was the mother of two sons. The family returned to London in the mid-1880s, but didn't settle and took a passage back to South Africa after about a year. Eleanor was widowed in 1888 when Martin committed suicide by jumping down a mine shaft near Johannesburg. Nothing is known of her later life.

Her spell in the public eye was brief, but Eleanor Boon raised issues about women's involvement in radical and freethought movements, and about women's control of their own fertility, which again came to the fore a century later. Eleanor Boon cannot comfortably be described as an early feminist. In one of her letters, "M.B." argued for "only a limited extension of the franchise to women at the present time", as most were so narrow in outlook. Few feminists today would endorse the tone of her avowal that:

if women took more interest in political and social matters, and discussed them with their husbands after the business of the day, so far from detracting from the charm of the domestic hearth, it would offer a greater inducement for men to remain at home instead of going to the tavern or public house to get an exchange of thoughts and ideas, which in the present day they too frequently fail to get in the society of their wives.

But her remarkable, if ephemeral, contribution to the freethought movement illustrates the extent to which it served as the midwife of other reform movements — on birth control, on women's rights, and a host of other issues later adopted by mainstream radicalism.

An Open Letter to the Editor of *The Independent*

Your leading article (2 April) was one of the most confused and blatant bits of Christian propaganda I have seen in your paper. It was frankly unworthy of your generally estimable standards.

A detailed analysis of its many fallacies and non-sequiturs would occupy several pages of close print, so I must content myself with trying to expose what seem to me its grossest errors. You are, of course, entitled to suggest that anyone who is capable of believing "the largest and strangest thing of all — that God so loved the world that he sent his only-

begotten Son to save it" — should have no difficulty believing lesser miracles such as the resurrection of Christ. But on what grounds are "we . . . asked to believe" any of these things? Only on the tenuous authority of the Gospels, the Church, or the latest evangelical mountebank! If you were better versed in biblical criticism, you could hardly claim that "the resurrection narratives in the Gospels . . . read as if told by eyewitnesses". No reputable scholar holds any such thing.

But if the Gospel narratives really are, as you

LETTERS

THE BRAIN'S FUNCTION

I am disappointed to see (Letters, April) that John L. Broom does not accept Barbara Smoker's sensible explanation of "out of body" experiences (OBES).

It is becoming increasingly clear that, contrary to what Mr Broom believes, unconscious people may sometimes retain some degree of awareness of their surroundings. While some faculties may be disabled it is perfectly possible that an individual may hear sounds and speech and then mentally construct images to match those sounds. The OBE seems to be some kind of hallucination in which something like that is happening. It may seem real to those who experience it, but there is no actual proof that a disembodied spirit really is floating around.

Those who believe that the mind can exist independently of the body had better consider the following facts, all of which point to the opposite conclusion.

Brain damage from physical injury, poisoning or disease causes loss of mental functions, memories and emotional and personality changes. If these were independent of the brain they should be unaffected. The effects are often predictable and specific to certain parts of the brain suggesting origins in those parts. For example, the damage to the hippocampal region does nothing to old memories but prevents acquisition of new ones.

Mental activity, emotional feelings, etc., correlate with electrical, chemical and physical activity and changes in the brain. Again these are specific to certain regions. Stimulation of those regions, e.g. by electrodes during surgery, stimulates memories, emotions, sensations, etc., characteristic of the areas being stimulated.

Animal experiments show that when they acquire new skills biochemical changes occur in specific brain regions which affect the electrical properties of the cells. In short, memories cause measurable changes in brain tissue — odd if they are not stored there.

Chemical substances can induce any emotion. What would be the point in taking drugs if the mind, because it was not a part of the brain, was unaffected?

There is indirect evidence that emotions are caused by chemical substances in the brain (and drugs mimic them). The chemical that causes the emotion fear has already been isolated and identified.

Some personality disorders, mental illnesses, etc. (e.g. manic depression) are inherited. A soul existing separately from the body should not be affected by genes.

Abilities are in direct proportion to brain development. Brain damage in infancy arrests or retards further development. Similarly, as the brain degenerates, faculties fail. As dementia progresses memories go and personality disintegrates. At the same time the brain shows readily observable physical damage, the extent of the damage being proportional to the extent of the dementia.

There is a correlation between a species' cognitive skills and its cranial complexity. Apes, whales and dogs are smarter than mice, rats and rabbits which are better than ticks, fleas and lice.

In human evolution brain size correlates with tool-making skills and social complexity.

When the left and right hemispheres of the brain are separated, two independent mental systems result. Each has separate percepts, memories, desires, etc. In short the "soul" has been split in two!

Visions, religious experiences, dramatic conversions

claim, "the hardest evidences for the truth of Christianity", then it is little wonder that Christianity now commands so little acceptance.

I agree with your rejection of the Calvinist catechism from which you quote, though on moral rather than logical grounds. It is indeed monstrously wicked in teaching that the vast majority of mankind is divinely predestined to eternal damnation. And yet it is fully in line with a number of sayings of Jesus and Paul recorded in the New Testament. All the more reason, surely, for rejecting the immoral teaching of Jesus and Paul along with its developed Calvinist form (cf Matthew 18.8; 25.41,46; Mark 9.43-48; Luke 8.23f Romans 5-8 passim).

Your most extraordinary assertion is: "For the most part, this is a country too sceptical of miracles". If this were true, it would be largely to the credit of a long line of rationalist philosophers including Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Bertrand Russell. But the fact that large numbers of people are still seduced by astrology, occultism and a thousand and one varieties of religious superstition suggests, on the contrary, that for the most part we are still too credulous by half.

I am most angered, however, by your gratuitous attack on secularism, and, by implication, humanism. And for you to suggest that it may be right to encourage milder forms of nonsense out of fear that, if they are swept away, more fanatical forms of nonsense may take their place, seems to me utterly cynical. It is, however, clear to those not in the thrall of any religion that there is indeed a pragmatic, but not a rational, way of distinguishing between religions. Thus many humanists have some regard for Quakers and Unitarians, not because their beliefs are less irrational than those of some other religions, but because, by being more tolerant, they do less harm.

To me, your understanding of "hope" seems very defective. Adherents of supernatural religions "hope" that mankind will be delivered from its ills by divine intervention, and that, in the last analysis, nothing we can do will affect our destiny. This sort of "hope" is something we can do better without, as it naturally leads to a servile passivity, and indifference to any concerted effort to ameliorate suffering and build, for its own sake, a more just and humane society. Secular humanists, on the other hand, believe that this is the only life any of us will have, and it is therefore our duty to do all in our power to improve the lot of our fellow human beings, here and now. It should come as no surprise that this life-stance has little appeal either to those who are content to better themselves at the expense of others, or to those quietists who, inspired by religious beliefs, think there is nothing better they can do than pray for a millenium in which the meek shall inherit the earth.

DANIEL O'HARA

and many of the effects and sensations associated with "after death" experiences are caused by disruptions in the limbic system and/or the temporal lobe. They are particularly common in epileptics and in those with tumours in the relevant brain region.

This list is by no means exhaustive. All the evidence points unequivocally to the conclusion that the mind, soul, spirit or whatever one cares to call it, is a product of the brain. Destruction of the brain means destruction of the soul. Any denial of this is just wishful thinking.

I am sorry Mr Broom, but when you die you die.

STEPHEN MORETON

GERMANY UNDER HITLER

John H. Charles (Letters, April) is correct in what he says concerning Hitler's coming to power in Germany. It was not the purpose of my brief letter (March) to detail that process, with its accompanying state of panic, intimidation and fraud; but rather to state that his regime was not in origin illegal in the sense of having been imposed by a putsch of the kind which he had attempted unsuccessfully in Munich in 1923, without regard to the forms imposed by the Constitution.

Since his regime was not in this sense illegal, no question arose of its recognition by foreign states, whose ambassadors continued to perform their normal duties. Nor, as far as I am aware, is the period of the Third Reich regarded in the present Federal Republic of Germany as a legislative void, with no laws remaining in force which were enacted during those years.

The Nazi Party did not, indeed, obtain an electoral majority at any time prior to the establishment of its dictatorship. But neither had any other party done so during the years of the Weimar Republic. All governments were coalitions, as was, at first, Hitler's also. And a phantom Reichstag continued to exist until the demise of the Third Reich in May 1945, although from 1933 it was composed solely of Hitler's supporters.

But my main point — not disputed by Mr Charles — was that Nazi credibility was always grounded on fear of Bolshevism.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

ANOTHER MYSTERY

Any difference of opinion regarding the legality of Hitler's rise to power (Letters, April) is rather pointless unless it can be shown that the German Constitution and legal system had any more legality than our own. The British "Constitution" defies definition; the *Manchester Guardian* once wrote: "Its unwritten mysteries and its practical resilience are the despair of theorists". And this "Constitution" is not accountable to our legal system except through an Attorney General who is appointed by itself! Anyone who puts faith in our "Constitution" and legal system might just as well believe in God.

E. F. CROSSWELL

UNWELCOME IMPORT

Barbara Smoker appeared on ITV's "Central Weekend" (8 April) and I hoped that for the first time on this programme the atheist message would come across to viewers. Sadly it did not. This is no criticism of Barbara Smoker who, if given the chance, which clearly she was not, would have put the view of a rational atheist that televangelism (the subject of the programme) was merely the competitive packaging of Christian superstition.

The debate ranged from the absurd claim that Christianity, whatever that amorphous blob is, has never

done any harm (!) to the usual bickering about which church or sect has the most direct line to God and thus has the exclusive right to impose "his will" on the rest of us. Whatever next? Televirgin births, tele-miracles.

The prospect of American televangelism reaching Britain was the most disturbing part of the debate. I suspect it is already on the way. First grab the money-bags, then the throats of television producers, programme planners and advertisers; God, Jesus and their earthly agents will have a real money-spinning telejamboree. What about a public floatation — Telecon?

In the few statements that Barbara Smoker was allowed to make, her message was clear — Christianity is superstition and a confidence trick.

ROBERT SINCLAIR

THE WOODCRAFT FOLK

I hope that none of your readers will be deceived by Robert Whittle's article on the Woodcraft Folk (March).

Although the organisation sounds innocuous, its real nature can easily be deduced from Robert Whittle's article by anyone with enough political nous to read between the lines. Many people believe that it exists to educate young people in certain political views supporting various protest movements throughout the world. The ultimate object can only be surmised.

Despite its Cooperative origins, which it stresses insistently, and the foolishness of the Cooperative movement in allowing it to continue to use its name, the Woodcraft Folk derives its funds today from more dubious sources. It was listed in *The Times* as one of those organisations that until recently received funds from Colonel Gaddafi; and it is a recipient of Redgrave money, with all the wacky militancy that implies.

The Woodcraft Folk is a registered charity. No doubt at its inception in 1925 it fulfilled all the requirements of the Charity Commissioners. Today it would appear to present yet another example of the urgent need for a review of charity status.

GLYN EMERY

TRAVEL HINT

At the National Secular Society dinner David Yallop is reported as saying: "When you go from England to Italy you put your watch back one hour". I feel I should warn any *Freethinker* readers who are tempted to follow this advice, that they will be two hours late for all their appointments in Vatican land!

JOHN L. BROOM

Once again religious fanatics in the Philippines, Asia's only Christian country, have "celebrated" Easter with mock crucifixions. Lucilia Reyes, aged 29, was one of seven who were nailed to crosses. After five-inch nails were hammered through her hands and feet she remained unconscious on the cross for thirty minutes. Alongside her a teenage girl underwent the same ordeal.

The Charity Commissioners have appointed auditors to help stamp out abuses. The announcement follows a highly critical report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee. The Commissioners agree that the risk of abuse is unacceptably high.

Church Numbers Drop

The Church of England has lost half a million members since Dr Robert Runcie became Archbishop of Canterbury.

Attendances at Easter services in Anglican churches are now half of what they were 25 years ago.

Dr Graham Leonard, Bishop of London, recently spoke of declining youth commitment to the Church. He said: "We must face the fact that something like ninety per cent of the child population is outside the sphere of the Church".

An Ealing Vicar, the Rev Michael Saward, says of the four hundred couples he has married, he knows of only three who have become Christians.

Sutton Exhibition

Sutton Humanist Group mounted an impressive exhibition on the theme, "Humanism for a Better and Happier World" at the town's public library for five days last month. It covered an area of 25 feet by 40 feet and was the result of over a year's work.

The four main sections were Moral and Religious Education, Differences between Religious and Humanist Beliefs, Individual Responsibilities and Rights, and The Power of Humanity. There was information about the local, national and international organisations, and quotations from writers including Thomas Paine and Carl Sagan.

There was a private view prior to the exhibition being opened to the public. Guests included the Mayor of Sutton who later made a speech in which he congratulated the Group on its presentation.

Throughout the week there were always at least two of a 23-member rota in attendance. Visitors left their names and addresses and have since received a circular from the Group. Several have already joined.

There was much praise for the illustrations, many of which were by Len Ainsbury.

In addition to the free literature, books and pamphlets to the value of £105 were sold, together with £34 worth of ties and brooches.

Sutton Humanists are prepared to loan the material (or any part of it) to other groups. A two-page synopsis is available, and a full typescript is being prepared. Further information is obtainable from the secretary, George Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey SM1 4PD, telephone 01-642 8796.

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EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 5 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Ted McFayden: Politics and the Press.

British Association for the Advancement of Science. The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, Friday, 9 September, 2 pm. Debate: The Religious Implications of the Theory of Evolution. Speakers: the Rt Rev Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, and Dr Beverly Halstead. Information obtainable from the BAAS, Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 1AB.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme for Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6UH, telephone 031-334 8372.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. 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 Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 7 June, 8 pm. R. J. Condon: The National Secular Society.

Humanist Holidays. Summer holidays at Shanklin, Isle of Wight, 3-17 September. Details obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 39175.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 May, 7.45 pm. Tony Milne: Is the Universe Intelligent?

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, 8 June, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Rob Steele: Mankind at the Crossroads — a Choice of Futures.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 16 May, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 044 128 3631.

Worthing Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Bob Thorpe, 19 Shirley Drive, Worthing, telephone 62846.

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 Coundon Road, Coventry, West Midlands, CV1 4AW.

Terrorism: Death Penalty no Deterrent

The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) has called on Parliament to reject the latest attempt to reintroduce capital punishment.

Commenting on the organisation's briefing paper entitled *Capital Punishment*, NACRO director Vivien Stern said that such a move would do nothing to reduce the murder rate. In fact it would be a damaging blow to the whole legal system.

She added: "There is no evidence that capital punishment is a unique deterrent to murder. On the contrary, world-wide research indicates that the death penalty would not reduce the murder rate, but would simply lead to a coarsening of attitudes to human life".

If the United Kingdom reintroduced capital punishment, it would become the only country in Western Europe where the death penalty is operational, with the sole exception of Turkey.

Since it was abolished in 1965, a series of cases in which murder convictions have later been quashed has increased society's awareness of the risk of mistaken convictions. NACRO declares: "Recent doubts about the convictions of those found guilty of the Birmingham and Guildford bombings have added even greater strength to this concern".

Referring to the suggestion that reintroduction of capital punishment would reduce the incidence of terrorism, the Association argues that in fact terrorists are even less likely to be deterred by capital punishment than other murderers.

"Divisive and Irresponsible"

economic sense, since at least 85 per cent of the capital cost and all of the running costs of voluntary-aided schools are paid for out of the public purse and this dual system of education is notoriously wasteful of resources.

For many years there has been division in the Labour Party about the role of church schools. A substantial proportion of members oppose them in principle, and will regard any proliferation of religious schools as a backward step. Labour-led local councils tend to favour mixed comprehensives, free from religious control. The Socialist Educational Association has already objected to the proposal of separate schools for ethnic minorities.

Muslim religious leaders have constantly demanded separate schools, but attempts to establish them in areas like Brent and Bradford have failed because they have not had sufficient financial backing. Private schools set up by groups of Muslim parents have been severely criticised by inspectors because of low teaching standards and inadequate facilities.

"It seems unlikely that those who carry explosives, have seen colleagues blown to death while carrying similar explosives, and who run the risk of death in their activities, would be deterred by the introduction of capital punishment.

"During the stages of committal, trial, appeal and the days before execution, terrorists would have a strong motive for taking hostages and threatening to kill them if the accused and convicted men and women were executed. . .

"The experience of other countries suggests that the execution of terrorists would be followed by reprisals.

"Since capital punishment would not apply to those under 18, the introduction of the death penalty for terrorist offences would reinforce the trend for terrorist organisations to recruit increasingly younger members".

For some years the majority of senior army and police officers in Ireland have been opposed to the reintroduction of capital punishment.

Free copies of the briefing paper on capital punishment are obtainable from NACRO, 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU, telephone 01-582 6500.

The Meanest Cuts

While religious pressure groups and their anti-abortionist supporters are making much noise about the need to defend foetuses from the moment of conception, most of them are noticeably silent about the plight of many real babies. In a letter to Health Minister Tony Newton, Harriet Harman, MP (Labour, Peckham), has pointed out that in every Regional Health Authority there has been a reduction in the number of cots in special care baby units.

"It is a bitter irony", she says, "that the number of special care cots should be cut at a time when medical advance means that so much more can now be done to save low birth-weight babies from disability or death".

A leading paediatrician, Professor Neil McIntosh of Edinburgh University, told the inaugural meeting of Action for the Newborn that every year around 14,000 babies needed intensive care to survive. But they were being put at risk in many parts of the country because of serious defects in the standard of care that cash-starved hospitals can provide.

Michael McIntosh said that in about ten per cent of cases where extra care was necessary for survival, doctors had to try at least six hospitals before finding a place. Babies are dying because specialist care is not immediately available.

