

The Freethinker

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IRRATIONAL AND INTOLERANT: RELIGION CONTINUES TO DIVIDE SOCIETY

The National Secular Society's latest annual report opens on a sombre note: the twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities in Northern Ireland, "that religion-tormented country". While welcoming the Government's recent decision to fund integrated schools in the Six Counties, it adds: "Had schools in Northern Ireland been desegregated twenty years ago, as we have always advocated since 1920, there would now be a whole generation of young people who had grown up alongside their contemporaries on the other side of the religious divide, and this would surely have helped in reducing the mayhem and even in bringing about a Catholic-Protestant reconciliation".

Another setback for humanity is noted: the tenth anniversary of John Paul II's accession. This coincided with the carbon-dating of the Shroud of Turin which "proved (to those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and brains to think) that it did not exist until the 14th century".

The Roman Catholic Church experienced another and much more serious embarrassment during the year. It suffered its first major schism since the beginning of the present century. The maverick Archbishop Lefebvre secured the "apostolic succession" for traditionalists by consecrating four bishops in defiance of Rome.

The Church of England has also been beset by difficulties, most notably a split over women priests. The prospect of women bishops is even more divisive. The conservative Anglican Bishop of London echoed the Pope by asking how could a woman possibly be in the "apostolic succession" when the apostles were all men.

Other divisions have developed in the Church of England, particularly regarding the Archbishop of Canterbury's style of leadership. The anonymous

cleric and Oxford don who wrote a critical preface to last year's Crockford's Directory stirred up a hornets' nest in Anglican circles. Exposure of the author by the press, followed by his suicide, aggravated the situation.

Although it was a bad year generally for secularism there were two very welcome parliamentary decisions. First, David Alton's anti-abortion Bill was defeated. Secondly, yet another attempt to bring back capital punishment was unsuccessful.

Even greater privileges extended to Christianity by the Education Reform Act are described as "the greatest setback to secularism in Britain for many years". Attempts to oppose the religious clauses "were all unsuccessful in the face of the powerful religious lobby and the unrepresentative religious votes in the House of Lords".

The report expresses the view that teachers and pupils "seem to have the sort of common sense that defeats religious propaganda, even when it is backed by legislation".

A section of the report is devoted to the Society's activities. It states that "press coverage of the Society and its officers has probably been greater in the year under review than at any other time since that of Bradlaugh". Members who were active in the NSS during the period 1963-71 will regard that claim as a distortion of the Society's recent history.

The report concludes: "The year under review has had more than its statistical share of natural disasters — formerly known, with theological justice, as 'acts of God' — with widespread drought followed by even more lethal floods, and with devastating earthquakes and hurricanes. Indeed, if the year has a main characteristic, it is perhaps that human beings (especially those in the poorest countries of the world) are even more vulnerable to 'acts of God' than to man's inhumanity to man".

(BGL)

The Freethinker

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NEWS

THE FAMILY AND ITS PHONEY FRIENDS

One Christmas card sent to our London office was addressed to Mr Foote, but as this paper's founder died in 1915 it was forwarded to the present editor. The sender, Dr Michael Schluter, is head of a Christian organisation known as Familybase, which is closely associated with the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. Predictably, the card's contents included a biblical text. These Christians will insist on dragging their Jesus-come-lately religion into the ancient Winter Solstice festival.

The main thrust of Dr Schluter's Christmas message was defence of the family. One way in which his organisation is doing this is by helping families "understand the temptation of credit". Most worthy, but two relevant points should be considered.

First, credit is not a temptation for many people. It is an unpleasant necessity after a decade of dominance by the Thatcherite market-place philosophy which has made Britain a land fit for exploiters, speculators and loan sharks.

Secondly, consumer protection organisations were sounding alarm bells and warning against "the temptation of credit" long before Familybase came into existence. But their concern has always been wide-ranging, and not restricted to the family. They recognise that a large number of people do not belong to a family unit. This may either be by choice, because they found family life unbearable, or circumstances, through being orphaned, deserted or bereaved.

Christian groups like Familybase seem to regard non-family individuals as second-class citizens. They approve of families that result from a union made legally binding by the State and confirmed by a religious ceremony. But there are diverse family arrangements which, although perfectly satisfactory to those concerned, make conformist Christian noses twitch in disapproval. For instance, would an unmarried couple and their children be regarded as a family by Dr Schluter? Or a legally married couple who have decided they will not have children and deliberately prevent conception?

Rather than being a defender of the family, Christianity is the traditional enemy of happy and fulfilled human relationships which are an integral part of family life. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church glorified celibacy, regarding sexual intercourse as a disagreeable duty within marriage to ensure continuation of the species. In modern times,

AND NOTES

all the churches, Protestant and Catholic alike, denounced contraception as a wicked attempt to frustrate the divine will. But in fact contraception, not Christianity, has been the emancipator of the family — woman, man and wanted child.

The fundamentalist Christian ideal is a family in which the husband is the authoritarian head, with his submissive wife and children in their subordinate places. But as Michael Duane declared in our last issue (p 186), “the happiest families are those where the rules are minimal and agreed; where no major decisions are made without consultation; where the youngest and the weakest are supported without question; and where all are encouraged to follow their own bent, with proper regard for the others”. Such families are far superior to the tin god of Familybase.

A VALUED VICTORIAN

Mrs Louisa Barlow could not see what all the fuss was about when she recently celebrated her 105th birthday. “If you go to bed at 104 one night, you can’t help waking up at 105”, she reasoned. A life-long vegetarian, she has lived in the same Birmingham house for over fifty years, recalls Queen Victoria opening a city park, and remembers coaches galloping past The Swan at Yardley, their horns blowing.

Mrs Barlow knows more than most about the reality of Victorian values. As a 13-year-old she went to work in a factory for five shillings a week. The hours were seven am until six pm Monday to Friday, and seven am until one pm on Saturday. She married and had ten children. “You had no choice in those days”, she told an interviewer. “Nobody in their right mind would want ten children”.

When asked what she thought about Christianity, the 105-year-old lady replied: “I don’t think anything about it at all. I don’t believe in God, never have and never will. If there was anyone up there, the horrors that fill the world wouldn’t happen”.

Mrs Barlow added: “The only good thing about me is that I am not senile yet”. No doubt there are many other good things about her — plain speaking for a start. After a very long life, during which eight of her children have died, she sticks to atheistic principles and makes no apology for them. In that respect she typifies thousands of non-religious people who live their lives without the advantage of privilege or academic eminence. And having rejected Christianity, they feel no need to replace it with a spurious, “humanistised” religion, or a wall to wall “life stance”.

CENSORWATCH

Last month a meeting of over five hundred Bradford Muslims — which was described by one of their leaders as “emotional and hysterical” — called for the banning of Salman Rushdie’s prize-winning novel, *Satanic Verses*. They demanded its immediate withdrawal from circulation, and a spokesman, Moham-med Sidique, said an attempt would be made to have the issue raised at the UN General Assembly in New York.

Religious censors claim that the novel “is causing suffering to millions of Muslims”. How suffering is being inflicted on millions of Muslims by a work of fiction with a limited print run is unclear. Educated Muslims are not being compelled to read it, while millions of illiterate peasants in Islamic countries have probably never heard of it. If anyone has suffered because of *Satanic Verses*, it is the author, publishers and booksellers who have been harrassed and threatened by Islamic fanatics.

Like their Christian counterparts, Muslim leaders want legal protection and public respect for their superstitious beliefs. If they are not resisted, we will have another Index of Forbidden Books.

Religious critics of *Satanic Verses* have impertinently demanded an apology from its author. Rather than being offered an apology, the censorious disciples of Allah should be told to take a running jump.

“THE FACE” AGAIN

With the claim that the Turin Shroud was the burial cloth of Christ finally laid to rest, *The Freethinker* predicted that the mystery mongers “will soon find another cause to get worked up about” (November 1988). We did not have to wait for long. On the very day scientists declared that the Shroud was a fake, carpenters at Ormrods’ wood works in Bacup, Lancashire, spotted a “face” ingrained in a plank of wood. And surprise, surprise, it resembled that on the famous Shroud. It was as though, faced with eviction from Turin, “the face” had emigrated to Lancashire.

A national daily newspaper reported that the markings, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Turin image, were first seen by a carpenter who was making a kitchen cabinet. Next day the paper changed its story and said it appeared on the panelling of a shoe factory office.

Already “cures” are being claimed. A partner in the footwear firm said: “When my ulcers hurt, I sit in the office and they go away”.

Works manager John Millar said that the piece of wood, now known as the Bacup Plank, is priceless. It is being kept under lock and key. Other workers are reported to be “stunned” by the discovery. One

of them declared: "I knew it was something special. It's hard to believe a miracle happening in Bacup, but who knows?"

Who knows indeed. The little Lancashire town may in due course attract coach parties of hopeful pilgrims, anxious and determined to see a holy image. They will be welcomed with open tills by shopkeepers and souvenir peddlers who are always mindful of the northern adage (slightly adapted): "Where there's superstitious muck, there's brass".

"THIS NAPPY BREED"

A heart-warming news item from the northern breeding grounds comes to us via a potty little religious newsletter which is published in Aberdeenshire.

After thanking God that the Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, is a Free Presbyterian, "and therefore a conservative Christian", it adds approvingly: "We must also commend a genuinely healthy young Free Presbyterian couple, John and Jessie Campbell of Skye, who are expecting their twentieth child shortly, the other nineteen (again thank God) occupying two entire pews at services on the Lord's day".

OBITUARY

Mr T. Biles and Mrs P. Biles

Ted and Pat Biles, who died recently within a few weeks of each other, were in fact David Neil & Company, the Dorking firm which printed *The Freethinker* for many years.

It is difficult in a short obituary notice to convey how much the paper owes them. Their association with *The Freethinker* was not just a business arrangement. They strongly supported its principles, and were very good friends to the editors.

Sadly, both were in poor health, and died only two years after closing down the firm and retiring.

Mr R. Clements

Richard Clements, OBE, who has died at the age of 97, will be remembered with much affection. He became an Appointed Lecturer at South Place Ethical Society in 1965 and also spoke at National Secular Society meetings from time to time. His thoroughly researched lectures were always well received.

Until his retirement, after which he returned to his native Birmingham, Richard Clements was deputy director of the National Council for Social Service.

Sabbatarian fundamentalists — mostly Methodists — in Fiji have been setting up road blocks in order to prevent Sunday travel. They stoned cars which were heading for beaches and resorts.

Reflections After

The best time to think, soberly of course, about Christmas is a little after the festivities have come to an end. Before, it is impossible. We are all abjured not to spend too much, but we concentrate all our energies on spending. The triune powers of the Prime Minister, the Queen and the Deity all, it seems, unite to persuade us that, in theory at least, spending and consuming are serious evils, especially if we rely on credit. Yet the sound of Christmas carols is drowned by the music of the cash register and the gentle swish of the credit card sliding to and fro. While the Christmas days are actually upon us, there is no time at all for reflection. We have to devote all our mental and physical energies to devouring the consumable goods bought for the purpose and in hiding our disappointment at the useless and unwanted rubbish with which we have been presented by kind and thoughtful relations and friends. It is when it is all over that we may find a moment or so for thinking about what it all meant and what it was all for.

We turn, of course, to the nation's spiritual advisers. No, this does not mean either the Church or the BBC, both in bad odour at present. Moreover, they have vested interests. It is to those wells of all that is pure and undefiled to which we turn — the newspapers. Restricting ourselves to the self-styled "heavies", we start with *The Times*. For long the authentic voice of all that is best in British life, although now in questionable Antipodean hands, this organ retains the authority associated with its former reputation as "The Thunderer" (and William Cobbett's affectionate term "the bloody old *Times*").

As usual, *The Times* did not fail us. The leading article on Christmas Eve began by suggesting that "the persistence of Christmas is one of those mysteries that ought not to be probed coldly". Some might think that, in general, Fleet Street — sorry, Wapping — leading articles are the right places for mysteries not to be probed, coldly or otherwise. In this example of not too coldly probing, the anonymous leading article looked at Christmas as, among other things, "an excuse for sentimentality and personal indulgence, for mutual generosity and general good will". It looked at other aspects of the festival, the myth and legend that call "for the suspension not of disbelief but of narrowness and reserve". In a conclusion which is a somewhat muted assertion of the ultimate value of Christmas, readers were told that in spite of the calamities, thoughts of which were in everyone's mind, such as the Armenian earthquake, the Clapham train-crash and the air disaster in Scotland, "Christmas is about optimism" and "a civilisation which had lost the taste for it would be a bleak one indeed".

Christmas, or What the Papers Said

T. F. EVANS

A somewhat different line was taken elsewhere. By one of the miracles, or accidents, of modern publishing, *The Times* appeared on Christmas Eve, a Saturday, swollen by the insertion of a coloured magazine, not of its own parenthood but from the *Sunday Times* (which was not to publish on Christmas Day itself). (In the complicated family relationship of the newspaper world, the *Sunday Times* could be called a sister paper of *The Times*, whereas the *Sun* is more of a bastard half-brother.) The *Sunday Times* took a good look at Christmas. The main article was by Anthony Burgess. He is a well-known novelist and literary critic, a composer as well and, in general, something of a polymath, certainly in the arts. He admits that he was brought up as a Catholic, but various things have worried him. Some of them were dealt with in the article. He compares what Jews and Muslims have sometimes called the "laxity" of Christian observances with the strictness of their own religions. He is not impressed by the liberalisation and vulgarisation of Church ritual — "pop-songs" and "new ecumenical prayers in tired English" — and is even less favourably inclined towards some new developments of evangelism, especially in America.

Among the features of Christianity to which Anthony Burgess takes the greatest exception is what he calls firmly "Christ's most astonishing and unacceptable act — the miracle of the Last Supper", to which, cautiously, but, as many would think, rightly he applies the word 'cannibalistic'. His last words are that "Christianity is not regarded as quite mad, but it's become a terrible embarrassment. And people would rather be wicked than embarrassed".

As might be expected, the Bishop of Durham was original in his approach. In his view, Jesus has kept us guessing but he was sent into the world "to go on troubling people about loving God and loving our neighbour as a real possibility and the only thing that is really worthwhile in the end". The same idea may be the most positive conclusion to emerge from a long feature in the *Daily Telegraph* which presented an account of the life and work of a rector in a rural parish. The nearest that this article comes to any thought of fundamental belief is a reference to the rector's "message" to his flock which is "a simple one, a message of warmth, of the warmth of Christ".

In its leading article, the *Daily Telegraph* wrote of concern that Christmas has become the principal festival of the Christian year, instead of Easter. It is, as might be expected, disturbed at the emphasis given by some Church leaders in the recent past, to the "social gospel" and their emphasis on the "dispos-

essed". This has the effect of alienating otherwise loyal Church members. In a separate article, a piece entitled, "Once-a-year Christianity", the writer, Minette Martin, was worried at the large numbers who attend church at Christmas but show no interest at other times. It could be, of course, because they feel that a concern for the "dispossessed" is quite legitimate on Christmas Day when shops and business houses are shut.

Rather surprisingly, the *Guardian*, despite its tradition of close association with non-conformity, had nothing to say about Christmas, its significance and lasting values; there are thoughts, however, on the growth of child abuse which seems especially deplorable when considered at the time of a festival devoted to children. The *Independent* found Christmas the right time at which to begin a series of articles on "Faith and Reason". The first looked at the various disasters and found comfort in God's light that shines in the darkness. On another page, a moving article asked readers to turn for a moment from their groaning Christmas tables to think of millions of starving children throughout the world.

The Times, which proudly considers itself a journal of record, was the only "quality" paper to appear on Boxing Day. Thus, it was the first to be able to give to a waiting world the text of the Queen's Christmas Day broadcast. In this oration, the Monarch referred to historical events celebrated in the past year, among them the Spanish Armada of 1588, the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the bi-centenary of Australia. She went on to mention the anniversary of the birth of Christ (carefully avoiding all the uncertainties about the actual date of that event). She thought that the Christmas story enshrined a "message of hope". Of course, to unbeliever as well as to believer, the story of the birth of a baby, representing life renewing itself, does touch life at its sacred beginning, irrespective of overtones of religion or dogma. As Burgess pointed out, "the spirit of Christmas is fundamentally pagan".

The celebration of the Winter Solstice with the promise of the regeneration of the year in the coming of the spring, and the birth of the baby at the centre, has a loveliness without any need to graft thereon the idea of the supernatural that is the addition of Christianity. It is because the Christmas story can reflect the whole of life that it has been able to survive all the illogicalities and unrealities that have come to be associated with it — from the narrow religious symbolism to the snow (never known in Palestine at that time of the year), the star, the Kings, the animals — and the cash registers and the credit cards.

Exporting the "Moral Majority"

JOHN CAMPBELL

Tammy Bakker's hair-dos, Pat Robertson's prayerful attempts to deflect the course of hurricanes, Jimmy Swaggart's tearful confession that while denouncing fornication he was at it himself — America's born-again Christians have certainly added to the gaiety of nations. But the sex-obsessed fundamentalists are now trying to spread their message in other countries, including Britain.

Over the last few months a series of conferences, mail shots and Christian magazine articles have heralded the founding of CARE for the Family, the latest initiative by Britain's Moral Majority. As its name implies, the organisation is an off-shoot of the ever growing CARE Trust (formerly the Nationwide Festival of Light). Heading this new outfit is Robert Parsons, an elder of the Glenwood "Centre" — in fact a Cardiff church. By creating a countrywide network of fundamentalists posing as "family counsellors", CARE leaders hope to convert those who turn to the group for help and advice in a time of crisis.

The inspiration for this movement has come directly from Dr James Dobson, an American evangelist whose Focus on the Family counselling service has, in less than a decade, expanded from a one-man operation to one of the largest Moral Majority enterprises. Dobson operates from a twelve-acre, high-tech centre in Los Angeles, California, known as "the family factory". It houses over five hundred university-educated staff who run the computer facilities, film and recording studios, peddling and justifying the values of the Victorian patriarchal family. The factory churns out books, cassette and video tapes whose titles like *Dare to Discipline*, *Discipline While You Can* and *Love Must be Tough* reveal the essence of the message — child battery justified with the aid of biblical quotations.

Eleven titles, translated into thirteen languages, have topped the ten million sales figure. The estimated audience for his *Family Life* video series is fifty million. A half-hour weekly presentation has become the second most widely broadcast show in the United States, promoted by over a thousand stations. In reality, Dobson is a fundamentalist "agony aunt", and judging by the demand for his products, the fundamentalist family is in a state of crisis. Every month, readers, viewers and listeners flood Focus on the Family with over 150,000 letters asking for personal advice — hardly an advert for the benefits of Christianity.

In his hundreds of stock computer-processed replies, Dobson blames the Christian community's troubles — from a pregnant daughter (heaven forbid) to glue sniffing — on everything else but their own ridiculous creed. The major problems seem

to be rebellious children who do not share their parents' rigid standards, "honeymoon disasters" stemming from fundamentalists' ignorance of the opposite sex, and one of the marriage partners discovering that holy wedlock has its drawbacks.

To combat these and other evils, Dobson's staff record the address of the distressed and despatch a reply, complete with a prayer and an appropriate book or pamphlet. This first "fix" comes free. It will be followed by a telephone call from a member of the Focus staff and then a visit from a Focus counsellor in the correspondent's area. In this way, Dobson seeks to ensure that the personal crisis will not precipitate a rejection of God. The same procedure is applied to those who write what is known as "hurt mail", where the family has already collapsed, suffered a bereavement, or is facing terminal illness.

This answering service occupies half the staff. The others are engaged in furthering the cause either by working on the broadcasts, the Focus magazines (*Family*, *Clubhouse* and *Clubhouse Jr*), or on the serious side of the business — raising money and playing politics. The Focus mailing list consists of 1.5 million addresses, and raises some twenty million dollars a year. How much of this finds its way into Dobson's pocket is not known. But Focus's costs are kept to a minimum as the vast majority of the staff give their services free of charge to this man of God.

Money is not everything; power also has its attractions. And Dobson's contribution to the Moral Majority crusade to establish a Holy Republic includes *Citizen* magazine — a Godly Action Guide to community politics and commentary on politically sensitive social issues — and other publications targeting professionals, such as doctors, who can have an immediate and direct impact on social policies.

Dobson himself denies any intention of political involvement. True, Focus does not voice opinions on East-West detente, South Africa, or Nicaragua. But close links with the Reagan Administration, being to the forefront of anti-abortion agitation and campaigning for lower family taxation, demonstrate Dobson's particular philosophy and aims.

Unlike feminists who point to male lust as the cause of sexually related social issues, Focus believes that the real problem is working women. Dobson is convinced that a return to the nuclear family, with the restriction of sexual activity to procreation by heterosexual married couples, would solve everything. To achieve this, Focus campaigns for a reduction in family tax rates which he asserts undermine family financial stability and force women, who should concentrate their attention on

husbands and children, out to work. The perfect mother would ensure that her husband's sexual attentions do not wander elsewhere, and that the children do not develop nasty habits.

Whether or not CARE for the Family can match Dobson's achievements in the United States remains to be seen. Familybase and numerous other groups are already falling over themselves to save the family. But judging by their attitude to sexual matters, there will be a definite need for a fundamentalist Claire Rayner in Britain.

Slavery Baptist College

MICHAEL KOLLER

Michael Koller is now a member of America's Freedom From Religion Foundation. This young freethinker relates how he came to reject Christianity.

Ahhh . . . God's country. The beautiful Blue Mountains. Herein dwells the almighty Jerry Falwell's University. And how do I know this? I was a student at this school that has the nerve to call itself a university.

I spent my freshman year at Liberty University located in Lynchburg, Virginia. It used to be called Liberty Baptist College, which is still too generous a title to give a school that lacks any real educational training. A more appropriate name would be Slavery Baptist College.

The fact that I only endured one year at this school is indicative of the quality of education one receives when one goes there. I went there because I thought I could receive a quality education in a Christian atmosphere. I was eager to learn. I was thirsty for knowledge. By the time I left, I was dry to the bone. All I received was religion on top of religion, brainwashing on top of brainwashing. The Rev Falwell is not ignorant of the value and power of repetition. He knows that if you send students to enough church services, chapels and prayer meetings, you will get the product you desire.

All students were mandated to attend Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening church; Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning chapels; and last but not least, Monday and Tuesday night prayer meetings.

It came to a total of fifteen hours a week. Of course that figure doubled during revival week. It may not sound like a whole lot of time compared to the number of total hours in a week. But accumulating over several semesters, it amounts to clever brainwashing.

The atmosphere of the school is full of hypocrisy and dishonesty. Why? Because the students who go

there must "deny themselves". They have to deny the doubts and honest questions that their growing minds ponder in order to preserve their faith. They have to literally convince themselves that their doubts are "satanic" and that "the Holy Bible" is the only source of truth. They must "keep the faith", even if it means deliberately ignoring honest doubts.

A most important thing happened to me at this school, and it was not a religious experience, to be sure. It was that I finally started the journey back to reality from a world of fantasy. I agree with the biblical Jesus when he said, "the truth will set you free". Indeed, it does. But not the truth of Christianity, for it lacks truth. I am talking about the truth that comes from a free mind. That is what sets you free.

I was once a hypocrite myself. I was always treating my doubts as the enemy to be vehemently opposed. I never questioned my faith. I was being dishonest to myself and to others as well. However, the doubts finally became all too real to continue to honestly ignore. I had to start facing them head on. My faith had to pass the test of logic and reason.

The best thing that I ever did for myself was to consider the possibility that Christianity might be false after all. It allowed me to pursue truth honestly and objectively. It gave me the free mind in which to pursue that truth.

When I was a Christian, I had already determined the verdict before I had even heard the case. I was biased and insisted that I had to be right, since I couldn't be wrong. As a freethinker, I am happy and content. Truth has a real meaning to me now. I do not have the chains of arbitrary doctrines on my mind. I can think any thought I want. I am free to think, in the purest sense.

I am not biased any longer and I cannot insist that I am right, since the possibility always exists that I may be wrong. Truth is never complete. Nobody or no holy book has all the answers. I am willing to change whenever reason warrants it. When it comes to religion, it lacks all reason.

The Rev Peter Greenslade of Looe, Cornwall, has been fined £225 for disorderly behaviour and assaulting a policeman. Plymouth Crown Court was told that the offence took place after Mr Greenslade had been involved in a road accident. He called the policeman "an obnoxious bastard" and urged his dog to bite him. One witness said the man of the cloth was "out of control, cffing and blinding and using other words like that".

Mrs Thatcher's shareholding democracy has reached the Channel Islands. The service sheet for the induction of a new rector of St Mary, Jersey, proclaimed: "We are called . . . to bring the peace of Christ to a broken and dividend world".

Genesis and "Creation Science"

KARL HEATH

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"
"In the beginning was the Word."
"As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be; world without end."

In 1925 John Scopes, a young teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was prosecuted, under a new State law, for instructing a class in evolution. The prosecuting counsel, William Jennings Bryan, a former presidential candidate who died of apoplexy a few weeks after the trial, made no attempt to refute evolution as a scientific theory, but, instead, based his case upon a literal acceptance of the Bible story of Creation. The year 1927 saw the publication of Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*, a devastating exposure of fundamentalist preachers. Today, at first sight, there have been great changes. "That old-time religion" inspires the "born again". The new "tele-evangelists" thump their Bibles on great TV networks. "Revival tents" are replaced by perspex cathedrals. Computers, electronic wizardry and modern market research are employed to milk the millions of the credulous. "Praise the Lord" Theme Parks are constructed at vast cost. The preachers, while continuing to condemn Mammon, wear Brooks Brothers suits and Gucci shoes, drive Cadillacs and Rolls-Royces. Some, like Jim Bakker, have been exposed for sexual peccadilloes and charged with fraudulent expropriation of enormous funds collected for ostensibly charity.

All this modern technology has been accompanied by a bogus attempt to enlist theoretical science on the side of fundamentalism under the guise of an abortion called "Creation Science".

But "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*". Today's Elmer Gantrys are the same uneducated bigots as before, "on the make" but making millions more. "Creation Science" is a sham. Where is the scientific method? Where is the testing and experimentation? Where are the measurements? Where is the scientific evidence for Creation from geology, biology, palaeontology, physics or chemistry? It would indeed have been sensational if, for the first time in history, genuine scientific investigation had been shown to demonstrate proof of God and Creation.

Yet, despite some ill-considered criticism of evolutionary theory, no evidence is advanced to prove Creation and Creator, nothing beyond the old mish-mash of faith, revelation and Biblical infallibility. There was, at least, some intellectual content in the logical proofs of God, the ontological and cosmological arguments of the mediaeval monks, but they have all been abandoned except for Paley's popular version, "the Argument from Design", still

a favourite among fundamentalists.

While science provides no evidence of Creation, theology is all at sea, in dispute and confusion, about what Creation means. The Book of Genesis begins: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void". Two interpretations are possible. Did God first create an earth which was without form and void? Or is this what God found before he started creating? In other words, did Creation mean giving form to something which existed already? Other ancient Creation legends suggest the latter, with Gods or Goddesses "creating" by giving shape or design to pre-existent matter, like an artist or craftsman. But we do not think, for example, of Chippendale's chairs "coming into existence". We acknowledge previous wood and trees. If God's Creation was like this, then the first ten words of Genesis do not describe the first act of Creation but are a description of what happened in the first two days. In verses six, seven and eight "God said Let there be a firmament . . . and God made the firmament . . . and God called the firmament Heaven". This suggests that the writers intended the second interpretation, the formless earth preceding Creation.

But St Augustine would have none of this. He insisted upon creation out of nothing, and this became orthodox Christian dogma. There were, however, heretical alternatives. St Dionysius the Areopagite (or was it the pseudo-Dionysius of the sixth century AD?) favoured the Neoplatonist emanation theory, creation being a continuous process radiating from the godhead like ripples from a stone thrown in a pond. This involved the interesting corollary that the further the ripples departed from God the less divinity they displayed. Indeed, the manifest evils and imperfections of the created world led other heretics like Marcion and the Gnostics to claim that the world of matter had been created by an evil deity, demiurge or Archon, Ialdabaoth, the Jahveh or Jehovah of the Old Testament. Matter was evil and Christians should worship the idealist God of the New Testament.

The biblical Creation story also ignores the time element in matter. When Mrs Alexander wrote "Each little flower that opens, Each little bird that sings, He made their glowing colours, He made their tiny wings", she imagined a bird which did not come from an egg, and a flower which did not come from a seed. But eggs also come from birds, and seeds from flowers. Nor could God make a mountain without a conscious imitation of all the processes of orogeny and erosion which would have shaped it, continuing in incessant change through past and future. Engels said: "There is no matter without motion, and no motion without matter". The sixth-

century BC Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, understood this in his doctrine of eternal flux: "Nothing ever is; everything is becoming".

The first sentence of St John's Gospel states the Greek idea of "logos". The Greeks had a profound conviction that there was a pre-ordained order in the universe, Cosmos rather than Chaos, destiny, fate, justice, retribution, a recurrent theme in Greek tragedy. This was a natural reaction to the perceived inter-relationships of nature, giving rise, for example, to the Stoic doctrine of Natural Law. But the appearance of design does not logically lead, as in Paley's "Argument from Design", to a Creator. Kant pointed out that this mediaeval "proof" at best indicated a thing which made the universe, and, in no way, a moral God. But the devastating riposte came from Darwin's "Natural Selection". Apply this process to the whole universe and it will always look like a design because the parts which don't fit are continually eliminated — hence the appearance of design, but no Designer.

The Church Service response says "in the beginning" and then "world without end". What is the logic of denying infinity in the past (except for God all by himself), and yet accepting infinity for the future. If there is to be an infinite future, the past will recede into infinity. When asked what God was doing (for ever!) before he made the universe, St Augustine replied "creating Hell for people who ask such questions". To do him justice he had a

more temperate answer, namely that the concept of infinity was based upon our imperfect notion of time, eternity being timeless.

All in all, the religious have not the faintest idea of what they mean by Creation or the Beginning. Nor has anyone; in this sense the infinite universe is beyond the scope of brains finite in space and time. We are like Fred Hoyle's fishes swimming off Yarmouth for centuries, but, with their fish brains, never to know that Yarmouth is there. And J. B. S. Haldane declared that, not only will we never comprehend the universe: we are incapable of imagining its nature.

And yet the religious have the effrontery to impose petty little fairy tales upon this eternal mystery. Thousands of little children have punctured this presumption and pretentious posturing. When told that God made the world, they have asked: "Who made God?" They will not have heard of "First Cause", "Primum Mobile", "Unmoved Mover" or "Infinite Regress", but they have more common sense than the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and perhaps even more than the Bishop of Durham. I have corresponded recently with Dr David Jenkins. I wonder whether he could tell us, in unambiguous terms and without mysticism, what he understands by Creation. And, if he claims the Bible version to be allegory, what does he understand to be the reality behind the metaphor?

Holy Places and Christian Credulity R. J. CONDON

Freethinkers have sometimes doubted or denied the historical existence of Jesus Christ, but none to my knowledge ever questioned the reality of Pontius Pilate. So it is all the more astonishing to learn that this position was apparently once held by a clergyman of the Established Church, Canon John Hester, now of Chichester Cathedral. Canon Hester describes his conversion to orthodoxy in an article in the *Chichester Observer* of 27 October 1988.

In 1962 or thereabouts a dedication stone was unearthed at Caesarea bearing the Latin name "Pontius Pilatus". It hit the Canon like a thunderbolt. He writes: "So he was a real man, this notorious character in the *dramatis personae* of the gospels! I went on to the disturbing realisation that the others must all be real people too; the apostles, the women with whom Jesus associated, ultimately the Lord himself, of flesh and blood like us. He was God, of course, but also a real man, not just God posing as such".

It would be interesting to know just what the Canon's earlier opinion was. Possibly he thought the whole thing was a play, as his use of "*dramatis*

personae" suggests. In Galatians 3:1 Paul gives a strong hint that this was so, and indeed such plays had long been performed in the ancient world. A Babylonian drama about the death and resurrection of Bel, discovered on the site of Assur, resembles the gospel narrative so closely that the latter could have been copied from it. Even the detail of the two thieves is there.

Canon Hester wrote his article in Jerusalem where, as he says, tensions caused by rival religions and sects go back two thousand years. He went each day to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre "to sit for an hour or two near the site of Christ's death on Calvary and ponder again and again the great mystery of that event".

If it is a mystery it must have a hidden meaning. Paul calls the gospel a mystery, and rebukes his followers for persisting in regarding it as "carnal" or literally true, instead of giving it a spiritual meaning (Ephesians 6:19 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-2). There is another warning against taking it literally in 2

(continued on back page)

INVASION OF THE MIND SNATCHERS. BBC Radio 4

There has been, in recent years, an extraordinary growth in the occult and the paranormal. Television programmes present these issues supposedly as "entertainment", while books and videos offer solutions to existential doubt, and packages for self-monitoring and self-control through the channelling of spiritual forces. Does it matter? Is it harmful to hold irrational beliefs, in fact? And of course, why have such beliefs a strong hold in the first place, in a supposedly scientifically informed culture?

This radio broadcast, "Invasion of the Mind Snatchers", produced by Peter Evans, took members of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims for the Paranormal through these questions, interposed with some chilling extracts from publicity material for the kinds of packages described above. Their conclusion was that the harm comes firstly from the surrender of one's willingness to do anything about one's problems, relying instead on amulets and faith. More insidious, however, is the dulling of critical edge, the creation of a public who are "apathetic, cynical and easily victimised by charlatans and bigots" as one speaker argued — and open to the kind of low level vilification campaign waged by the Republicans in the recent US presidential election.

But it is easy for the confident sceptic to berate the irrational beliefs of others, to laugh at horoscopes and UFOs. To attack irrationality one has to understand it. The programme mentioned two sets of research on the people who believe in the occult and the paranormal, and it is interesting that the results were contrasting. One profile is perhaps the classic stereotype of the gullible person — low level of education, especially in science, more likely to be female than male, strongly religious in a concrete and fundamentalist way, such that the magical beliefs do not conflict with the religious. The second profile of the irrational, however, poses a more serious problem because it reflects not so much deficits in the individual's education as a set of assumptions and frameworks for how one should treat knowledge. These are valued elements of the culture; a combination of belief in freedom of thought, anti-authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism (together these two are a manifestation of populism), and an interest in religion. The ruggedly individualistic thinker who is sceptical of authority may as equally reject science as any other orthodoxies. Indeed, several speakers saw the decline of traditional religion — something that increasing scientific knowledge has aided — as creating a vacuum for people who lack sufficient scientific knowledge, or

who are not convinced that science can answer questions in many areas of life. Such people are particularly vulnerable to mythologies that offer comfort, the resolution of ambiguity and, most particularly, the illusion that one can gain power in one's life through the channelling of spiritual forces.

Self-enhancement and comfort are one thing, but invasion by aliens is another dimension. UFO abductions are apparently a cult: people who give accounts of their personal experiences fuel speculations and pseudo-scientific rubbish — for example that aliens are engaging in "genetic engineering" and take families as experimental subjects over generations. In a reincarnation of the myth of the incubus, the virgin and the changeling, it is even claimed that aliens enter the bedrooms of teenage daughters, impregnating them with alien sperm, and later returning to remove the foetus for implantation in an extraterrestrial host.

The Committee was set up to offer a solid scientific buttress against the growth of such cults, and through their magazine, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, have campaigned for over ten years. They, justifiably, argue that scientists have been too arrogant and too complacent, dismissing irrational beliefs and at the same time being unwilling themselves to make a strong stand, supported by information addressed at the proper level of popular comprehensibility. The behaviour of many a scientist confirms the alienating, ivory tower image of science, a depressing spoilsport of the imaginative and the existential.

Despite the efforts of the Committee, belief in the paranormal remains strong. How can the irrational be countered? One cannot entirely blame the media; to have been abducted by aliens is much more newsworthy than the prosaic disclaimer of the sceptic. Big business will cynically promote the bestselling video and book, but they don't need a conspiracy to create the market itself. There is, the speakers considered, a real problem of bad information — information pollution. Enough incorrect information goes out for an intelligent but ill-informed reader to find apparently sensible support for pseudo-science. But the problem does boil down to a culture which thinks that science is boring. It is not more science that people need, but better understanding of the tools of rational thought — the realities of science rather than the pat products of science. Too often science is presented as fact, rather than as the best current guess — where the key issue should be *the methods by which one should evaluate the claims of others*. The cult of the fact may be the enemy of rationality. One speaker argued that children should

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be taught how their minds work — as we explain dreams and nightmares, so also we should explain to children other ambiguous subjective states so that they can find an internal psychological explanation rather than seeking an external one.

Finally, the process of knowing, discovering and evaluating needs to be fun, not tedious. The sceptic has to be seen as exciting, not a killjoy. Anyone who demythologises and deromanticises is hardly going to gain popular appeal; it is time that the devil no longer had all the best stories.

HELEN HASTE

BOOK

VICARS OF CHRIST: THE DARK SIDE OF THE PAPACY, by Peter de Rosa. Bantam Press, £14.95

This is well-trodden ground. The record of any power-sodden institution invites lurid language, or may even intimidate the scholarly soul of an historian. The monstrous crimes, follies and scandals in the history of the Papacy are notorious; there is hardly need for exposure. Peter de Rosa, who was a priest and occupied senior academic posts for some twelve years, re-treads the whole course during more than 1,900 years of the 262 Popes. He is unsparing with the lurid language. He left the priesthood in 1970, and lives in Ireland with a wife and two sons. He says: "Though, like Dante, I stress here the dark side of the papacy, it is the work of a friend not an enemy". It seems to have been his purpose to convey to his fellow Catholics, in the spirit of Vatican II, the information and insight that would enable them to make their own critical assessment of and response to the policies, actions and pronouncements of the incumbent of the See of St Peter. That is, he seeks to help the faithful to live with an institution that is ruinously flawed, under a supreme authority that is always fallible, and liable to be obsessively perverse. What would logically condemn the institution, and in practice undermine it, is offered for its salvation. The paradox is not shirked.

The book is divided into three parts: Power; Truth; Love. The first part is basic, because it deals not only with the papal aspiration to rule the world, and the policies and actions by which outstanding popes strove to accomplish that, but also with the credentials of the institution itself. The claim to a Gospel warranty for its foundation is tendentious. It was opportunist in taking advantage of Constantine's choice of a State religion. Its claims were maintained by forgeries. In short, it was a corrupt human institution, faced with a Christian cover-up.

By the time Stephen III (752-7) became pope, the church was thoroughly converted to the Roman Empire. From the Donation, it is plain that the Bishop of Rome looked like Constantine, lived like him, dressed like him, inhabited his palaces, ruled over his lands, had exactly the same imperial outlook.

Secular politics, in which a king in council makes laws to which the king is expected to be subject, and again and again a strong and able king makes himself absolute, were paralleled in the church. A General Council represented the Catholic Church, and had supreme authority under Christ. The versatile and famous Aeneas Sylvius, who was to become Pius II, wrote: "Hardly anyone doubts that a Council is above a pope". That meant little or nothing to Hildebrand or Innocent III, among many. Like secular government, the Church ruled by a spoils system, with richer pickings. In terms of inevitable bureaucracy, the Curia in Rome was even more firmly entrenched, manipulative, and secure against change and reform. Popes who were not flagrantly lax, and their lives scandalous, were the greatest menace. An austere, ascetic, reforming pope, prepared to use all available means to root out error or stamp out moral laxity, exemplified Montesquieu's comment on the futility of trying to change by force what is established in habit or the nature of things: "Abstract principles can transform men into savages". We have had Stalin and Pol Pot. Infallibility is a commitment to consistency, which entails "forgetting" or re-writing history, satirized by Orwell. In short, the Roman Church as, first and last, a human institution, manifested conspicuously the tendencies to which institutions in general are liable.

No institution reforms itself from within. It was the Reformation that forced the Roman Church to take stock of itself. This was done by the Council of Trent (1545-63). The result was a consecration of medieval theology, and a hardening of attitudes that cemented the schism and turned it into a cold war. After Trent, bishops so lost independence that no Council was held for more than three hundred years, and then only to express formally papal absolutism. "The Roman Church . . . was henceforward less a Catholic Church than an inward-looking and frightened sect over which the pope held sway".

Vatican II, the Council convened by John XXIII (1958-63), promised to change all that. Edouard Herriot, President in his day of the World Union of Freethinkers, said of this man when he was nuncio in Paris at the end of the war: "If all priests were like Nuncio Roncalli, there would be no anti-clericals left". What happened when the Council met was spontaneous and totally unexpected, and to the organising Curia utterly unwelcome. Liberal minds expressed themselves, and gained the ascendancy.

There was a thrill of response as it was generally felt that the Catholic Church was beginning to move as a body into the twentieth century. John's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* implicitly repudiated much of the teaching of his nineteenth-century predecessors, according respect to the individual conscience and to the beliefs of those believed to be in error. The glory of the Council at the time, its spontaneity, was its fatal weakness. The structures were not altered.

The Council was a second spring, a chance for liberty and free discussion to blossom and enrich the church. . . . But with Paul VI and John Paul II the second spring died out.

In a democracy, a Catholic participates in something like an open society. In his Church, control from the top is absolute. The contrast is particularly galling in the USA. John Paul sees himself as the champion of absolute Catholic truth. "A scholar is as likely to be silenced for proposing that priests should be allowed to marry or women be ordained as for denying the divinity of Christ". Unfortunately, or fortunately, his assumptions are false.

History explodes the myth of a papacy lily-white in the matter of truth. In an age of barbarism, the popes led the pack; in an age of enlightenment, they trailed the field. And their record was worst when, contrary to the Gospel, they tried to impose the truth by force.

In the nineteenth century, the encyclicals constantly attacked civil and religious liberty. In the twentieth, their preoccupation is sex. Paul VI who inherited Vatican II was a pope in the old style. He believed it was his duty to speak to and for the Church on the issues of indecision. On the current question for the Church, birth control, he appointed a large and representative commission to advise him. Their discussion was thorough, and a large majority were in favour of recommending approval of modern methods of contraception. What prevailed in the end with the Pope, however, was the unrevised ruling of the Church, and he issued the lamentable *Humanae Vitae*. Rome received a flood of applications from priests wanting to give up the ministry. They had been forced to recognise the ignorant intransigence of the Vatican on sex. The papacy was the chief victim of its own decision. In America particularly, the Catholic Church went into steep decline, of which a sociological study "found substantial evidence linking that decline to a rejection of the Church's sexual ethic and erosion of the credibility of papal leadership". With the accession of the ubiquitous John Paul II in 1978, this has been reinforced by his unhesitating absolutism on clerical celibacy, marriage and divorce, birth control, and abortion.

There is of course a long tradition in the Church

of manichean horror of the flesh, which Augustine helped to establish. But de Rosa shows that the glorification of chastity and virginity was an alien development. "To honour Mary's *chastity* would have perplexed the apostles, as it perplexes Jews to this day. . . . A virgin was not a 'pure girl' but an unwed girl". In the Magnificat, "Mary praises God for looking, not on her purity but on her lowliness, her nothingness". Peter de Rosa argues that to punish sex is not biblical and is no necessary part of Christianity, and that to make it so is inevitably to alienate the modern world.

Since 1979, whenever John Paul has spoken about abortion, he has witnessed to a consuming fire within him. He believes with every fibre of his being that this is the issue that will decide whether our generation has the right to consider itself civilised or not. . . . Opponents of abortion are in the front line of the battle against the new paganism; they are fighting for the dignity of man and the sacredness of all life. . . . Contraception leads to abortion leads to infanticide leads to euthanasia. It is all of a piece.

To subsume and polarise these questions in this way is to polarise a complex issue and exclude all middle ground, on which alone reasonable people can reach judgements and decisions that take due account of all relevant considerations in the case in question. The author here, as a faithful Catholic, argues that his Church must concede and occupy this middle ground, if it is not to doom itself to self-destruction. To do otherwise, is in effect a betrayal of the faith.

The papacy, by considering itself the moral referee of the world . . . has got itself into an appalling mess. Most Vatican decrees are rabbinical in the worst sense of the word, negative and condemnatory.

The upshot for the author of this long argument of many strands is his hope that his Church will break out of its self-imposed prison, and renew itself in "an Ecumenical Council of all those who profess the name of Jesus and live by his name. Such a Council is already a thousand years and more overdue".

Here is a faithful, fully-informed Catholic who thinks it is not merely realistic, but right in matters on which his Church officially insists on exclusive application of abstract principle, to stand on middle ground and entertain all reasonable considerations in the light of the particular case. On abortion, in general terms, he bases his position on scientific grounds. "The conceptus has its own genetic code that will evolve but never alter substantially. . . . What the woman carries is not an inert piece of matter . . . but a particular human male or female in embryo. This embryo is not a potential human, but a human being with potential". All the same, abortion is not to be considered *ipso facto* as murder.

H. J. BLACKHAM

A Sign From Above

PHILLIP ADAMS

A few years back, one of Britain's most majestic cathedrals, one of God's mediaeval skyscrapers, came to grief. York Minster was smote by lightning, the thunderbolt turning ancient beams into kindling. Soon the sacred precincts were turned into a parody of hell. Stained-glass images melted like coloured toffee, becoming Daliesque distortions and molten lead poured down on the scurrying, treasure-salvaging clergy from the exploding roof. Bibles burnt, pews blistered while, below in the crypt, the ancient tenants were roasted in their tombs. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Having just spent millions on restoration, the parishioners were somewhat puzzled by the justice of this Act of God. The police, however, discounted the possibility of arson which had been thought possible given the consecration, just hours earlier, of a controversial new Bishop. Just before the ceremony, the Right Rev David Jenkins had confessed that he didn't believe in the virgin birth or in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus in the act of claiming crook and mitre, he had infuriated a large part of the membership of the Church of England. The Rev John Mawll, the vicar escorted from York Minster on Friday after protesting Jenkins' promotion, said: "I believe God acts in this world. Who can say whether God intervened in this case or not".

Mind you, an increasing number of senior members of the clergy, not to mention some of the Vatican's highest-ranking theologians, are dispensing with many of the quaint dogmas in favour of a more humanistic system of belief. They see Jesus of Nazareth as an earth-bound and mortal teacher, albeit one of soaring influence. Little wonder that many were quite pleased to see their cathedral ablaze, the spire belching flames like one of those malfunctioning rockets at Cape Kennedy. For them it was God's judgement on the Bolshie Bishop. Images of the Almighty leaning over a thundercloud to drop a disapproving depth charge.

All of which persuades me to relate one of my favourite historical, theological anecdotes, a sort of atheist's parable. It concerns lightning, churches and "the first civilised American", republican, rationalist and scientist, Benjamin Franklin.

I should explain that the term "scientist" is a modern one. Up until Franklin's time such men (for women tended to be excluded from their ranks) were described as "natural philosophers". They would cogitate, experiment, discuss and publish, but in a studiously impractical manner. The idea of technology translating a scientific idea into a practical product was virtually unknown. Indeed, it can be argued that Franklin's breakthrough, the

lightning conductor, was the *first* tangible expression of science, the first technological product to be offered to the market. And it was a product that would bedevil the Christian church.

Franklin, Benjamin (1706-90), American printer, author, publisher, inventor, scientist, public servant and diplomat. Interested in heat and light, sound and magnetism, hydrostatics, chemistry, geology, physiology, psychology, oceanography, women and revolution. Not necessarily in that order.

There was a time when the truly great were the really famous, when men like Voltaire and Victor Hugo were the most famous on earth. Thus in Franklin's lifetime nobody, including the King of England, was more celebrated. By the end of his life, Franklin was a force in a dozen fields. Amongst his most popular publishing ventures were Poor Richard's Almanacs, full of useful maxims. "God helps those who help themselves" was one of the most popular and, clearly, Franklin took his own advice.

In 1780 Franklin wrote a magnificent letter to Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen.

The rapid progress through science now has me regretting, sometimes, that I was born too soon. It is impossible to imagine the height to which civilisation may be carried in a thousand years, the power of man over matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large matters of their gravity, and give them absolute levity, for the sake of easy transport. Agriculture may diminish its labour and double its produce; all diseases may by sure means be prevented or cured, not excepting that of old age, and our lives lengthened at pleasure . . . oh, that moral science were in as fair a way of improvement, that men would cease to be wolves to one another, and that human beings would at length learn what they now improperly call "humanity".

Franklin was born in Boston in 1706, the son of a maker of soap and candles. Taking little pleasure in the cutting of wicks, the boy was apprenticed to his elder brother James, a printer. An ardent reader of such writers as Bunyan, Plutarch, Defoe and Mather, Franklin began flirting with religious scepticism. And when his brother was gaoled for criticising the authorities in a newly founded newspaper, Benjamin became the publisher.

After storms in his private life, and storms at sea, he arrived in New York, beginning a phase in his life that reads like the *Odyssey of Candide*. A teetotaller, Franklin became a vegetarian so that the money he saved on meat could be invested in more books. Despite the lack of protein, Franklin found the energy for endless flirtations. That "hard-to-be-governed Passion of Youth" led him to a succession of "low women". Soon he found himself responsible

for a natural son, whose mother has remained a mystery.

His fame and fortune greatly aided by the success of the Almanacs, and a newspaper called the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin became a prosperous businessman, with investments in real estate and a modest but growing publishing empire. Yet he found time to establish Junto, "to debate questions of morals, politics and natural philosophy, and to exchange knowledge of business affairs which might be valuable to the more enterprising members". Thus, for his sins, Franklin was the progenitor of service organisations like Rotary and Lions.

Whatever his contributions to politics and republicanism, Franklin is best remembered for his encounter with electricity. Whilst his originality may have been somewhat exaggerated (there were experimenters aplenty in Europe), Franklin's hypotheses about electricity were the most sophisticated, and he invented many of the terms which we still use in discussing electricity today: positive, negative, battery, conductor, etc. Whether or not his famous experiment with a high-flying kite in an electrical storm was authentic or apocryphal, there's no doubt that Franklin conceived the idea of the lightning rod.

For centuries churches and cathedrals had been blazing merrily, not because of arson by atheists but because of highly embarrassing acts of God. In every village, in every city, the church was always the tallest building. Enspired to inspire, its upthrusting architecture was at once pious and pompous, pointing at the Heaven of its patron. Sadly, this made the steeple a two-edged sword. For whilst it directed the thoughts of the congregation in the right direction, it also proffered itself to passing storms as the perfect target. Thus the congregations or their primitive fire brigades were forever rushing to burning churches with brimming buckets and tears. Many of the most beautiful cathedrals caught fire quite regularly, a phenomenon that was hard for priests and vicars to explain away from their oft-singed pulpits. If the church was the house of God why did he keep burning them down? Why not vent his spleen on the pub or the brothel?

By observing storms Franklin was able to find the answers. And when he proffered his lightning rod to the world, businessmen and farmers embraced it with enthusiasm. Not wanting their barns and emporia to be barbecued, they were delighted to install the new invention. But not the churches.

The clergy found themselves on the horns of a dilemma, if not the devil himself. It seemed to them anomalous, perhaps blasphemous, to deflect God's wrath in this way. While they were frequently miffed or peeved by his tendency to incinerate churches (burning the Baptists, incinerating the episcopalians), it was, after all, his business. And so a new era

began, in which secular buildings enjoyed the unfailing protection of Mr Franklin's ingenious device whilst churches — and churches alone — were burnt to the ground. Spectacular bonfires on every horizon.

Such was Franklin's fame that when he died all educated Europeans knew the epigram of Turgot, the French economist: "He snatched the lightning from the skies and the sceptre from the tyrants". And whilst he may have been saddened by the singing of York Minster, I think Franklin would be faintly amused by the superstitious interpretations of the tragedy. But then, from the days of Galileo to the current crackpot controversy about Creationism, the Christian church has not always been in the vanguard of scientific thought. More often it's been in the guard's van, having disconnected itself from the Spirit of Progress before being shunted onto some overgrown sidetrack.

LETTER

I'm delighted my provocative T. S. Eliot bait should attract so formidable a fish as Jim Herrick.

Unfortunately, in a brief note I was unable either to acknowledge Eliot's positive contribution to English letters or to substantiate my serious criticisms. Anyone interested can sniff the entire 5,000-word can of worms in *Twentieth Century*, Vol 177, No 1042 (1969).

The *Freethinker* is no place for extended literary argument, but I must address some specific points. I did acknowledge (obscurely) Eliot's memorable lines, my point being that there were so few of them for a "major" poet. In my copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* he ranks one column, about as much as Queen Elizabeth I and somewhat less than George Eliot, who had other goals. All whom I regard as major poets achieve pages. True, this is a 1941 edition, but the same pathetic Eliot gleanings appear in the numerous birthday tributes during his later life.

His "mixture of the mythic and demotic" was interesting, if not always successful, but not in my view "novel" as the same thing was done by the early Wordsworth and Browning — as well as by minor poets predating him.

Herrick does raise important questions of concern to freethinkers: (1) should a "great artist" express "humanist" or "elevated" views? (2) should freethinkers "fall into the trap of dismissing writers whose views they do not share"? My replies are (1) maybe and (2) no.

Studies by J. M. Wheeler, J. M. Robertson and Joseph McCabe suggest that in fact major writers often do "rise above the prejudices of their milieu"; and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is less anti-semantic than the popular story he adapted.

Personally, I've always treated literature as literature and not ideology. In *Twentieth Century* I contrasted Eliot's 10-liner from *Four Quarters* beginning "Time present and time past" with the metaphysical Henry Vaughan's three-liner beginning "I saw Eternity the other night". One is popinjay prose, the other pure poetry. And I paid tribute to the "genuinely original" Ezra Pound who edited *The Waste Land* while pursuing fascism. Further, in quoting the Bible I always use the mellifluous Authorised Version, though I could score more propaganda points with jejune modern translations.

DAVID TRIBE

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 5 February, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public meeting.

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

Gay 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, 13 February, 7.30 pm. Wendy Webster: Women's Role — Cultural or Innate.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 January, 7.45 pm. Discussion: Is Britain a Christian Country?

London Student Sceptics. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Monday, 23 January, 7.15 pm. Ian Ridpath: Extraterrestrial Life and UFOs. Monday, 6 February, 7.15 pm. Colin Brewer: Alternative Practitioners — the Witchdoctors of Today? Monday, 20 February, 7.15 pm. Barbara Smoker: Near Death Experiences.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 a.m.; Forum, 3 pm; Concert, 6.30 pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Extramural Studies, 6.30 pm. Please write or telephone 01-831 7723 for details.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 8 February, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Annual General Meeting followed by talk on John Bowden's new book, *Jesus — the Unanswered Questions*.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 16 January and Monday, 20 February, public meetings, 7.45 pm for 8 pm.

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

ANNUAL DINNER
NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
Guest speaker
JONATHAN MILLER
London,
Saturday, 15th April

Freethinker Fund

January is the month when many readers renew their subscriptions to *The Freethinker*. Needless to say, it is very helpful if this is done promptly.

Of course the cover price does not meet production and distribution costs. Without the generous financial support of readers, and the unpaid work of those who write its articles and reviews, the paper would, like so many others, have disappeared years ago. Donations to the Fund are essential in order to meet the annual deficit. And just as important, *The Freethinker* must be introduced to potential readers.

Supporters rallied around magnificently in 1988, and we look forward with confidence to their continued support in 1989.

The final list of contributors for 1988 is given below. Our thanks to them and all others who supported the Fund last year.

A. Ferguson, A. R. Hall and S. Waite, £1 each; R. J. Beale, B. W. Carter, A. Dawn, H. Gurney, N. Levenson, G. McGhee and G. Vale, £2 each; B. Piercy, £2.40; A. C. F.ambre, F. J. Muskett, T. Morrison and D. Redhead, £3 each; A. McGill and K. Moore, £4.40 each; N. K. Bridge, B. Cattermole, G. Coupland, F. G. Evans, D. Flint, E. C. Gray, D. T. Harris, N. Haemmerle, C. Honeywell, L. T. Johnson, J. Lippitt, T. J. Peters, S. Smith, W. S. Spencer, P. K. Wilmott and F. Yates, £5 each; P. George, W. Johnston, J. Watson and A. Whitehead, £10 each; J. Galliano, £14.40; N. L. Child, £25; W. J. Gallo, \$5.

Total for November and December 1988: £199.60 and \$5.

Grand total for 1988: £2,403.90 and \$38.

Australian Churches Make a Property Killing

It is not only in the United States that religion is big business. The normally conservative Australian weekly, *The Bulletin*, recently carried a major feature entitled "The Realtors". It reported that, as in most countries, the mainstream denominations in Australia are losing customers. Nevertheless business is booming for the churches — the property market.

"The value of church property is conservatively estimated at \$3.2 billion. . . Once upon a time, it was the churches' spires that reached heavenwards; now it is their highrise office buildings. In Sydney, hymns and liturgy are being drowned out by bulldozers and jackhammers. Dust is thicker than incense. Hallelujah, even the Sallies are going up.

"The Anglicans began the highrise trend in 1976 when they built their headquarters, St Andrew's House, behind St Andrew's Cathedral . . . it has more than trebled in value. . . Other churches were quick to realise that they should make greater use

of the valuable city properties either bequeathed to them by the devout or granted by God-fearing governments more than a century ago.

In a section headed "Sects' Appeal — it's Tax Free", *The Bulletin* notes that churches are exempt from rates and taxes. It poses the question: "But what constitutes a church? A belief in God? Dogma? Organisation? At a time when an English judge was describing the Church of Scientology as 'corrupt, sinister and dangerous', five justices of the High Court of Australia ruled that it was a religious institution and therefore qualified for tax exemptions. . . The ruling was joyful news for dozens of small sects who could see a tax-free life ahead. Others viewed the decision as licence for the dotty".

And for the dangerous, it could had added with justification.

Holy Places and Christian Credulity

Corinthians 3 : 6. Certainly a real Pilate does not guarantee a real Christ.

The earliest knowledge we have of the Christian religion shows it to have been split in this very manner. Opposed to those sects believing in a Jesus Christ of flesh and blood were the Gnostics, for whom the Saviour was a purely spiritual being emanating from God and descending from heaven to dwell within the human heart. His suffering was due to his being out of his rarified element in what was, for him, the evil and suffocating miasma of everything earthly.

On this view there could never have been a physical crucifixion, under Pilate or anyone else. The Apostles' Creed goes back at least to the second century, and may be older than the Gospels. It has a cosmic quality that points to a Gnostic origin, the one incongruous clause being "suffered under Pontius Pilate". It has been conjectured that the original Greek wording had "pontos piletos", which would then translate as "suffered under the dense sea" (of earthly matter). This would be perfectly intelligible as a Gnostic principle. If the conjecture is right, the "dense sea" would inevitably have become confused with Pontius Pilate, saddling the procurator with a crime he could not have committed.

Canon Hester tells us that the Greek Orthodox authorities have care of the "precious" site of Calvary. But can it be authentic? The *Encyclopaedia Biblica* considers several possible positions, but all are said to be inconclusive — "The scene of the greatest event in Jerusalem's history is still unknown". The same may be said of the birthplace which attracts large crowds at Christmas. According to Jerome a birthplace of Tammuz once did duty for it.

There was no church on the alleged site of the Holy Sepulchre before Christianity was established by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.

A temple of Venus had to be demolished to make way for it. Then the priests began to descend on Jerusalem. They confidently pointed out the scene of each event recorded in the Gospels, and disputing sects built their shrines on rival sites. The Roman and Greek Churches, for example, each had a site of the Annunciation, and frequently came to blows over the question of authenticity. Such strife is not unknown today. Almost every Christmas priests of rival faiths battle for control over the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The Palestine Exploration Fund initiated a great deal of excavation in and around Jerusalem between 1865 and 1914. Its 1915 Report makes fascinating reading, but one looks in vain for any confirmation, however limited, of the gospel story. The Report does say that travellers in Palestine wrote books containing remarkably little accurate information. Christian pilgrims visited traditional New Testament sites, and accepted without question the stories they were told and the legends that had been invented. The pilgrims had no means of knowing what Jerusalem was like before its destruction by Titus in the year 70. The restoration by Hadrian in 132 completely altered the appearance of the place, so writers had to rely on traditions, often incorrect and altered from generation to generation.

If any site has been validated since 1915, the Churches have been mighty quiet about it. Proof seems hardly necessary anyway, for there is no shortage of the credulous in Jerusalem. Canon Hester tells of waves of Greek pilgrims creeping on their knees.

All in all, the Canon's faith in the authenticity of the holy places seems likely to be misplaced, but at least he can be commended on another count. Before he left England he was "fortunate enough" to see Martin Scorsese's "remarkable" film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. "I was grateful for the chance to see it", he writes. "I hope the film, impulsively condemned as it has been by some who have not seen it, will help others as it has done me". What, no blasphemy?

"Born again" Christian, Philip Howard, of Hawarden, Clwyd, admitted being a public nuisance when charged at Mold Magistrates' Court of persistently attempting to impose religious propaganda on people against their will. The court was told that Howard preached to young children. One mother was so upset she required medical attention. Howard was bailed pending social and psychiatric reports.

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.