

The Freethinker

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RADIO AND TV BAN: GOVERNMENT'S NEW ATTACK ON MEDIA FREEDOM

Anti-censorship campaigners, journalists and others have expressed strong opposition to the Government's ban on broadcast interviews with representatives of eleven Northern Irish organisations. This latest development in the province's religious war is widely regarded as a propaganda coup for the forces it is supposed to curtail. It is also seen as yet another Government attack on independent journalists, particularly broadcasters.

Sarah Spencer, general secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties, was severely critical of the Home Secretary's ban.

She said: "This censorship will serve only to prevent the public understanding the motives which lie behind the violence and thereby hinder the search for political solution to the conflict".

Noting that there are a significant number of Sinn Fein councillors and one Member of Parliament, she added: "It is flying in the face of democracy to prevent the electorate hearing the views of those who have been democratically elected to represent them, however offensive many may find those views".

Mike Jempson, spokesman for the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, described the ban as "yet another attack on media freedom from a Government which has a record of attacking independent journalism. It sets a further and dangerous precedent.

"Who will be the next group of people the Government will seek to silence because it doesn't like their opinions?"

In a press statement, the CPBF said the ban will prevent journalists from reporting independently on the Irish situation.

"Its catch-all phrasing is imprecise and will provide a charter for the banning of a wide group of organisations.

"Section 31 of the Irish Broadcasting Act, which contains similar provisions, has not led to a solution of the situation in Ireland. It has meant that journalists have been gagged and sacked as a result of the imposition of censorship".

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, said that since we all deplore terrorism it may seem a perfectly justifiable move to deny media access to advocates of terrorism.

"But it is not as simple as that", she added.

"The ban will create anomalies. For one thing, the organisations concerned have other avenues of communication and will only use these to greater effect.

"The general experience of history is that censorship invariably does more harm than good.

"For that reason, the NSS has, throughout its long history, consistently opposed censorship of any kind, and we see no reason to make an exception in the present instance".

Mary Hayward, honorary secretary of the Campaign Against Censorship, described the Home Secretary's decision as absurd.

She added: "This Government has always insisted that the actions of paramilitary groups are so repellent to ordinary people that no statement can justify them. Therefore the ban is superfluous.

"To prosecute named organisations is not the behaviour of a democratic Government. Once the principle has been introduced, one wonders what will follow.

"This is another example of panic legislation, and it may well turn out to have effects that the Government didn't intend".

President Botha of South Africa praised Mrs Thatcher and quoted the British Government's example when he threatened his country's already heavily censored newspapers with even stricter regulations.

The Freethinker

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NEWS

CHURCH AND OPPOSITION

It is undeniable that the population of Europe contains a high proportion of nominal Christians. But according to Peter Brierly, editor of the latest *UK Christian Handbook*, "no other continent has seen so much secularism and agnosticism invade its Christian community".

The *Handbook* reveals that church membership in Britain has fallen by well over a million since the 1970s. Among the mainline churches, only the Baptists have, statistically speaking, held their own. Britain now has four thousand fewer churches and chapels than in 1970. There has been a significant drop in the numbers of ordained clergy; during the last two years the Church of England alone has lost five hundred priests through drop out and retirement. There are fewer UK missionaries serving abroad than twenty years ago.

Despite the colossal wealth — much of it acquired through plundering the public purse — privileges and wasted human endeavour, Christianity is steadily declining in importance to people's lives. Most are on nodding terms with the faith only through attendance of church weddings, funerals and midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

The *Handbook* editor, a former statistician with the Cabinet Office, believes that these developments result from "a general loss of intellectual confidence, a marginalisation of Christianity, and its perception as a private, middle-class hobby".

Although this falling away of adherence to Christianity is most gratifying, there are two main reasons why freethinkers have no cause for complacency. First, other religions are on the upturn. Britain has 900,000 Muslims and 200,000 Sikhs, while numbers of Satanists and fundamentalist sects are increasing.

Secondly, it is a matter for concern that the secularist-humanist movement is making little impact at this time, particularly when an onslaught against personal freedom and hard-won reforms is being conducted by religious indoctrinators, authoritarians and self-appointed censors. Unfortunately there is little effective opposition to these reactionaries from the movement which twenty years ago campaigned so vigorously for the reforms that are now under attack.

The job of tackling the New Rightists is being left largely to *ad hoc* organisations operating without adequate funds, premises or full-time staff. Despite many disadvantages, such groups are usually on the ball and have a more impressive record of solid achievement than some of the established, well-

AND NOTES

funded organisations. Is this because of members' dedication, and the main consideration when appointing a full-time worker is the candidate's commitment and track record?

The mere mention of militant opposition to even Moral Majority-style religion causes a genteel shudder in some quarters. There appears to be scant recognition of the fact that religious pressure groups which would have been dismissed as batty a decade ago, are now influencing Government policy. Such elements will not be deterred by glib slogans or wishy-washy concepts. Unless the secularist-humanist movement asserts itself, it will also become "a private, middle-class hobby". There is a suspicion that this is already the case.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Despite its name, the contents of *Joy and Light*, published three times a year by that esteemed body, the Lord's Day Observance Society, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as gladsome or enlightening. Readers' flagging spirits are bucked up from time to time with encouraging reports that "an indoor market in Whitby must not operate on Sunday" and that John Carlisle, MP, "has stated that Luton Council should prosecute video-hire shops that open illegally on Sunday". But for the most part, the message to defenders of "our Lord and his day" is as dreary as a Victorian Sunday in Bognor Regis.

Joy and Light publishes reports from LDOS labourers in the Lord's vineyard, and that from Nelson McCausland, Northern Ireland area secretary, in the Autumn issue, is sure to send shivers down Sabbatarian spines. Mr McCausland sorrowfully records that 47 young people took part in a Sunday cycle marathon from Belfast to Dublin. Worse still, they were representatives of the Young Men's Christian Association. He wrote to the YMCA national director protesting that participation in such an event "is a desecration of God's day, and it is particularly distressing that representatives of an avowedly Christian organisation should engage in such desecration".

Christian Aid's involvement in a Third World Race held in Belfast to raise money for four charities is also frowned on by the Sabbatarians. *Joy and Light* reports: "Local celebrities mingled with the jostling crowds, signing autographs and cracking jokes in a cacophony of noise and a blaze of colour. In blazing sunshine, a carnival atmosphere prevailed, with music supplied by the Martello Jazz Band". Churches which support the work of Christian Aid are urged

to protest against such depravity.

Significantly, this most blood-drenched region of the British Isles is also one of the most fervently Christian. The reaction of Sabbatarian watchdogs to people enjoying themselves is another example of the mean, pettifogging brand of fundamentalist Protestantism that pervades Ulster society.

However, the rising generation may not be so gullible and unquestioning of Christian "truths" as were their forebears. Dr John Greer, Reader in Religious Education at the University of Ulster, recently conducted a survey on the attitude of Northern Ireland's young people to Christian beliefs. A Catholic girl described weekly attendance at mass "as such a worldly concept that I cannot believe it to be necessary". A Protestant girl commented on the sacraments that she found it hard to accept "that stale bread does you good".

The boys were even less respectful. One Catholic boy retorted: "I don't like the sound of you. . . It's not your business what people think about religion". And a Protestant boy declared: "The existence of God, I believe, is total fantasy, and the idea of evolution is far more believable to me".

Yes, despite the harm inflicted by bomb, bullet and Bible, there are signs of hope for Northern Ireland.

A CHARITABLE THOUGHT

After a run of over two years, the Law Lords have rung down the curtain on the Whitehall farce starring (at enormous expense) Margaret Thatcher and (for a limited engagement) Sir Robert Armstrong. *Spy-catcher*, heavily subsidised by the British taxpayer, was a huge financial success for its backers, particularly lawyers and publishers.

It has also made author Peter Wright a very wealthy man. Now retired, he will not be unduly perturbed by their Lordships' ruling that his work no longer has copyright protection. If only Mr Wright had taken the trouble to found the Spiritual Order of Disgruntled Spycatchers (SODS for short) and register it as a religious charity, his tax-free royalties would have been safe.

Even so, Peter Wright is reportedly a millionaire. Who says censorship doesn't pay?

The Rev Andrew McIntoch, rector of St Mary's Church, Maldon, Essex, has pleaded guilty to driving a car while almost three times over the legal alcohol limit. He was fined £200 and banned from driving for eighteen months. The magistrates' chairman said the ban was much shorter than the maximum, as the rector would not be able to do his job effectively without a car.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

What will become of the Turin Shroud now that claims it is the burial cloth of Jesus have been debunked? In his recent *Church Times* "Roman Catholic Commentary" column, Michael Walsh suggested that it will be returned to decent obscurity, "placed in the cathedral treasury to be treated on a par with phials of the Virgin's milk or St Joseph's last breath".

Even in the last dozen years of the twentieth century the Church still possesses an incredible hoard of holy bits and pieces. These include one of the stones with which St Stephen was bashed, a feather from the wing of the Archangel Gabriel and three heads of St John the Baptist. Gullible and usually affluent pilgrims collect relics like schoolboys collect train numbers. They can take their choice; they certainly pay their money to gaze in awe and adoration at a wide variety of objects ranging from the grotesque to the gruesome.

The relics business went through a thin time after Vatican II. Even wonder-working (if mythical) saints

were pensioned off. But things started to look up when the traditionalist Pope John Paul II took over the old firm. Under his management there has been a record number of canonisations, pilgrimages are again a growth industry and the shrine circuit is flourishing as never before.

The veneration of relics has for centuries been a Roman Catholic obsession. But the campaign to "sell" the Turin Shroud has been markedly ecumenical in tone. As Michael Walsh pointed out: "Some of the most vociferous sindonologists (as experts on the Shroud came to be called) were Anglicans. And, after initial reluctance because the relic was in RC hands, some of its most fervent protagonists as proof of the reality of the Gospel story were American Fundamentalists".

Of course people like Ian Wilson and the British Society for the Turin Shroud will not be deterred by the findings of mere scientists. And even if the Turin Shroud is relegated to the lumber room with other discarded relics, the mysterymongers will soon find another cause to get worked up about.

AFTER REAGAN

Ronald Reagan's departure from the White House could end an era of unprecedented dominance by America's Christian Right. Politicians of all shades and in most countries cynically indulge in religious rhetoric, whatever their views about ultimate reality. But Reagan's religious faith is a different kettle of stinking fish. From his earliest years he has genuinely adhered to hillbilly Christianity. It is therefore not surprising that during his presidency a thoroughly reactionary and malign brand of religious fundamentalism polluted American social and political life.

Reagan was regarded by the Moral Majority as a man sent by God to transform the United States into a land ruled by conservative and conformist born-again Christians who would keep dissenters in their inferior place. Their confidence in him was not entirely misplaced. Reagan endorsed the worst of money-grubbing televangelists, advocates of creation "science", campaigners for school prayers, and defenders of "family life" as defined by the Rev Jerry Falwell. He delighted them with claptrap like: "Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged". His warmongering "Evil Empire" and fatalistic "Armageddon" speeches enraptured the faithful.

While protesting his devotion to the cause of peace and justice, Reagan was a supporter of corrupt dictatorships and terrorist groups in Central America and elsewhere. That is how millions will remember the man who led a country where "religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged".

Freethinker Fund

Although included in last month's total, two generous donations (£30 and £100) were not listed. The oversight is regretted, and we thank the generous donors together with those whose names are given below.

J. Anderson, E. Wakefield and W. S. Watson, £1 each; B. Morgan, E. M. Prent, W. G. Stirling and J. D. Verney, £2 each; D. R. Barrett, E. F. Channon and J. R. Hutton, £2.50 each; W. H. and E. Brown, £3; Y. Gugel and A. Varlet, £4.40 each; N. Cox, G. Greig, E. Haslam, J. H. Howard, F. Jacot, C. Kensit, D. S. Lee, J. Leenders, I. J. McDonald, K. Mack, A. Negus, W. N. Ramage and V. Wilson, £5 each; W. H. Seddon, £10; R. E. Davis, £15.

Total for September: £120.30.

Heavy rain caused extensive damage to the Methodist Church at Strabane, Northern Ireland. The lecture hall was flooded, and the piano was found drifting beside a missionary poster which read "Thank you God for Water".

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Celestial Private Patient Plans

BARBARA SMOKER

Throughout history, miracle cures have been big business. The patient needs only to be touched by Jesus — or merely to touch the hem of his garment; to visit a special shrine; to be prayed for by someone (whether "in the body or out of the body") who has a special relationship with the almighty; to wear a miraculous medal or a holy relic or a piece of cloth that has touched a holy relic; to bathe in a miraculous spring; to be touched by the hands of a faith-healer in touch with the Life Force (or merely to go on his absent healing list); to take medicaments that have been diluted to nothing but water: the variety of prescriptions is endless, and so is human credulity.

The traditional definition of miracles as "breaches of natural law" has caused many of the more educated Christians to abandon faith in them. The pantheist philosopher Spinoza, who, more than three centuries ago, identified "natural law" with the divine will, therefore declared miracles to be *a priori* impossible. Yet even today, many educated Christians who otherwise appear to be both intelligent and honest somehow contrive to cling to a belief in miracles.

A century after Spinoza, the rationalist philosopher David Hume pointed out that belief in miracles would entail a rejection of our statistical knowledge of the uniform laws of nature and of the very principle of cause and effect — which underlies all rational human behaviour.

In the present century, that modernist churchman Dean Inge declared that "Miracle is the bastard child of faith and reason" — but that was more than half-a-century ago; since then, many Christian theologians and prelates seem to have slipped back to medieval beliefs, and, in an age of science, alleged miracles still proliferate.

These thoughts are prompted by two news items in the Catholic newspaper *The Universe* about babies diagnosed as having terminal cancer. The first item took up most of their front page on September 25, under the banner heading "Lourdes cancer baby's 'miracle cure' amazes doctors". The cure to which it refers certainly seems to have been unexpected — but doctors are not infallible, and there are unexpected remissions of cancer in many patients who have not been to Lourdes or been prayed for. Moreover, on reading the text one finds that besides being taken to Lourdes the child had also undergone a course of chemotherapy.

The very next week, there was in the same paper (but much smaller, on an inside page) a moving story of the courageous last hours of a three-year-old who died from cancer in Great Ormond Street Hospital. Though he, too, had no doubt been prayed for by his Catholic parents, there is no mention of his

having been taken to Lourdes. But if it is supposed that that fact accounts for his not having been cured as the other child was, not only would believers be faced with the objections of Spinoza, Hume and Inge; they would also be faced with the problem of their god being the sort of cruel, capricious, irrational god that would choose between two small children on such an absurd criterion. How can such a god possibly be envisaged, let alone worshipped, by believers in Lourdes and other triggers of divine miracle?

The physical condition of the first of the two babies may have been considered good enough to stand up to the journey and that of the second one not. In any case, neither child could have made the decision for himself. Besides, the number of patients who die in Lourdes or on the way there is very high every year — a fact that is no longer kept as secret as it used to be — and, not surprisingly in view of the communal bath, it is not unknown for patients to go there with one malady and come back with something worse. It also costs a considerable sum to take a patient overseas and across Europe. Does the Christian god (or his Lourdes mediatrix, the mother of one-third of him) take patients' bank balances into account when allocating cures?

However, the theological problems raised by divine miracles go deeper than that. If, after deciding to end a patient's life, the putative deity were to change that decision as a result of prayer or a pilgrimage to a miraculous shrine, that would surely contradict the doctrines of divine omniscience, pre-knowledge, and absolute wisdom — which are also generally accepted by those who believe in Lourdes and other such sources of supposed miraculous cures. How, then, can they go on believing in a god with such contradictory attributes? The only answer seems to be a readiness to believe simultaneously in things that are mutually exclusive.

Like the first of the two cancer patients featured in *The Universe*, one of my own sisters — who is a nun and a cancer patient with secondaries — was taken to Lourdes this summer. She went by plane, with a wheelchair, accompanied by two of her fellow nuns and a nurse — and I am glad to report that since her return her X-rays show diminished tumours, she has been able to walk up a flight of stairs for the first time for many months, and she looks and feels very much better. No doubt most of the members of her order put this down to the pilgrimage. As it happens, however, before she went to Lourdes she was already three-quarters way through a course of chemotherapy to which she was responding well. Indeed, her plans to visit Lourdes had been made provisional upon her condition improving sufficiently for her to undertake the

journey.

I am glad she enjoyed the experience, and am willing to admit that the stimulating change of scene may have helped to some extent to boost her return to health which the chemotherapy had already set in train — and which now, I am glad to say, looks very promising. In spite of her being a professional believer, however, I suspect (and hope) that if she had been forced to choose between the chemotherapy and the pilgrimage she would sensibly have opted for the former.

Allied to miracle cures are some forms of nature cure. Herbal medicine often has a sound medical basis derived from statistical evidence, sometimes over many centuries, even though science may not yet have analysed the active ingredient or discovered the way it works. But this cannot be true, for instance, of homeopathic remedies in which the purported active ingredients have been diluted to less than one molecule per patient — i.e. nothing. Such prescriptions will certainly enjoy a proportion of successes — possibly, indeed, higher than spontaneous cure alone, because of the well-known placebo effect of making the patient more optimistic — but that is all. And if they dissuade the patient from undergoing more scientific treatment, they can, of course, impede alleviation or cure. Reliance on homeopathy could well have been the cause of death of the comedian Peter Sellers, who refused a bypass operation (which has a high success rate) in favour of homeopathic treatment — and, of course, died.

Many kinds of faith-healers have likewise dissuaded patients from accepting orthodox medical treatment, sometimes with fatal results. Of those patients, some would no doubt have died even with orthodox (or proved herbal) prescribed medical treatment or

surgery, but others would not.

Among the most histrionic and the most successful (financially if not medically) of the faith-healers are still those who perform their “miracles” in the name of Jesus — especially the American confidence tricksters known as tele-evangelists. So far we in Britain have been spared their tricks on TV, but with the imminent introduction of Thatcherite “choice” via satellite, only the “off” button on the set will stand between these religious criminals and vulnerable viewers in this country too.

The spectacularly gory “psychic surgery”, performed mainly in the Philippines and televised over here some years ago, has conned many western patients who ought to know better — proving not only very lucrative for its practitioners but sometimes, through neglect of more scientific treatment, fatal to its victims. It simply relies for its effects on the conjuror’s expertise in production and sleight of hand, using animal gut and blood supplied by the local butcher — and the rationalist conjuror James Randi, who has duplicated these effects on American TV with an honest explanation, showed a video of this performance at a recent dinner in London at which I was present. Though rather gory to watch immediately after eating, it was well worth a little queasiness, both for its entertainment value and its instructiveness; and it is to be hoped that Randi’s message will percolate to those patients contemplating a trip to the Philippines when they would be more likely to benefit from a visit to hospital.

However, perhaps the greatest harm done to humanity by belief in miracles is simply the general effect of the denial of reason and the power this gives to ruthless charlatans.

God or Man: the Christian Dilemma MICHAEL DUANE

In his book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Faber and Faber), Leo Steinberg traces some of the Church’s early struggles to establish that Christ was *both* divine and human. It had realised that he could not be simply one or the other. Divinity alone set an insuperable barrier between the Grecian Olympus and earth: gods and goddesses had provided fodder for literature and superstition but they had made little impact on the daily life of mortals. When they became mortals it was usually to satisfy some element of lust. Christ could not become just another addition to the Pantheon. But if he were to be portrayed as fully human then the whole mythology built up around his superhuman powers, the miracles, would collapse and while he might be admired as a courageous pragmatist he could not be adored. He could differ from other heroic men only in degree.

Leo Steinberg shows how the dilemma of the Church during the Renaissance appeared in paintings of Christ, especially of those depicting the crucifixion. Early portraits showed the dying Christ stripped naked and in the utmost extremity of agony, crucified with criminals, in order to illustrate his total helplessness. Later these gruesome portraits had loin-cloths painted on to them so that his humanity should not obtrude on his divinity or become an occasion of sin for some observers.

The dilemma has been forced into the area of public discussion again by Martin Scorsese’s film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, over which some clerics and some lay people have got themselves into a dreadful tizzy. The multiplicity of shocked and abusive epithets whizzing through the pages of the

(continued on back page)

"Being Reasonable"

DANIEL O'HARA

An Anglican clergyman wrote to Daniel O'Hara (a former Anglican clergyman, now an unbeliever) warning him against "rationalist fundamentalism". Here is an extract from his reply.

How wise of you to warn against the dangers of "Rationalist Fundamentalism". By this, I take it you refer to those who want to impose very narrow and rigid criteria of what is reasonable. We know, however, that something is always regarded as "reasonable" or "unreasonable" in relation to a specific context. Thus, the Space programme may reasonably reject an engineering component on the ground that it fails to meet a tolerance of 0.0005", but it would be unreasonable to expect a bath plug to meet such tight tolerances.

One may, however, reasonably ask a Christian why he (or she) refuses to accept the revelation of Joseph Smith, the prophet of Mormonism. I'm quite sure you could give me a thoroughly convincing account of why you are not a Mormon. I strongly suspect that your account would be largely based on reason; i.e., it isn't reasonable to suppose that the Angel Moroni (who?) appeared to Mr Smith, and led him to a hill where he discovered gold plates inscribed in "reformed Egyptian" (what?) which, by the aid of a magic stone, he was able to interpret as the wonderful history of how Jesus Christ travelled to North America, and how it was the land to which the "ten lost tribes" of Israel travelled and made their home. I expect you regard the saga as pure bunkum, and with very good reason. My point is that the doctrines of Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam) are, on those very same criteria, also bunkum. There is surely no reason, is there, why one should demand a higher or a lower onus of proof from the pundits of one religion against those of any other? The notion that in the sacrifice of the Mass, the forms of bread and wine are miraculously converted into the substance of the body and blood of Christ may seem quite unexceptionable to a Catholic who has been indoctrinated with it since early childhood; but to an objective observer it seems every bit as nonsensical as the wildest doctrines of Mormonism. Likewise, the notion that a child could be miraculously conceived without the agency of a human father and rise bodily from the dead and ascend into heaven (where?) might seem equally ridiculous to the impartial observer. Why, then, should one accept any religion at all?

We all of us exercise quite complex and diverse canons of reasonableness every day of our lives, when we consider such questions as: "Have I time to cross the road before that car?", "Can I get to Paddington in time for the 6.05?", "Would mother prefer a box of chocolates or a potted plant?", "Shall we go to

Spain again this year?", "Would Rodney mind if we had fish again tonight?", "Shall I try to get home in time for 'Brookside', or wait for the Omnibus edition on Saturday?", "Should I take the job in Saudi Arabia?", "Shall I ask Monica to marry me?" "Should I take a whole bottle of Paracetamol rather than risk facing a long and painful death from Cancer/Aids?" Surely you would not want to exempt religion from such reasonable questioning?

In a game of cricket, people are content to let who decides which team will open the batting rest on the toss of a coin. That is not unreasonable. But no one in his right mind would make a decision about whether to buy a used car or a house on the toss of a coin. The important consideration is: "What is at stake?" It is upon our judgement about the answer to this question that we decide what is reasonable. It may not matter much whether we have fish again tonight, or sausages, unless Rodney is allergic to sausages or a vegetarian. Every decision we make opens up one range of possibilities and closes another. If we go to Spain again this year, that doesn't preclude the possibility of going to Italy or Greece next year, unless, of course, I am facing unemployment and may not be able to go abroad at all next year, or have been diagnosed as having an incurable illness and not more than six months to live. Then it might be very important to make sure my last holiday is the one I really want. If I decide to take the whole bottle of Paracetamol, I am unlikely to make many further decisions.

Pascal's famous wager implied that it is better to act on the unprovable assumption that Christianity (why that particular religion?) is true, as, if it is, there is everything to gain, and if it isn't, there is nothing to lose. But humanists most strongly reject that implication. We would as soon play Russian roulette for money: if you survive you collect £1,000; if you don't, you know nothing about it. We think there is everything to lose by basing your life on a fantasy, and everything to gain by following the course of reasonableness wherever it may lead.

The only real advances in human health and opportunity have come about by means of the diligent application of critical intelligence to the problems confronting us, not by taking refuge in superstition, incantations, mumbo-jumbo and all the other traditional paraphernalia of religions. The basic objection to all religious claims is that they are mendacious. On this objection humanists, atheists and rationalists take their stand. The damage that flows from religion, directly or indirectly, all stems originally from its mendacity, and the desire of pundits to impose it on the minds of men and women in the absence of any evidence of its truth whatsoever.

Bradlaugh and His Biographer

JOHN PETHER

It would be a pity to let the year close without looking back on one of the main subjects of controversy within the freethought movement of a hundred years ago — a brutally hostile biography of Charles Bradlaugh. It was written not by a Christian fanatic, but by a member of a rival group of secularists. John Pether recently chanced upon a copy.

Charles Bradlaugh is a commanding figure in the annals of freethought. He possessed boundless energy and considerable courage. He was an inspirational orator and the most dynamic figure within popular freethought in its years of greatest influence. But he was not without his failings. Bradlaugh was an arrogant man. It was his conceit and vanity, more often than a point of principle, which goaded him into quarrelling with almost every other secularist leader of any importance.

Victorian freethought was a deeply divided movement, which rallied round several different standards. Vendettas were pursued with considerable rancour. Quite the most sour expression of the contempt in which Bradlaugh was held by some secularists was a book, the *Life of Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.*, which appeared in 1888 under the name of Charles R. Mackay, one of several young freethinkers who clustered admiringly around W. Stewart Ross ("Saladin") and his *Secular Review*.

The biographer prefaced his work with the assertion that, whatever its faults, there was "nought set down in malice". In fact, every one of the 470 pages reeks of spite and vindictiveness. The book was littered with crude smears and cheap innuendo. It was not really a biography at all, but a dishevelled account of various episodes in Bradlaugh's life, all told to do him maximum discredit. It was, in modern parlance, a hatchet job.

Mackay deplored the tub-thumping Bradlaugh style, arguing that his polemics served only to insult the feelings of those he was trying to convince. "In the eyes of all cultured and thoughtful people, he has strengthened the Christian position rather than weakened it". But the book did not rest with a criticism of Bradlaugh's populism. Here was a man — suggested Mackay — who was financially and intellectually corrupt. He had chosen to champion the freethought cause simply to accumulate power and riches at the expense of his humble followers. Having won influence and position, he was now preparing to betray the interests of his supporters in the hope of securing a junior post in Gladstone's Government.

The fiercest attack on Bradlaugh, and the most unpleasant, concerned his advocacy of family limitation. The biographer outlined his case in the

opening pages:

The society which boasts of the services of Mr Bradlaugh worships in an Atheistic cathedral, dignified by the title of the "Hall of Science", a building which has more the appearance of a barn than of an assembly-room. Its revenues are derived from the sale of liquors in a "Club", to which is added a Dancing Academy, where males are admitted without the formality of an introduction, and females attend without chaperones; while within the hall is a bookstall bestrewn with "literature", recommending the grossest sexual immorality.

Bradlaugh's name, it was claimed, "cannot be severed from the terrible orgies which the advocacy of Neo-Malthusianism has brought in its train".

The book went further and made personal charges against Bradlaugh. It accused him and Annie Besant of making a fortune out of the enormous sales of the *Fruits of Philosophy*, the birth control pamphlet which they were prosecuted for republishing. The biography even sought to make a connection between Bradlaugh's public promotion of contraception and his private life. It commented on Bradlaugh's separation from his wife and her early death, on his friendship with a French countess, and on the nature of his relationship with Mrs Besant. Bradlaugh, it said, believed in "the Neo-Malthusian doctrine that the female portion of the community should be viewed as members of one universal harem".

It was an undistinguished and unsavoury enterprise which was immediately recognised for what it was — a vulgar attack on a public figure. But that didn't stop some papers from peddling some of the anecdotes and allegations. Those responsible for the biography can hardly have expected such a litigious man as Bradlaugh to accept its publication with equanimity. A long and convoluted legal case followed the appearance of the book. And although it was never specifically judged to be libellous, Bradlaugh deservedly got the courts on his side.

Bradlaugh was quite aware that Charles Mackay, a young Scotsman who had only a brief acquaintance with the freethought movement, could not have been the author of such a sustained attack. He surmised that Ross must have been behind the biography which, with beguiling naivety, included several passages in praise of "a brilliant, scholarly, and poetic writer who, under the *nom de guerre* of 'Saladin' has succeeded in lifting the cause of Freethought from the gutter".

It is probable that Bradlaugh was not far wide of the mark. Stewart Ross always insisted that he had not been involved in the writing of the biography and had counselled against its publication. But in the course of the legal action, it was revealed that there had been financial dealings between Mackay and

Ross. It was also alleged that Ross had furnished some of the information on which the book was based. The action was eventually settled with Mackay expressing regret and Ross giving a donation to the Masonic Boys' School (Bradlaugh's favourite charity) as well as meeting costs and agreeing to destroy any copies of the biography that came his way.

Any attempt to arrive at the truth about the authorship of the book is confused by the insistent claims of a third person, William Harral Johnson, that he was responsible. Johnson, another close colleague of Ross, was a freethinker of long standing, best known under the pseudonym "Antony Collins". Johnson said Mackay had paid him £50 for writing the entire biography. All that Mackay had contributed to the text, Johnson alleged, was the title page, the preface, certain disrespectful epithets about Bradlaugh, and a few pages which sought to blemish the reputation of Bradlaugh's daughters.

All the rest Johnson was anxious to claim as his own, and to vouch for in a court of law. He wanted to be joined to Bradlaugh's legal action so he could plead a defence of justification. Johnson never got a chance to vindicate his work in court, but was tireless

in making known his role in the whole dubious enterprise. A copy of the *Life* in the British Library contains margin notes by Johnson about the genesis of the book, and the copy at the LSE Library has tipped into it copies of articles in various secularist journals in which Johnson and his daughter recited how and why the biography was written and published.

Time often heals animosities, and on Bradlaugh's death Stewart Ross wrote a respectful eulogy. Johnson too, in an article written many years later, took a more generous view. He commented with satisfaction that Ross and Bradlaugh were buried in the same cemetery: "the two champions now sleep within a stone's throw of each other at Brookwood". Johnson himself, according to a handwritten note in the LSE's copy of the biography, died in prison in around 1914. The British Library, apparently, withdrew the book from general access for some years. And members of Bradlaugh's family threatened prosecution against any bookseller offering copies. It's now one of the rarer books about Bradlaugh, a testimony to the fierce and conflicting emotions he aroused.

Antony Flew and the RPA

NICOLAS WALTER

The freethought movement is involved in two great tasks — to destroy the system of supernatural religion and irrational superstition, and to construct in its place a system of natural morality and rational knowledge. In these two tasks it is important both that the various individuals and organisations in the movement should cooperate as closely as possible against the common enemy, and that all freethinkers should show believers how humanely and reasonably they behave. This is especially true here and now, in a place and at a time of great efforts to encourage agreement and unity within the movement in the struggle against our old enemies.

In these circumstances, all your readers will welcome the editorial remarks in *News and Notes* (August) about Antony Flew and the Rationalist Press Association. It is hard to imagine a more useful way of impressing all the friends and also all the enemies of freethought than by dismissing one of the most determined and effective freethinkers in the country as "a far-Right guru" and by describing his limited disagreement with some aspects of the movement's work as "back-stabbing activities". And it is almost as helpful to accuse the directors of the RPA — who include some of your past and present friends and colleagues — of being so snobbish and spineless that they don't dare to force him to resign as a vice-president of the RPA. After all, we all know that the Distinguished Members of the National Secular Society are chosen entirely by merit, that they never

disagree with any aspect of NSS policy, and that if they dared to do so they would immediately be kicked out.

It brings a special flavour to this controversy to add that the information about Professor Flew's involvement in the controversy over the Education Reform Bill — and indeed virtually all the information about the progress of the Bill through Parliament — was actually supplied to you by the RPA. But of course we are trying to teach people to get beyond the crude morality of primitive religion and learn to hate their friends as well as their enemies and not to forgive a favour if it is more fun to bring a few insults into a serious debate.

Let us hope that the RPA and the *New Humanist* will not remember this moral lesson from their elders and betters in the freethought movement when they are next asked for aid or comfort by the National Secular Society or *The Freethinker*, but will continue to work for the common cause.

Oh yes, as it happens, Professor Flew has decided in the circumstances to resign as a vice-president of the RPA from the end of the year; he remains a particularly valued member and particularly distinguished Honorary Associate of the RPA.

A white South African family changed a relative's funeral arrangements, when church authorities refused her black maid permission to attend the service.

BOOK REVIEW

GOD AND EVOLUTION: CREATION, EVOLUTION AND THE BIBLE, by R. J. Berry. Hodder & Stoughton, £6.95

Dr Berry is Professor of Genetics at University College, London. He is also an evangelical Christian. In this revised and expanded version of an earlier book, *Adam and the Ape*, he sets out to reconcile Bible-believing Christianity with Darwinism, and to smite hip and thigh the inanities of "Creationist Science".

Although he does a thorough job with the latter task, his attempt at the former doesn't, to my mind, come off. That's not to say that the objective is impossible; but Dr Berry's religious assertions are far more woolly and credulous than his rigorous scientific approach. So his book seems to me quite badly split.

This is, frankly, disappointing as I had looked forward to a more intellectually meaty read. Berry explains the current state of evolutionary biological and genetic studies lucidly and (to this layman) convincingly, and he is clearly as pained as the most scrupulous rationalist at the crassly illogical outpourings of the Creationists whose obsessive determination not to insult their own self-importance by admitting that they might share a common ancestor with an ape (who might understandably be insulted by such a link with *them!*) obliterates all else in their pigmy-sized, God-shaped minds. His book is well worth reading for this aspect at least.

But what is one to make of statements such as "natural selection is a divine institution in just the same way as the State is a divine institution"(!); or "it was God himself who subjected the creation to futility" — followed, a few pages later, by "any religion worth serious consideration must be one where the God is in constant control of everyday events"?

One of my difficulties, as a lay student of evolutionary theory, is that, however hard I try, I fail to see the force of the objection to the view that Darwin's explanation is essentially tautologous — by which I mean basic common sense. Although this may be heresy to dedicated evolutionists (who, *pace* Mary Midgely, are not themselves always immune from their own quasi-religious beliefs), I shall end by praying in aid of an eighteenth-century Bishop of Durham, Joseph Butler, who was, like the present incumbent, something of an iconoclast. Bishop Butler said "things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: why then should we desire to be deceived?" A less well known saying of his, equally apposite to those who claim divinely inspired knowledge of the

ultimate mysteries, was "other orders of creatures may perhaps be let into the secret counsels of heaven and have the designs and methods of Providence in the creation and government of the world communicated to them: but this does not belong to our condition. . . Our ignorance, and the little we know of other things, affords a reason why we should not perplex ourselves about them". And — in a final anachronistic sideswipe at the Creationists — he wrote to no less than John Wesley: "Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing". I see the cadaver of Jeremy Bentham smiling as Professor Berry walks past. Bishop Butler's Sermons are a good supplement to *God and Evolution*.

ANTONY GREY

Joan Miller

David Tribe writes: With the death of Joan Miller the world freethought movement has lost one of its most distinguished actresses. This loss is the world's, and not just the movement's, for she was a truly great actress with an unsurpassed emotional range and voice control, born of rich talent and craftsmanship, and nurtured by a long apprenticeship in provincial repertory and outdoor theatre. Both on and off the stage or screen she had an unforgettable presence. You could never bump into her in the supermarket — as with more recent "megastars" — and mistake her for a sales assistant.

Yet, on or off the stage, there was never anything "theatrical" about her. Within the quartz of glittering professionalism was a warm vein of humanism which endeared her to all her friends and gave her the courage to combat decades of illness and pain, which few knew about.

As far as was possible her distinguished career was inseparably linked with that of her husband, the brilliant producer-director Peter Cotes. Through biography, television and other writings down the years in books and the *Freethinker*, his freethought is well known. Hers surfaced only occasionally, as in her memorable participation in the National Secular Society's *Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare*, and has been generally overlooked by the media. But it was an enduring aspect of her life, motivating her world view, her deep understanding and her stoic courage.

Our deepest sympathies go to Peter Cotes.

When the legendary singer Edith Piaf died in 1963, French Catholic authorities ruled that her body should not be allowed into a church because of her "unorthodox lifestyle". Twenty-five years later a Requiem Mass has been held in London's French church, Notre Dame de France. It concluded a three-day "Festival of Piaf".

God's Animal Trap

For those who are interested in the fascinating science of paleontology, in contrast to the dull-witted followers of primitive creationism, a most remarkable dig has been in progress since 1974. This great fossil recovery is taking place outside the small historic city of Hot Springs, in Fall River County, South Dakota, USA. It rivals the excavations of the Dinosaur National Park, Colorado.

This part of South Dakota should be well known to many, because of its famous landmarks. To the south of the Black Hills is the petrified forest, with its mineralised trees, and about 35 miles north west are the great carvings of the past presidents at Mount Rushmore. The vast limestone caverns of Wind Cave National Park, are about ten miles to the north. This was part of Sioux country. They fought many wars, led by famous chiefs such as Red Cloud, Sitting Bull and Spotted Tail, and were not finally defeated until the pitiful massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. This took place about sixty miles south-east of Hot Springs.

The amazing fossil discovery happened quite by accident when the blade of some heavy equipment, being used for a new housing development, unearthed an enormous mammoth bone. This find led to the recovery of further bones and to the final abandonment of the housing project. At this early stage, nobody could have predicted what drama was to unfold as the dig progressed. It has turned out to be a veritable bonanza of extinct giant mammoths. The revelations so far have been awesome. Level upon level of bones, tusks and some partially articulated skeletons. Over forty mammoths met their doom here, and perhaps there are more to come as the search goes deeper.

Research shows that, about 26,000 years earlier, this area was a large sink-hole, one end being warm springs and the other end a cool inviting lake, which had apparently developed from a limestone plateau or cave. The unfortunate victims were apparently attracted by the crystal water and lush vegetation surrounding the banks, but upon retreating were unable to negotiate the steep, slippery side walls. The shale, when wet, became like a waxed floor. Unable to escape the prison, their fate would be sealed as they slowly died from starvation.

Judging by the levels of pinkish-buff soil depositions, the accumulation of bodies probably took up to a thousand years. Most of the fossils are within six metres of the ancient shale wall, demonstrating the undoubted frantic efforts of the huge beasts to negotiate the slippery embankments.

Many other animals were also trapped at this one-way picnic spot. So far, the fossils of other Pleistocene species have been recovered, including camels, peccaries, timber wolf, mink, prairie dog and

HOWARD SPICKLER

a large carnivorous bird, fish and gastropods. But perhaps the most exciting find has been the fossil bones of a couple of extinct short-faced bears. This gigantic ice age bear, the largest known land carnivore of its period, was much larger than modern bears. A possible scenario might be, that the creature, on the outlook for easy pickings, would be lured to the spot by the noise and odour of trapped and dying animals, but soon becoming an unwilling prisoner itself at the conclusion of the banquet.

The fossils of camels and peccaries have been found in other areas of South Dakota. The camel evolved in America and migrated to Asia about a million years ago, becoming extinct in North America in comparatively recent times. Peccaries are primitive hogs, and still survive in Latin and South America.

The mammoth collection is a real stunner. "Mammoth" is a Siberian word for ivory, at which place vast numbers have been unearthed, frozen and preserved for thousands of years. A relative of the elephant, they were abundant during the Ice Age, becoming extinct about 8,000 years ago, for reasons as yet unknown. Probably the largest land mammal to have ever lived, the imperial mammoths were much larger than the woolly mammoth or the modern elephant. They stood up to fifteen feet at the shoulder, weighed eight tons, and some had sixteen-foot curving tusks. These monsters grazed on grass and other vegetation, possibly consuming five hundred pounds per day and many gallons of water. Their teeth included four huge molars with corrugated grinding surfaces, each tooth weighing up to ten pounds. A real dentist's nightmare!

The lesson to be learnt from this catastrophe is that when in trouble, do not rely on help from God. He is too busy marking the sparrow's fall.

According to the Jewish Chronicle, Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, has been banned in Israel. The authorities fear that "it may offend some Christians". Glasgow's Licensing Committee has decided that the film can be shown locally.

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The Comic History of Noah's Ark

R. J. CONDON

The biblical story of the Deluge has always caught the imagination, so much so that even in these sceptical times expeditions set out to find the remains of Noah's Ark. Until a century or so ago, when George Smith published his translation of the Babylonian myth from which it was copied, few doubted the historical truth of the Genesis account.

Thoughtful believers, however, felt the story to be not entirely satisfactory as it stood. There were difficulties which might be resolved if gaps in the narrative could be filled in. How, for example, were the various animals induced to come to the Ark, and what food was provided for the carnivorous species? Fortunately the old-time rabbis were equal to the task, and the fruits of their researches can be found in the midrashim or scriptural commentaries written between the second and twelfth centuries.

God, it appears, had given our sinful race plenty of warning before deciding to destroy it. For 120 years Noah had been telling of the coming flood and preaching repentance, to no avail. It took him 52 years to build the Ark, working slowly to delay God's vengeance.

The task of gathering every species of animal was quite beyond Noah, so the guardian angels of each kind led them to the Ark, bringing with their charges enough fodder for their survival. The angels rather overdid things, the animals coming in such numbers that the patriarch had to reject most of them. Any refusing to crouch before him in submission were barred, though some say that to be admitted the males had to lord it over the females.

One animal, the reem, was too large for the Ark, so Noah tethered it to the stern of the vessel and it swam behind. The giant Og survived by clinging to a rope ladder, compassionately fed by Noah through a porthole.

A note about the reem. This word appears as "unicorn" in our Bibles, but the rabbis thought of it as a gigantic wild ox. It has not been sighted lately, but that may be because there is never more than one pair at a time, a bull and a cow which live at opposite ends of the earth. At the end of 70 years they meet and mate, after which the cow kills the bull. Towards the end of an 11-year gestation period she becomes too heavy to move. She avoids starvation by watering the ground around her with saliva, which produces a lush crop of grass. She bears twin calves and dies. Immediately the young reems, a male and a female, go their separate ways, to meet again after 70 years.

King David, when a boy, led his flock of sheep up a sleeping reem, thinking it was a mountain. The animal awoke and rose to its feet, with David stranded on its back. God sent a lion, the king of

beasts, before which the reem crouched in obeisance, thus allowing David to escape. Long afterwards the celebrated traveller Rabba bar Bar-Hana saw a reem bigger than Mount Tabor. Its droppings blocked the River Jordan, causing a flood. And that was a day-old calf. In Rabbi Hiyya bar Rabha's time a newly-born reem uprooted every tree in Israel.

The ziz, king of birds, had no place in the Ark. He didn't need it. The Bar-Hana aforementioned, during a sea voyage, saw a ziz standing in mid-ocean with water up to its ankles. Bar-Hana thought it might be safe to go paddling, but a voice from heaven warned him that a ship's carpenter had dropped an axe into the water at that spot seven years earlier, and it still hadn't touched bottom. A hen ziz once let fall an addled egg whose stinking contents drowned 60 cities.

Ziz means "this", and the bird gets his name because his flesh has many flavours, tasting of this and this. Reader, I am not making these things up. He is a clean bird, fit for food, and capable of teaching mankind the greatness of God. The ziz is mentioned in Psalms 50 and 80, translated as "wild beast".

Let us return to the Ark. God opened the flood-gates of heaven by removing two stars from the constellation Pleiades. Thousands of evil-doers besieged the vessel in panic, only to be torn to pieces by the rejected lions, wolves and bears.

For 12 months neither Noah nor his family slept. The daylight animals had to be fed at different times during the day, and the nocturnal ones at all hours of the night. The camel demanded straw to eat, the elephant vine shoots and the ostrich broken glass. There was all the mucking-out to do as well. Throughout this time the lion suffered from a fever and ate nothing but grass. Once when Noah didn't bring his dinner fast enough the ungrateful animal gave him a blow which crippled him for the rest of his life. The phoenix earned himself a blessing by politely declining his rations, saying that Noah and his family were busy enough.

One stern prohibition was laid on the entire ship's company, human and animal alike — no sex please. Only Noah's son Ham, the dog and the raven disobeyed. God punished Ham by turning his skin black, the dog by attaching it shamefully to the bitch after copulation, and the raven by making it inseminate its mate through its beak.

Eventually God closed the heavenly sluices by plugging them with two stars borrowed from the Great Bear, which now pursues the Pleiades nightly demanding its stars back. Noah opened the Ark's window and ordered the raven to see what conditions were like outside. The bird objected, reasonably

LETTERS

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

It did not surprise me that Graham Webster-Gardiner, chairman of the Conservative Family Campaign, would make a number of false claims about his recent unsuccessful libel action against me (Letters, September). We are all familiar by now with his untruthful approach to certain matters. His allegiance to "biblical" morality, which he says he supports, apparently does not include the ninth commandment.

Mr Webster-Gardiner eventually withdrew his libel action, which one judge referred to as a squabble and a waste of the Court's time, because my persistent denial of libel and my eagerness to contest the action (which he hadn't expected) meant the holding of a trial, which he didn't want because he knew he would lose. The evidence and defence arguments I filed with him evidently convinced him of that, although human nature being what it is, he is never going to admit it.

If the purpose of his action was merely to prevent distribution of material during his 1987 general election campaign as he claims, why did he wait until April this year to ask the Court for permission to withdraw it, and why did he seek an order restraining distribution until after the trial, which would have been years away. His solicitor also wrote to me almost three months after the election stating that Mr Webster-Gardiner intended to pursue the matter to a conclusion through the Court.

Mr Webster-Gardiner has a strange way of defining success. He failed to get an admission of libel, or an apology, or a retraction, or damages, or even his costs which according to him, were substantial.

The two judges involved (in chambers) did not decide that the material was defamatory, or make statements to that effect, as he also falsely claims. They were not asked to, did not, and had no power to do so anyway at that stage. A trial had to be held first, and in this case, only a jury, rather than a judge, could decide the matter as my defences included fair comment and justification which are jury matters, as any lawyer will confirm. There was no trial, although I wanted one. It was Mr Webster-Gardiner who backed away from a trial, not I.

Finally, his application for an order restraining further distribution, which was never actually granted incidentally, had no bearing on my decision to cease the distribution of the few leaflets I had left by then. It was never my intention to continue distribution once the local press got hold of the story, which they did while this matter was still being argued before the Court.

My files on the case are open to anyone who doubts what I have said.

R. W. ALDRIDGE

ANIMAL ABUSE

I have long respected Barbara Smoker's erudite exposition of the secular viewpoint but find her easy acceptance of animal abuse (front page, September) an unexpected disappointment. True, she qualifies her stance by expressing an unwillingness to cause considerable harm to other animals for the sake of comparatively minor benefits to ourselves. But what practices, if any, does this condemn?

Adherence to the concept that we have the right to exploit all other species for whatever purpose is paralleled by the religious belief that a deity has bestowed upon us dominion over all living creatures. Neither should be part of a humanist philosophy. If the biblical interpretation of our origin is rejected, then

enough, that there were only two of his kind in the world, and it would be better to send one of the seven doves on such a perilous mission. He further suspected that Noah intended to seduce his mate. The outraged patriarch cursed the raven and sent him on his errand, but not before the evil fowl had done some seducing on his own account by impregnating the she-eagle and several carrion birds, thus depriving their natures.

With the flood abated and life once more flourishing on dry land, Noah planted a vineyard and made wine. He also got drunk and allowed himself to be seen in an indelicate condition. According to Genesis, Ham's amusement at his father's nakedness caused the old gentleman — he was then 600 — to curse little Canaan, his grandson by Ham. This may seem unfair to Canaan, but the Bible doesn't tell us the whole story. The child had playfully looped a cord round grandpa's genitals and pulled it tight, castrating him.

Noah was upset, to put it mildly. Despite his great age he had intended to father another son whose descendants would have served the rest of mankind as slaves. "Now the slaves will have to be Canaan's sons", he roared. "Since I can no longer do ugly things in the blackness of night, Canaan's children will be ugly and black. You, Ham, twisted your neck to see me naked, therefore your grandchildren's hair will be twisted into kinks. Your lips jested at my misfortune, so theirs shall be swollen. Because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked and their male members shall be shamefully elongated".

And so it came to pass. It only remains to be said that Canaan's descendants at the present time do not regard this as an unqualified curse, but something of a mixed blessing.

A court in Turkey has been hearing how Ahmet Hasim Ucer, a 25-year-old Muslim, killed his father because he slept during a televised reading of extracts from the Koran. His brother told the court that after decapitating the body with a butcher's knife, Ucer held up the severed head and declared: "Now you are a Muslim. The devil in your body has been removed". Asked why he had done it, Ucer told the court: "My father was an atheist. He had to die".

The Rev Sun Myung Moon, head of the Unification Church, conducted a mass marriage of over six thousand couples in Seoul last month. Most of the assembly line couples had first met each other the previous day. They had been "matched" by the church, and many did not speak the same language.

Mother Teresa has publicly approved the recent papal document which declares that women cannot become priests. "Let us thank God for the truly wonderful gift the Pope has given us with this document", she said.

surely the only alternative is an acknowledgement that other creatures have a right to live, albeit under the harsh conditions imposed by nature. The ability to write a symphony, build a pyramid, or put a satellite into orbit, are not necessary qualifications of that right.

No consideration whatsoever can justify the brutality, squalor and endless killing of the abattoir, the cruel deprivation of factory farming, or the insensitivity and depravity of the vivisector's laboratory. Exploitation of this nature and many other practices worldwide diminish us all and nullify any legitimate claim to superiority as a species.

ROBERT BARR

PROTECTION IF REQUIRED

May I take up a few lines of space to apologise to Irene Fearn if my letter distressed her, or if I seemed to dispute the existence of mental illness or the necessity for medical help in many cases. If I gave that impression my letter was badly put. My plea for "the right to be wrong" was in respect of the vast majority of us who may be stupid, or selfish, or eccentric, or prejudiced, but are not mentally ill, and who, as long as they keep the law, should be entitled to "do their own thing".

Her original article, if I may say so with respect, went beyond the simple point of protecting the mentally ill and accused the Children of God of sins and crimes possible and impossible, very much in the manner of libels on the early Christians and of all unpopular minority groups since (and probably before) including "witches". To this I was objecting. We must be careful. People who believe in absurdities may indeed commit atrocities. But so can rationalists, as Voltaire would have found out had he lived to see the excesses of the French Revolution.

ELSIE KARBACZ

CHURCH WEALTH

During the second half of the last century and into the early years of this, the Nonconformists sought, in their own words, "the securing of complete religious liberty by the disestablishment of the Church". But ecumenism put a stop to those endeavours and so their objective remains unrealised, except in Wales.

Today, the Church Commissioners administer assets to the value of billions of pounds. And although compulsory Church rates were abolished in 1968, and, generally speaking, compulsory tithes in 1936, the established Church's revenue continues to be guaranteed by the State. Furthermore, although there are Government spokesmen in Parliament for the Church Commissioners, little seems to be done to satisfy the public right to know about the Church of England's financial affairs.

Certainly the Church's income is not, as many people imagine, derived from what congregations place in the collection plate each Sunday, nor from appeals made in a plaintively impecunious fashion for contributions towards the restoration of historic church buildings. Nor should it be supposed that the Church's vast areas of real estate, accumulated over centuries, were acquired by visits to real estate agents.

What we need is a thorough enquiry into the Church of England's assets, including income, and how it impinges, directly or indirectly, on the lives — whether willing or not — of all citizens, irrespective of their beliefs.

There should be a similar exercise concerning the Church of Scotland.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

The Sweeney Ad

DAVID TRIBE

Centenaries are convenient opportunities for reappraisal of people and events, and ideally for promoting some lasting — or at any rate tangible — memorial.

In bringing George Sampson's *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* up to 1960, R. C. Churchill added a chapter on "The Age of T. S. Eliot". So it is appropriate that the English literary community celebrate 1988 as the centenary of Eliot's birth and that the occasion be taken to launch a Centenary Fund to raise £100,000 for London Library, of which he was president from 1952 to 1965.

What could be controversial about this? Well, among the fund's patrons are well-known Jews like Lord Goodman and Sir Isaiah Berlin, and the *Jewish Chronicle* has claimed Eliot was anti-Semitic.

Fortunately, it appears at the time of writing that Goodman and Berlin will continue to sponsor an appeal to help needy students and scholars subscribe to Britain's leading private library. But is the allegation another example of *Chronicle* paranoia?

Frankly, no. In the *Daily Telegraph* of 9 August 1988 John Gross quoted the following gem:

"The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot."

And this from what Iris Murdoch once called "one of our more important moralists".

In 1969 I was asked to contribute to an issue of *Twentieth Century*, "In Retrospect", and chose Eliot as my topic. One of the editors asked what new eulogies I could conceive to describe the great man. I replied that I would not be conceiving eulogies; and the resulting "hatchet job" was one of the minor literary scandals of that year.

I can't claim to be the first to discover that never before has a poet dined out so well on such a *Trinkgeld* of memorable lines. In 1957 "Myra Buttle" (Victor Purcell) had published his satire *The Sweeniad*, invoking "your widespread sacerdotal fame, Your minor poet's laurels".

My main concern was not that Eliot seemed to be overrated as a poet, dramatist and critic, but that he had exercised a stultifying influence on English life and literature. The phantasy of *The Waste Land* had been mistaken for genuine social comment on urban squalor; the Christian propaganda and dreary metaphysics of his later poems, for philosophical insight; the banality of his later plays, for empathetic humanism.

An age with no established literary canons readily falls under the sway of established literary incumbents. None was more influential than Eliot in his lifetime, and perhaps today. He used that influence

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Annual Dinner at Langfords Hotel, Third Avenue, Hove, Saturday, 19 November, 6.30 pm for 7 pm. Tickets £9.50. Bookings: Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, Sussex, telephone Brighton 733215.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton, Sunday, 4 December, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Members' Forum and Winter Solstice Celebration.

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.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Monday, 12 December, 7.30 pm. Public Meeting on The Centralisation of Government.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 24 November, 7.45 pm. Terry Liddle: 'Sixties Nostalgia.

London Student Sceptics. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on alternate Mondays at 7.30 pm, commencing 17 October. Details: Mike Howgate, telephone 01-882 2606.

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, 14 December, 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm. George Mephram: Some Great Humanists.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 21 November, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Bernard Phillips, 16 Highpool Close, Newton, Swansea, SA3 4TU, telephone 68024.

Worthing Humanist Group. East Worthing Community Centre, Pages Lane, Worthing. Sunday, 27 November, 5.30 pm. Public Meeting. Details from Bob Thorpe, telephone Worthing 62846.

Calum MacDonald, Labour MP for the Western Isles, did not vote in the leadership elections held on Sunday at the party conference in Blackpool last month. He abstained in deference to the views of his Sabbatarian constituents, and was refused permission to register his vote on Saturday.

as an editor, publisher and *guru* to ensure that Eliot-imitators basked in critical acclaim and that twentieth-century "literature" became an irritating blend of the incomprehensible, the private joke, the ludicrously incongruous and the plain slipshod. Lacking his talent, these *protégés* developed obscurity and banality into an art form and guaranteed that poetry and *belles lettres* would never again be taken seriously by the general public.

But his influence did not stop there. He obtruded his religious and political views so that the nonentities he promoted were pious and reactionary ones. What he chose to call "traditional", non-Christians recognised as reactionary, obscurantist and anti-Semitic.

And is it surprising? When he turned away from early "agnosticism" — which was really eclecticism — he found Ezra Pound, Fascism and Anglo-Catholicism.

Of course he was anti-Semitic, as the New Testament is anti-Semitic. Of course few people noticed it because, like the Bible, his books are rarely read or his plays performed today.

Whatever his personal views, his influence has become like that of religion in schools or religious broadcasting: the promotion of religiosity without conviction, tradition without culture, indoctrination without insight.

Fortunately the London Library contains a good deal more than the works of Eliot and the Church Fathers.

RC Abortion Rates Soar

Two national surveys in the United States show that the abortion rate is thirty per cent higher among Catholic women than among Protestant women. The surveys, conducted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a private health foundation, also show that the abortion rate for Catholics is considerably higher than for Jewish women.

Jeannie Rosoff, president of the Institute, said that nearly two-thirds of the women who choose abortion are afraid that others may discover they have become pregnant. She commented: "Catholic women are more likely than those of other denominations to choose abortion for this reason. Religion appears to play a part in abortion decisions, but not in the direction one would expect".

The surveys are acutely embarrassing to the Roman Catholic authorities. Revelations about the high abortion rate among Catholic women coincide with a nationwide anti-abortion campaign in which Catholic pressure groups are playing a leading role. There have been demonstrations in a number of cities, and police evicted protestors who had invaded three clinics in Atlanta. Over three hundred arrests were made.

Rushdie Book Banned to Appease Muslims

The Indian Government has given in to Muslim pressure groups and banned Salman Rushdie's new book, *Satanic Verses*. One Muslim Member of Parliament described the work, short-listed for this year's Booker Prize, as "an indecent vilification of the Holy Prophet". He said that it should be banned in England as well.

Spokesmen for Muslim organisations expressed satisfaction at the Indian Government's action. E. S. Seit, president of the Indian Union Muslim League, said that by banning the book the Government has shown it was "not insensitive to the religious sentiments of the people".

India's publishing industry has expressed serious concern over the ban. The Booksellers' Association

of India and the Federation of Publishers said in a public statement that the Government's action went against India's basic commitment towards the development of knowledge. It also went against the promotion of good Indian authorship.

Salman Rushdie won the 1981 Booker Prize with his *Midnight's Children*. In a recent interview he defended *Satanic Verses* as "a serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person.

"There are no subjects which are off-limits, and that includes God and prophets".

The latest World Report on Information, Freedom and Censorship declares there is "a worldwide trend by authorities to make all forms of art a classic target of censorship". One aspect of censorship is the manner in which it becomes "bureaucratically possible to criminalise the imagination".

God or Man: the Christian Dilemma

popular press reveal in startling nakedness the nightmare quality of the writers' own imaginations. Most members of the human race are so irresistibly alluring to the other sex that not only does the population of the world continue to increase but that magnetism inspires the bulk of the creative arts and is accepted with joy by all healthy people. It is so powerful that it operates under even the most discouraging circumstances of hunger and misery.

Outside Christianity the sexual drive and its manifestations are celebrated by many religions with a bewildering variety of rituals that reveal the range and heterogeneity of human response to its power. For any religion to portray a God who stigmatises such power as "sinful" betrays a psychopathic character either in the God or in those who claim to interpret his will.

In Scorsese's film the dying Christ's fantasy of making love to Mary Magdalen is a psychologically powerful index of the depths of exhaustion reached through hunger, torture and prolonged vilification. The Christ who had resisted the temptation to appease his hunger after forty days fasting in the wilderness and who had rejected the appeal to become ruler of the world now has reached the end of his resources and utters the pitiable cry "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Public execution is the most powerful way of saying "We have no love for you. For us you are no longer human". At the foot of the cross stand the two women who have made evident their love for him — his mother and Mary Magdalen. His mother can no longer cradle him in her arms and give him suck; so, craving human love, he fantasises being loved by Mary Magdalen.

The film portrays Christ as completely human. That is why it has caused offence to so many Christians.

MISSIONARY TERRORIST HONOURED BY CHURCH

Preaching at a Mass in St. Peter's Square, Rome, to mark the beatification of Father Junipero Serra, Pope John Paul II praised the eighteenth-century missionary to California as "a shining example of Christian virtue and the missionary spirit". And when he was in the United States last year the Pope described Serra as a "defender and champion" of the Indian people.

American Indians do not regard the "apostle of California" in the same light. They describe him as a tyrannical religious fanatic who terrorised and enslaved their ancestors.

Rupert Costo, of the California Cahuilla tribe, who runs the Indian Historian Press, says that Serra kidnapped Indian children and forced baptism upon them. He kept adults in virtual slavery at his mission where they were subjected to violent punishment for infringement of rules. Serra established the system of servitude and exploitation of Indians for the benefit of Spain. Thousands of them were "converted" to the faith; thousands more died from European diseases, including syphilis transmitted through rape by soldiers from Catholic Spain.

Serra embarked on his missionary work in 1796 after his Jewish ancestry became known. This ruined his chances of advancement in the European Church.

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, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.