

# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 109 No. 3

MARCH 1989

40p

## SUNDAY SHOPPING: SURVEY REVEALS MAJORITY SUPPORT FOR REFORM

A large majority of the public want to see the Sunday trading laws reformed. That is the clear message of a "super-poll" conducted by NOP, MORI, Marplan and Gallup. Over 7,000 people were questioned in an unusual mass survey commissioned by the Shopping Hours Reform Council.

The 1950 Shops Act has survived more than 20 attempts at reform. In 1984 a Home Office Committee, chaired by Robin Auld, QC, recommended the abolition of restrictions on Sunday trading. This proposal alerted the Sabbatarian forces, and two years later the Government's Shops Bill was defeated. Its opponents in the House of Commons included MPs from all parties.

Outside Parliament the anti-reform campaign was spearheaded by the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. But unlike its rather quaint old auntie, the Lord's Day Observance Society, the Cambridge-based KSSC goes in for glossy literature, direct mailing and modern lobbying techniques. The two organisations' relationship appears to be chilly, if not actually frosty.

During the 1986 campaign many anomalies came to light. The hypocrisy of the Shops Bill's opponents was exposed by the revelation that many churches engaged in Sunday trading by selling books, souvenirs, etc. Petitions and letter-writing drives were organised. The 14 Ulster Unionists suspended their boycott of Westminster to vote against a reform that did not apply to Northern Ireland. The Bill was lost by 14 votes.

Participants in last month's "super-poll" were asked: "At present only shops selling newspapers and certain types of goods are allowed to open on Sunday. Do you think that the law should be changed to allow other shops to open or not?"

The "Yes" replies (in per centages) were: NOP,

61; MORI, 65; Marplan, 61; Gallup, 67. The "No" replies were: NOP, 33; MORI, 32; Marplan, 34; Gallup, 29. "Don't know": NOP, 6; MORI, 3; Marplan, 5; Gallup, 4. Average: Yes, 63; No, 32; Don't know, 5.

The Shopping Hours Reform Council now proposes the limitation of Sunday trading to six hours, beginning at noon. The Keep Sunday Special Campaign suggests Sunday opening for recreation, emergencies, social gatherings and travellers. But even these categories are restricted; i.e. garden centres (leisure) could open but DIY stores (work) could not. The sale of items likely to "harm the character of Sunday" would not be allowed. In a last-ditch attempt to prevent reform, the KSSC is trying to fill the breach in the Sabbatarian wall with yet more anomalies and petty restrictions.

Meanwhile in Wales preparations are proceeding for the fifth referendum on Sunday drinking. Back in 1881 a ban was imposed by an Act of Parliament. It was a time of religious revival, when the grip of the chapel seemed to be unbreakable. The first referendum, held in 1961, was for Sabbatarians the beginning of the end. The chapel has been steadily losing control, and now only two areas, Dwyfor and Ceredigion, remain "dry".

The autumn referendum will take place in those areas where those calling for it can present a petition with 500 signatures. The "wet" lobby will have to find 500 petitioners in Dwyfor and Ceredigion. It is believed that they will have little difficulty in doing so.

One district after another has gone "wet" over the last 28 years. The Nonconformists and temperance organisations, backed by the Lord's Day Observance Society, have fiercely resisted change. But their appeals to the secular authorities and supplications to the Almighty have been in vain.



# The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

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The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or Editor. Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 18th of the preceding month to the Editor at 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT (telephone 0742-685731). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

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

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

## ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

United Kingdom: twelve months £5. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £5.60; USA: twelve months, \$12. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$8 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3 total \$15.

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

# NEWS

## A LAW FOR BIGOTS

*Blasphemy is a manufactured crime. It is altogether alien to the spirit of the age.* G. W. Foote

In April 1889 Charles Bradlaugh's Bill to abolish blasphemy law was defeated at Second Reading in the House of Commons. On that occasion, Conservatives who traditionally voted against reforming measures were joined by a few pious Liberals and the Bill went under by 141 votes to 46. A century later the common law offence of blasphemous libel remains as a threat to free expression.

Over the last hundred years there have been prosecutions for blasphemy which have resulted in fines and imprisonment. As far as we know — and our records are not complete — no Christian has actually demanded the death penalty for "anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord" as specified in Leviticus, chapter 24. But as the world knows, the death sentence was passed last month on an eminent writer, Salman Rushdie, by the Islamic godfather, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* has been denounced by Muslim bigots as filthy, obscene — and blasphemous.

Blasphemy law was last a major topic in 1977. At that time most people, including many Christians, thought that the offence was a dead duck. The 1967 Criminal Law Act and the 1969 Criminal Law (Repeals) Act abolished statutory law relating to blasphemy. But the common law offence remained, and Mary Whitehouse used it against the publishers and editor of *Gay News*. The case was tried at the Old Bailey by the very religious Judge King-Hamilton. He later wrote that during the trial he underwent "an extraordinary experience of unreality"; furthermore, during the preparation and delivery of his summing-up he was "half-conscious of being guided by some superhuman inspiration". Fortunately for the defendants, Britain is not an Islamic State. Despite Judge King-Hamilton's state of mind, they got away with fines and, in the editor's case, a suspended prison sentence.

The blasphemy question has been on a back burner in recent years. Submissions were made to the Law Commission which published its report in 1985. A majority favoured total abolition, rejecting the argument that an offence of blasphemy was needed to protect the feelings of adherents to any faith. There were threatened prosecutions of films like "The Life of Brian" and "The Last Temptation of Christ". But nothing more serious transpired than freelance Bible-thumpers letting off steam to queues

# S AND NOTES

of amused cinemagoers.

Blasphemy law applies only to Christianity. This is something of an embarrassment to those with an ecumenical turn of mind, and freethinkers' warnings that pressure would be exerted to extend, rather than abolish blasphemy law, have been vindicated. Christians are now urging its extension to protect religions they previously dismissed as false, sending missionaries to foreign parts "where the heathen in his blindness, bows down to wood and stone". Even anti-censorship liberals, fearful of being tarred with the racist brush, have joined in the chorus of support for an extension of blasphemy law.

It is undeniable that blasphemy law is discriminatory. As interpreted over the centuries, it has favoured one religion in a way that is unacceptable in contemporary, post-Christian Britain. But a bad law should be abolished, not strengthened and increased in scope. Exclusively used in the past by Christians to suppress critics and dissenters, its extension would mean that in future any religious group could use the law for the same purpose. Inevitably this would lead to greater discrimination against unbelievers and squabbling among followers of different deities.

It is also necessary to consider the advantages that protection by blasphemy law would confer on outfits like the Moonies, Scientologists and Children of God. Media exposures have warned the public against such groups, but their protection by blasphemy law would be a serious deterrent to investigative journalists, TV producers and newspaper editors.

Pussyfooting concessions and expressions of regret simply encourage the book burners and religious fanatics. But faced with the threat of assassination, it is understandable that Salman Rushdie apologised to the prophet's bully-boys for the "distress" his novel had caused. The most dramatic demonstration of such distress, resulting in ten deaths, took place in Bombay where *The Satanic Verses* has not even been published.

If anyone deserves an apology it is Salman Rushdie. An apology is due to him from the bigots who burnt his book in Bradford (where, incidentally, a 20th-century victim of blasphemy law, John William Gott, is buried); and also from Christian opportunists, vote-hunting politicians and linguistic dry-cleaners who kowtow to the mullahs.

One extremely worrying aspect of the *Satanic Verses* controversy is the enthusiastic support expressed by young Muslims in Bradford and elsewhere for Khomeini's murderous edict. The poisonous influence of religion was illustrated by a

group of interviewees who declared: "I'd pop a party if I heard Salman Rushdie was dead" (Balkish Pandor, 15); "Kill him" (Asif Khan, 9); "Rushdie should be killed. The people who published the book should be killed too" (Zahir Ahmed, 11); "I think they should kill him. I would do that myself" (Mohammed Hunif, 16); "What Khomeini says is right" (Ishtaiq Hussain, 17).

The vast majority of people will be shocked by the mini-ayatollahs' endorsement of incitement to murder. Yet the State is expected to finance mullah-controlled, segregated Islamic schools, establishments which will be indoctrination centres and a breeding ground for future generations of religious terrorists. Those who think that this is a fanciful notion should remember events in Northern Ireland during the last 20 years. There are marked similarities between the fanatical followers of the Christian saviour in Belfast and those of the Islamic prophet in Bradford. Both groups are the product of intense religious indoctrination and segregation.

Our predecessors fought hard and bravely against Christian domination of society. Now that the threat is coming from another quarter we should not turn tail, but in the words of playwright Arnold Wesker, "declare ourselves enemies of Allah". In a challenging letter to *The Independent* (17 February) Wesker wrote: "Too much evil, stupidity, primitive behaviour, destruction of the good and beautiful has been perpetrated in the name of one divinity or another.

"Respect for and tolerance of other people's beliefs does not require us to be patient with the idiocies of their fanatical exponents".

The clamour for an extension of blasphemy law is bound to increase in the coming months. It must be resolutely resisted. Our hard won freedom of expression will be seriously diminished if we allow tolerance to degenerate into supine mawkishness.

In a recent radio interview, Lord Hailsham, the former Lord Chancellor, described blasphemy law as "mediaeval rubble". The rubble should be swept away, and with it the deities, saviours and prophets who have inflicted so much misery on humanity.

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**Bishop Pavao Zanic, whose diocese includes Medjugore where visions of the Virgin Mary have allegedly been appearing since 1981, says pilgrims are "deluding themselves". He has previously described the visionaries' claims as exploitative tricks. "I am certain that their authenticity will not be supported by the Vatican", he declared. Meanwhile, pilgrims from all over the world are turning up at the shrine. Globberate Ltd ("all enquiries caringly dealt with") arrange departures from London (£239) and other British cities. The Bishop of Lourdes has criticised touts who sell water from the shrine to gullible pilgrims who think it has magical qualities.**

## PRIORITIES

Virginia Bottomley, the Heritage Minister, has announced that the Government will contribute £8 million to the Redundant Churches Fund over the next five years.

It has also been announced that the British Theatre Association will have to close down for want of £150,000. Simon Crine, director of the National Campaign for the Arts, said the shortfall was due to withdrawal of financial assistance by the Government and the Arts Council.

He added: "The Arts Council of Great Britain, as the national agency entrusted with responsibility for the arts by Government, should provide the necessary resources for the continued existence of the services offered by this and other support organisations".

In addition to its unique drama archive and a library of 250,000 volumes, the British Theatre Association arranges courses for university drama departments and other educational establishments.

## THE REVEREND DODGERS

Two Free Church of Scotland ministers want to be regarded as monks — for poll tax purposes.

The Rev John MacLeod, of Easter Ross, and the Rev Denis McNair, of Evanton, are demanding exemption from poll tax liability. They have refused to complete the registration form, claiming that they are not "responsible persons".

Under the new legislation members of Anglican and Roman Catholic closed orders will not have to pay the charge. Mr McLeod says that people living in monasteries and nunneries are supposed to have no personal possessions. "But this is untrue", he claims. "Some wear expensive watches and others go for trips on motorbikes. They actually own these things. So the law does not bear close scrutiny".

Mr McNair argues that manses occupied by the clergy belong to religious communities.

"That being so, we cannot be classed as responsible persons and should not be called upon to fill up registration forms".

Most manses in Scotland enjoy a 50 per cent reduction in rates. In some areas the entire amount is waived, the occupier having to pay only about £60 a year water rates.

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**The Rev Ben Turner, vicar of St Stephen's, Bury, in Lancashire, has banned rose queens because he says the tradition is pagan. He said: "It is firmly rooted in pagan fertility rites, like dancing around the maypole". One parishioner commented: "He'll be banning Christmas next. That was a pagan festival until the Church took it over".**

## The Shroud in Shreds

BARBARA SMOKER

Six months after it was known that the "Shroud" of Turin had been proved, by C14 dating, to be only about seven hundred years old, the actual facts and figures have been released, putting the last nail in the Shroud's coffin — but that is, of course, no guarantee that its devotees will not continue to believe in it and try to explain away the scientifically irrefutable findings.

We had received from the British Museum Society a plain typed leaflet bearing a print of the familiar Jesus head from the so-called Shroud of Turin, advertising a lecture entitled "The Turin Shroud: A Lesson in Self-Persuasion", to be given on 15th February by Oxford's Professor E. T. Hall, who had carried out one of the three carbon-dating tests on miniscule portions of the relic last summer. Since no one seemed to have seen any other publicity for the lecture, there was a £5 admission charge for it, and the full scientific details were to appear the following day in the journal *Nature*, a large audience did not seem likely. However, I decided to blow a siver on it myself, as, having taken a close interest in the pretentious piece of cloth for so many years, I felt like being in at the kill.

To my amazement, more than a thousand people thronged the largest lecture hall at the Institute of Education — and, judging by the reactions to well-known facts and by the questions afterwards, few of them were experts in the subject. The secret of attracting a large audience for such events is obviously to build up a membership through a public institution.

Professor Hall said he had been agnostic about the Turin relic but would really have liked the age of the flax from which it was made to have turned out at about 2,000 years. Since the man in charge of the test at one of the other two laboratories was a committed Catholic, who was very disappointed at the result, this adds credibility to the findings — which in any case, without any collaboration, were remarkably (and, from our standpoint, satisfactorily) close.

The Arizona laboratory came out with an age of 646 (plus or minus 31) years; the Zurich laboratory with 676 (plus or minus 24) years; and Oxford with 750 (plus or minus 30) years. This means that the material dates from the thirteenth or fourteenth century AD — somewhat late for shrouding the holy corpse. And, since the first authenticated mention of the relic is in 1359, the scientific dating of it is exactly what we expected.

Of those who wished to ask questions after the lecture, one of the handful called upon was Ian

Wilson, author of two best-sellers on the relic, using the popular technique of contriving to blind the average reader with a scientific smokescreen. He is adept at lending a spurious air of academic respectability to religious sensationalism by discounting much of the alleged evidence he puts forward but keeping enough of it in reserve for a concluding question-mark at the end of each chapter. Far from wearing sackcloth and ashes or offering to refund money paid for copies of his misleading books on the Turin relic, Mr Wilson's postscript to Professor Hall's lecture smilingly put the speaker right on a peri-

pheral historical date.

When he saw me going over to him afterwards to say "I told you so" he quickly disappeared — no doubt hurrying home to work on yet another book advocating mind-bending superstition to please the heart of his bank manager. Indeed, while the carbon-dating of the Turin relic was awaited, he had prudently turned his attention to "after-death experiences", on which he published a book a year ago, using the same well-tried technique of mystification.

Our work of de-mystification is therefore equally unending — but without best-seller status.

## Easter as Astronomical Allegory

R. J. CONDON

"Christ is Risen", say the church posters. Sounds like something that only just happened, doesn't it? They said it last year too, as they do every year following the vernal equinox. The use of the present tense is inappropriate for an alleged resurrection from the dead nearly 2,000 years ago. We seem to be dealing with an annually recurring event.

No matter what the prevailing religion, the vernal equinox was celebrated with rejoicing throughout the ancient world, much as it is today. It is the time when the ecliptic, the sun's path through the heavens, crosses the earth's equatorial plane, or the equator projected into the sky. For three days the sun appears to hang upon this imaginary cross, then rises above it — the Solar Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. From now on the days are longer than the nights, spring is in the air, summer is on the way, and if that isn't worth a festival nothing is.

The ancient Christian year began at Easter. Vigils were kept in the churches until cock-crowing announced the sunrise. Then came shouts of "The Lord is risen!" and Easter Day was celebrated with every demonstration of joy. Church tapers and fires, which had been extinguished, were relit. Pagans and Christians alike believed that the sun danced on Easter Day. Whether it did or not there was dancing in church by the clergy, sometimes led by a bishop. Gyrating to music, they threw a ball to the choristers as a sun-charm. Many Easter customs survive, but few have anything to do with Christianity.

When Christianity began, the vernal equinox occurred as the sun was moving out of Aries, the Ram of Lamb, and beginning to rise in Pisces. It was an interim period, which may account for the many references to lambs and fish in the Gospels. Some churches have stained-glass windows in which Jesus is symbolised by a lamb holding a cross. The cross is not upright but tilted at an angle of 23½ degrees, the angle at which the earth is inclined

relative to the sun. It is also the angle made by the ecliptic crossing the equator at the equinox. Occasionally the symbolism is too obvious to be mistaken. London's Greek Orthodox Cathedral, for example, actually has the crucified sun on its spire.

The four Evangelists are often portrayed in church windows, each accompanied by a figure representing a sign of the zodiac. Mark has a lion, Luke a bull, and so on. These are the so-called "fixed" signs, standing at the cardinal points of the zodiac as witnesses and recorders of the sun-god's annual progress through all twelve signs. This is probably what the second century church father Irenaeus meant when he argued that the Gospels had to be four in number because there were four universal winds and four quarters of the world, the world here meaning the universe.

There is of course another solar crucifixion at the autumn equinox, and this seems to have inspired the corresponding scene in John's Gospel. Despite the conventional setting at the Passover, John has the Virgin Mary standing by the cross. At that time the autumn equinox was in Libra, and Virgo as the next sign may be said to stand by it. The synoptics have the vernal equinox when Virgo is nowhere to be seen, consequently Mary is rather pointedly omitted from the list of women present at the crucifixion of Jesus. And naturally there is no Ascension in John.

Jesus himself is described as "the light of the world". What light is that? "The true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world". No wonder "his face did shine as the sun"!

In some towns the clergy and their congregations take to the streets on Easter Day. Carrying a large wooden cross, liturgical differences temporarily set aside, the various sects march behind a Salvation Army band in a "united procession of witness". What they can witness to is unclear, unless it be their uncritical habit of taking symbolism literally.

# Historic Treasures and the Church of England

R. W. MORRELL

Following widespread protests, Hereford Cathedral authorities have the Mappa Mundi for sale. The possible loss to Britain of this historical document has raised the question: should the Church of England be allowed to dispose of national art treasures?

Because of the break between England under Henry VIII and the Roman Catholic Church, the sect which the unelected rulers established to replace the foreign dominated church received, as its part of the loot expropriated from Rome, numerous historic churches, and their contents. Many of these with the passage of time have become important national monuments which it would be an act of vandalism to destroy or allow to fall into ruin. This also applies to many of the artifacts preserved in them, and the Church of England has been looked upon not so much as the owner of these buildings and their contents, but the guardian of an important part of the nation's cultural heritage.

The situation which has prevailed for so long now appears to be under intense strain, for the Dean and Chapter of Hereford Cathedral have decided to sell off one of the most important medieval relics in their trust, the 13th-century *Mappa Mundi*. The decision was taken in secret. Moreover, the cathedral authorities were so contemptuous of public opinion that they had already allowed the London auction firm who were to conduct the sale to take possession of the map before the press conference was held to announce the sale.

It is worth stressing that the *Mappa Mundi* is unique, being the most important medieval world map in existence. Its only rival, the slightly larger Ebstorf Map, was destroyed during the last war. It is drawn on a piece of vellum measuring approximately 165cm by 143cm, the map itself measuring 133cm being within a circular plate, thereby reflecting the biblical belief in a flat world. It was made, so an inscription on it states, by one Richard of Haldingham and Lafford, though why he drew the map, and for what purpose, is not recorded. The inscription, which is written in a form of Norman French, describes the *Mappa Mundi* as an "estoire", a word meaning history or story; so it is fairly certain it was intended to be not just a map but also a primer in geography and sacred history, the two being interwoven in the medieval mind. As such, it represents a vivid insight into how medieval people saw their world, and though the resulting picture embodies a mass of fact, fiction, theology and fable, the *Mappa Mundi* for all its superstitious extremes

and unscientific character, constitutes an important document in the development of scientific cartography.

The debate about the proposed sale has been bitter in the extreme; it has certainly shaken the Hereford clerical establishment, though not sufficiently to force them to reconsider. During the course of the debate it came to light that the money required was not for urgent restoration work on the cathedral, there being sufficient funds already available for this, but to establish an endowment fund with part earmarked for the cathedral choir school. Hence the rebuff given British Heritage when they offered the Dean and Chapter £2 million for restoration work providing the map was withdrawn from sale. Earlier, though, the cathedral authorities had made much of the refusal of British Heritage to purchase the map for £2 million, so one can only conclude that the clerics have been influenced by press reports of the possibility of the map realising around £7 million when auctioned.

The Church of England is always pleading poverty, yet has investments and properties valued at hundreds of millions of pounds from which they derive an annual income in tens of millions. In addition, they have further income from collections, sales, grants, legacies and such like. Nor should it be lost sight of that no rates are levied by local authorities on church buildings consequently the people of Hereford have probably paid far in excess of £2 million to the city's cathedral and hence have a right to demand the map as a gift in gratitude for what they have already given. The Church of England never seems to experience any major difficulties in laying its greedy hands on very substantial sums of ready money, so there is no reason to believe the Church Commissioners to be unable to find adequate resources from which to establish an endowment fund for Hereford Cathedral should they be forced to. However, as is now clear, there is no immediate urgency to raise money for restoration work at the cathedral; ample time is available for other fund raising options to be explored.

The *Mappa Mundi* affair draws attention to the urgent need for legal safeguards to protect buildings and artifacts under control of the Church of England, now that influential parties within the sect consider they have an unqualified right to sell historical treasures. The C of E is not a private organisation and should not act as though it is. If, on the other hand, it wants total freedom, then it should support disestablishment. But disestablishment should also include disendowment, including

# One Humanist's View of Marriage

ERIC STOCKTON

the transfer to the State of the historic churches and artifacts they contain. Anglican supporters of disestablishment — and there are a fair number, including bishops — prefer to remain silent on this matter. However, if disestablishment and disendowment come, it might then be possible for the Anglicans to negotiate an agreement which would permit them to use the buildings for their quaint rituals and other theatricals. An analogy can be seen here in the case of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, Orkney, which is owned and maintained by the Orkney Islands Council who permit the Church of Scotland to use the building as a parish church.

In the event of protective legislation being enacted to curb the Church of England selling historic treasures entrusted to it (and the *Mappa Mundi* is not, contrary to press reports, the first such thing to be threatened with sale). Moves were initiated recently to sell a rare chalice owned by a Leicestershire church. Vociferous local opposition was heeded and the proposal dropped, at least for the moment. The *Mappa Mundi* can be left either in the cathedral or handed over to a museum in Hereford or elsewhere. The map in fact was not made in Hereford or intended for the cathedral. Richard of Haldingham and Lafford (also known as Richard de Bello), in employing the medieval practice of assuming a surname derived from a place-name, provides evidence for having made it in Lincolnshire, as both Lafford (Sleaford) and Haldingham (Holdingham) are in that country. If he had made the map in Hereford, or finished it there, he would have identified himself as Richard de Norton, for he was made prebend of Norton, Hereford, in 1305. Additional evidence for a Lincolnshire origin can be found in the abbreviation of the name on the map to read H'ford, Lincoln's name, by contrast, being given in full. Had Richard been a canon of Hereford when he was working on the map he would have been unlikely to have used the abbreviated version of the name.

If the map had been sold to a museum or private collector, the additional controversy may well have generated essential and influential support for the total disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England, if only to safeguard those cultural treasures which remain in the hands of the sect. So good may emerge from this affair after all.

Phrases that are supposed, by their habitual users, to be magic answers to a wide range of social ills and personal tragedies, are "Christian marriage" and "Christian family life". There are, of course, some valuable Christian insights into such matters but, as used for propaganda purposes, such phrases are the occasion for circular argument and special pleading. In any cases where professing Christians manifestly fail to make a go of their family relationships, propagandists claim that they cannot be "real" Christians — perhaps adherents to another sect — and that is why things have gone wrong for them. When avowed atheist families do succeed, as often happens, a common comment is that "they are really Christians but don't or won't admit it".

My own comments on marriage are based on some common sense and much experience — happy and otherwise. One of my marriages — the present one — proceeds happily; one of them proceeded happily for twenty odd years until it was ended by death. But my claim to have opinions of possibly a little general interest rest, not upon my being an elitist egg-head twice married happily but, upon my being dear old Mr National Average, the first of my three marriages ended in divorce.

Marriage, like much else, is always there and is always changing. To advocate a traditional formula is, in effect, to admit that the formula is coming unstuck. If it really worked, we would not be so conscious of it; we would take it as read. In particular, few people really believe that marriage must, of its very nature, be for life — although most marriages do, quite understandably, begin in the belief that "ours will last". Two-thirds of them do. The actual facts of premature, non-simultaneous deaths and of honest failures (there being not even a pious pretence that human choice and advice are infallible) make it necessary to steer clear of oversimplification in marriage laws and customs.

The conscientious liberalising of the marriage bond is one of several parallel, and perhaps related, developments. First, society is no longer founded largely on geographically fixed property, its inheritance and the inherited loyalties due to it and to its associations. Secondly, the "obedience, conformity and fear of God" tendency, so beloved of the Old Testament addict (and of Paul, the patron saint of reaction) has largely given place to a far more reflective, questioning and personally responsible approach to life on the part of believers. Thirdly, there is an increasing tendency to address problems in a secular way that is based upon just

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**A minister in South Africa's Dutch Reformed Church has had his salary suspended after he helped to prepare a statement criticising apartheid. The Church is split into different branches. One serves whites, the other blacks, Indians and people of mixed race.**

such questioning and personal responsibility.

Ideally, marriage should be an association freely entered into, and equally freely sustained by the consent of both partners (and therefore equally subject to the veto of each). It should be seen primarily as a personal relationship and not as a component of a system of property relations nor as an element in an embalmed mythology that has faded but remains vestigially sacrosanct.

The law should reflect the real world as well as order it. The restrictive aspects of Marriage and Divorce should exist to serve three purposes: (1) the

discouragement of hasty decisions, (2) the fullest protection for children, especially the young, and (3) deference to the real state of public opinion (otherwise it is either tyrannical or unenforceable).

With regard to (3), it is very important not to mistake the prominence of slogans for the actual state of public opinion and expectation. At the same time, proposals that commend themselves only to their authors are as valueless as the flimsy abstractions already mentioned. The law is for real people faced with real situations.

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## “... don't let them tell you what to do”

JOHN A. FLORANCE

One of the many depressing things about the present Government is that it has raised philistinism to a political principle. There is a grim irony about the fact that HRH the Prince of Wales (of all people!) is the one Establishment figure who is prepared to speak in forthright terms of the state of the arts as an index of the nation's health and well-being. And of course it is a measure of the depths to which we have sunk that in today's increasingly intolerant climate he should be dismissed in so many quarters as at best a crank, at worst a dangerous radical.

One is reminded of a famous fictional Prince who was considered by some to be as batty as his latter-day counterpart. Hamlet spoke of “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”. The Prince of Denmark's insistence on the significance of drama (and by implication the other arts), its moral potency and its ability to make sense of the times, is something we need to hang onto when the spirit of Mr Gradgrind unashamedly stalks the Palace of Westminster. The traditional view of the power of art, which sees its function as a criticism of life and hence artists as acknowledged legislators, is now in abeyance.

But it is not enough to wring one's hands and bewail the small-minded philistinism rampant in the present administration. I think we must see the withdrawal of arts funding and the policy of encouraging corporate sponsorship as a kind of *de facto* censorship. What the Government would like to see is the cultural life of the country reduced to unthreatening blandness. Philistine Mrs Thatcher may be, but she has enough understanding to see that intelligent, challenging art will be, as it always has been, inimical to establishment values; and so it, along with the BBC, the IBA, the schools and universities and all other organs and institutions perceived as instruments of dissent, must be brought to heel. In a

word, the offensive against the arts world is just one skirmish amongst many on a broad front designed to stifle dissent and present the emergence of ideas which in any way stand in opposition to the government's.

The outlook is depressing, but it is far from hopeless. Indeed, one of the most heartening events of recent months has been the *Omnibus* interview with the playwright Harold Pinter broadcast on BBC1 in October.

The accepted critical “line” on Pinter's plays, especially the early ones, is that he writes ambiguous, self-enclosed dramas whose meanings are wilfully obscure. In the past Pinter himself has done little to explode such a view: his reticence is well known and such remarks as he has passed on the meaning of his work have tended to be gnomic. Now here he was resolutely and inspiringly speaking out about the iniquities of government across the globe. And, significantly, discerning what perhaps we should have seen all along — a sustained thread of political meaning in his work.

His political reawakening has been caused by visits to Turkey and Nicaragua and his experiences of those places have caused him to reassess his early plays: “I've been writing plays for 30 years and many of them have to do with that mode of operation, of terrorising through words of power — verbal power, verbal facility. In *The Birthday Party*, I think it is most evident. I was a boy in the last war, you know, and the sense of the Gestapo was very strong in England. They weren't here, but we, as children knew about them”.<sup>1</sup> Pinter is here thinking of the way in which the inoffensive Stan is systematically broken by the verbal onslaughts of the mysterious Goldberg and McCann.

In some sense verbal violence has always been a metaphor for the tyranny of power in Pinter's plays. But it is significant that he, like every great artist, treats his raw material, in his case the English language, with the utmost respect and fastidious-



ness: for Pinter, words in themselves can damage people. His most recent play, *Mountain Language*, is about the suppression of a language and hence the suppression of a whole culture — a way of being. (One might comment that the language of sane, reasoned, public debate has been deliberately hi-jacked and corrupted by the tabloids, and in this context Orwell's essay on the language of politics and his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes salutary reading). Pinter sees the covert and overt suppression of freedom of thought and expression as one of the great menaces confronting us today. He instances the infamous Clause 28: "Under it the promotion of homosexuality will be against the law, in certain circumstances, through local councils. What it will encourage is censorship on all levels, certainly in public libraries and, I imagine, censorship in local theatres, in local cinemas. Apart from that, it seems to me that it is quite interesting that the homosexual is being seen as an alien force, something to be feared and therefore to be rejected and repressed". The parallel with the position of the Jews in Nazi Germany is, of course, inescapable.

Pinter's words often had one seething with indignation at what he was describing, and simultaneously applauding the fact that here was someone using his authority as an artist to speak out for justice and sanity.

The other day the Turkish President came to Victoria Station, an official guest. At the station there were quite a few Kurds and a number of Turks who are exiled, with banners asking him to go away. Before the train arrived at Victoria Station, a number of them were taken by the scruff of the neck and thrust against the wall by the police — spread-eagled, the usual thing — and were kept there physically. They hadn't done anything. The police horses were very close to them, so they were covered in horse excrement during all this. You wouldn't expect when we talk about merry old England that this kind of thing happens. When the Conservatives came to power, one of their platforms was that they wanted to save the country from state control, those nasty socialists, the Labour Party centralising everything. What has actually taken place is that no state power has ever been stronger in this country.

G. B. Shaw once wrote a superb essay called *The Sanity of Art*. What we desperately need today is an art which explores the effects of, the reasons behind (and hence resists) the insanity of today. Which is not to say that such art should be narrowly propagandistic. Pinter has never used his plays as a vehicle for simple-minded "messages". Rather, his work offers access to a finely imagined world from which we can emerge recreated, our perceptions sharpened, our understanding enriched.

Asked about the press attacks on the informal meetings he and a group of like-minded artists have convened, Pinter commented: "What is really so sad is that these silly attacks came from so many people

in the press who are part and parcel of the structure and don't realise the extent to which they have been sucked into a very finally debilitating, insidious and corrupt state of affairs". One remembers the heart-rending cry goaded out of the broken Petey as he watches Stan taken away in *The Birthday Party*: "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" If we can nurture an art which is unafraid to stand against the menace of the times then all will not be lost.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the transcription of the Pinter interview printed in *The Listener*, October 27, 1988.

## LETTERS

### HUMANISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

We should be grateful to Joan Wimble and the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group for raising the issues discussed in her letter (February). They deserve an answer.

To take the last point first, whether the British Humanist Association should issue public statements about disasters, the answer must surely be "no!" There are quite enough people swarming around natural catastrophes, and man-made ones, ranging from genuine to ghoulish. There can be no objection to funeral services, but do they have to be televised? Since Hungerford, a stream of nouse sociologists have intervened at each tragedy, claiming to have some special skill at "counselling" the bereaved. As for Margaret Thatcher, there are now reverse-Donor cards available to ensure that she will not be permitted to hover over the hospital bedsides of those who carry them.

The important question from Brighton, however, is what humanists should do about their beliefs. At the first meeting of the Warwickshire Humanist Group, addressed by Jim Herrick on 4 April 1977, I suggested that, instead of dissipating its energies on minor peripheral issues, the BHA should subject the nature and organisation of human society to the test of humanist and rationalist philosophy.

In those days many humanists were afraid of politics, which they narrowly construed as political parties and elections, not acknowledging that Government, economics, social welfare, law, police, defence, nuclear weapons and power-stations, environment, food, health, education, culture, the media and civil liberties are all politics. This does not mean that humanists should form a political party, but no more is it sufficient to be merely educational. We need the unity of theory and practice, and an appeal to members of all parties and members of none.

Many British humanists are old enough to remember the Left Book Club. Small groups, very much like a humanist group, were formed at first to discuss the monthly book choices. But their discussions led to action, and the Left Book Club, in the late 'thirties, became the liveliest force in British politics. Victor Gollancz began printing leaflets by the million and sending them out in batches of 25,000 for each group to distribute. Great rallies filled the Albert Hall and the Earl's Court Stadium. My own group in Lincoln could fill the largest halls for its public meetings, while the local Labour Party, on the rare occasions when it held a public meeting, could only muster a handful. The

(continued on page 46)

# BOOKS

**DECADE OF DECLINE: CIVIL LIBERTIES IN THE THATCHER YEARS**, by Peter Thornton. National Council for Civil Liberties, £3.95

Many of us who were adult during the '60s and lived through what we now recognise as the great wave of libertarian reform which that sunny decade ushered in, may perhaps be forgiven for feeling currently rather depressed. When the '80s loomed, some of the more realistic among us warned that what had been given could as easily be taken away.

Unhappily they have been proved only too right. This is how Peter Thornton describes our present malaise: "The Government has produced almost a state of peacetime emergency. In the name of national security the Government has censored the media and prohibited trade unions. In the name of anti-terrorism the Government has censored the broadcasters, exercised the power of internal exile without trial, and removed the right of silence. In the name of democracy the Government has withdrawn the right to vote and interfered in the internal running of trade unions. In the name of law and order the Government has minimised the right of public protest. In the name of justice the Government has reduced the right of trial by jury and filled the over-crowded prisons".

If this language seems excessive, it is worth pointing out that Peter Thornton, the author of this excellent review of what amounts to a programme of sustained deprecation by this Government, is no rabble-rousing pamphleteer; he is an experienced barrister specialising in criminal and civil liberty cases. In fact this is very much a lawyer's book: sober, objective and restrained. It brings even more impact to this sorry story of the theft of our liberties.

One of the Government's successes in recent months has been their use of the "security" concept as a justification for their liberty-stealing; it is all too easy, with the help of an eagerly sycophantic tabloid press, to hold up a picture of bomb-throwing terrorists as a necessary concomitant of freedom. It is to Peter Thornton's credit that though his first two chapters deal with censorship and secrecy — the *Spycatcher* affair, Zircon, and the Official Secrets Act — he rapidly moves on to outline the other areas in which the Government has wreaked its mischief.

And these are the areas which impact most closely on the average citizen — the increasing use of police powers which we are seeing reflected in legislation such as the Public Order Act and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (already discussed in this journal); issues relating to criminal justice such as trial by jury and the right of silence; and the growth

# FREETHINKER

of what Peter Thornton summarises as "intolerance, discrimination and inequality" which we can see in relation to women, immigration and racial issues, trade unions and employment, and the infamous Section 28.

So what is to be done? Peter Thornton points out that the European Convention of Human Rights has been the principal check against a series of the Government's policies. In total some eighty UK laws or regulations have been repealed or amended as a result of proceedings under the European Convention. Mental patients under compulsory confinement now have more rights and fairer procedures in the review of their confinement. Corporal punishment has been abolished in State schools. Prisoners' rights have been extended. The laws of contempt of court, under which the *Sunday Times* was banned from writing about the effects of thalidomide, have been amended.

Significantly, there are more individual complaints to the European Commission by UK citizens than from any other signatory to the Convention — approximately eight hundred cases a year. It is also worth noting that no other country has lost so many cases; about one-third of the decisions against governments have been against the UK.

But — it all takes time. The procedure is expensive and cumbersome; complaints may take five years or more to be resolved; legal aid is available only on a modest basis, and much of the machinery operates in private.

All this is clearly unsatisfactory. What Thornton suggests, therefore, is that the European Convention should be incorporated into UK domestic law. There is already some support for this; Lord Scarman has pointed out that it can be done without raising any of the constitutional questions which would arise if a brand new Bill of Rights were to be promulgated.

The book is published to coincide with the relaunch of the National Council for Civil Liberties. The NCCL has had something of a rough passage over the last few years; not only has it had to struggle to keep alive in an increasingly hostile climate, but it has also had to cope with internal disagreement. Under the leadership of Sarah Spencer, the general secretary appointed four years ago, the NCCL has now completed its own internal reorganisation. It has lobbied effectively in Parliament on bills such as Public Order and the poll tax, and it has won some important test cases in British and European courts. And it attracted nearly 1,000 new members last year. It deserves our support.

TED McFADYEN

# REVIEWS

THE FREETHINKER, VOLUME 108, 1988. G. W. Foote & Co, £7.95

"*The Freethinker* is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular. It will do its best to empty the resources of Science, Scholarship, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as Divine Revelation; and it will not scruple to employ for the same purpose any weapons of ridicule or sarcasm that may be borrowed from the armoury of Common Sense". With those words, its founder, G. W. Foote, introduced *The Freethinker* to Victorian England in May 1881.

The 108th annual volume is now complete, and this is no bad record in itself. Essentially, *The Freethinker* remains true to the principles Foote outlined, and its style — combative, disrespectful and brave — is uniquely its own and all the more valuable for that. None of this should suggest that there have been no changes in 108 years — far from it. But it is instructive to contrast *The Freethinker* as Foote knew it to the journal of today.

Perhaps the most surprising feature is the lack of essays concerned with biblical criticism. Articles such as those by Nigel Bruce (October) and R. J. Condon (November) are now very much the exception to the rule. Clearly the freethinker of 1988 does not require a weekly diet of "Bible bashing" served up with great generosity by Foote and J. M. Wheeler in the early days. Or perhaps the problem is that freethinkers have cottoned on to the fact that rational argument is no answer to irrational belief.

On the other hand the merciless exposure of the absurdities of the religious and their foibles continues. Highlights must include the editor's comments on Jimmy Swaggert (March); T. F. Evans's survey of the problems facing the Anglican Church (May); and Barbara Smoker's article on the Shroud of Turin (October).

A developing aspect has been the publication of historical articles exploring the highways and byways of freethought and radical history. Freethinkers have always had a respect for the sacrifices and heroism of their philosophical ancestors. J. M. Wheeler's excellent biographical pieces saved many from obscurity, but these were not historical articles of the type included in 1988. Articles by David Tribe on Bradlaugh and the oath question (March); Andrew Whitehead on Eleanor Boon (May) and Freethinkers and Birth Control (June); John Pether on the East End of the late nineteenth

century (September) and Bradlaugh and the libellous biography (November) were all read with avid interest by the present writer and all revealed a depth of real scholarship. It is important that we don't forget our triumphs — there are plenty of instances to suggest that if we do others will hijack them and claim them for their own.

Whether by accident or intent, the publication of John Pether's article about the Mackay biography of Bradlaugh and the divisions in the freethought movement of the 1880s on the same page as Nicolas Walter's loyal but strained defence of Antony Flew raised a smile on my face. Things are no more harmonious than they were a hundred years ago, and the extraordinary behaviour of some of those associated with our movement persists. I suppose at least we now know where we are with Professor Flew having resigned as a vice-president of the Rationalist Press Association. I assume he continues as a member of the Advisory Council of The Educational Research Trust? This is the organisation which sponsored the publication of *The Crisis in Religious Education*, by John Burn and Colin Hart, which paved the way for the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Similar disharmony bubbled over from 1987 to 1988 with Nigel Sinnott and Harry Stopes-Roe continuing to swap punches over the use of the term "humanism" (sounds wet with flared trousers to me). Of course Foote used to have similar problems with "agnosticism". He said agnostics were atheists with top hats. It is just that some words sound much more comfortable than others. Are we going to follow Stephen Morgan's advice (Letters — January) and drop the "humanism" from *The Freethinker's* masthead or not?

Education remains the concern for *The Freethinker* that it has always been. The Reform Act of 1988 really gives the lie to two frequently held convictions. First, that the battles over religious freedom are won — not often expressed by freethinkers. Secondly, that all we really have to worry about these days is the fundamentalists — quite often thought by freethinkers. The Reform Act was primarily the work of Right-wing Anglicans and represented a major setback for this movement which will not easily be reversed. Barbara Smoker's hope (December) that head-teachers will inform parents of their right to "opt out" of assemblies and RE is unlikely to be fulfilled unless additional facilities are made available — and they won't be. Anyway, who wants their child removed from a mainstream school activity which has many spin-offs into music, drama, etc? The idea that more RE will mean more non-belief is a barren piece of logic. On that basis we might as well teach the glories of the Holocaust to encourage racial tolerance.

Sara Wood's short article on the Girl Guides

(February) touched a raw nerve in my case. I write this review as my daughter prepares for an outing to the Brownies. She has already taken her promise, "duty to God and service to the Queen". She has been to Church parade — all the rest of her friends went and of course they say prayers every week. I'm really not going to expose her to embarrassment in front of Brown Owl (who we like) by complaining. In any case, I have not got a foot to stand on. Nor am I going to remove her from the Brownies when there is no other viable alternative nearby. That is where the churches have you as a parent — they own most of the halls.

I was pleased that this year *The Freethinker's* treatment of the education has gone a little beyond RE and denominational schools. A free, high-quality egalitarian education system has always been prized by freethinkers as a guarantee of intellectual freedom. James Sang's article on student loans (December) was thus especially welcome. The question is when are we going to have something on the follies of Kenneth Baker's national curriculum and the anti-intellectualism that lies just below its surface?

In terms of column inches the issue which absorbed most attention in 1988 was undoubtedly that of censorship. This can hardly be surprising in this era of conviction politics which as Michael Duane quite correctly points out (December) "abuts on despotism because it distrusts the collective judgement and wisdom of the people as a whole". Further particularly useful articles were written by Tom O'Malley and Mary Hayward (July); Ted McFayden (August) and David Godin (September).

Other topical issues raised during the year included religious slaughter (January); religious charities (March) and David Alton's attempts to amend the law on abortion. The defeat of the last of these represents at least one grain of comfort in a year not notable for its successes. In short, *The Freethinker* has continued with its traditional concerns.

The most surprising article of the year must be Michael Duane's "Born-Again Maggie" (July). Despite a title that might lead the reader to assume otherwise, this had little to do with the Prime Minister's religious beliefs but was concerned with her political and economic policies and her personality. Now, there is nothing wrong with that, and I suspect many of this journal's readers will agree with most of what was written. The trouble is, was *The Freethinker* the right place to publish it? After all we only have 16 pages a month to deal with freethought issues and the publication of this article breaks Foote's and Chapman Cohen's firm rule that political matters should only be included in this journal where they impinge on religious issues.

Two reviews took the eye in 1988. Beverly Halstead's defence of Thomas Paine from A. J. Ayer was a relief (August). David Tribe's review of G. A. Wells' (ed) *J. M. Robertson: Liberal, Rationalist and Scholar* often said more than the book itself (September). However, wasn't Chris Tame's contribution to the volume on "The Critical Liberal" worth some attention? I do find the argument that Robertson was really libertarian and individualist rather than interventionist and socialist difficult to stomach. Tame seems to contend that some of Robertson's reasoning needs correcting and that when you have done that you get the answers that he (Tame) wants. He thinks he understands Robertson better than Robertson did!

A few other thoughts on *The Freethinker* of 1988 as compared with that of around a century ago. Today there are actually more contributors to each issue. The early *Freethinker* was dominated by Foote plus a few trusted compatriots who included at various times the likes of J. M. Wheeler, Charles Watts and Chapman Cohen. "Acid Drops" and "Sugar Plums" have gone — but the jokes are still good. The headlines are better, "Pious Indoctrinators Tighten Grip on Classroom Captives" (July) says much for the editor's sense of humour which is always maintained throughout "News and Notes".

Most apparent of all is the fact that *The Freethinker* is still needed because the issues for which it has always campaigned are still there. What is more, no past victory can be assumed to be safe in these reactionary days. Conciliation and philosophy are not always the answer. Someone has to shout back loudly and unambiguously from time to time. *The Freethinker* has not failed us yet.

ELLEN WINSOR

## THE FREETHINKER

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# A Battle With Reality

DANIEL O'HARA

A Church of Scotland clergyman, who had known Daniel O'Hara at University 25 years ago, wrote to him after reading one of his articles in *The Freethinker*. In one of his letters he said "Try to give up atheism. It will lead you into constant and increasing battle with reality as the years go on, and it's a battle you cannot win". Here is an extract from Daniel O'Hara's reply.

You recommend that I should give up atheism. I presume the only way of giving up atheism is by taking up theism. But there are thousands of varieties of theism, and in almost thirty years of study, I have been quite unable to find any real evidence in favour of any variety of theism, or any non-arbitrary means of distinguishing between their competing claims. Would you really expect me to embrace theism in the absence of any evidence for its truth whatsoever? And if so, why, unless you are selling some dubious product and don't want the prospective purchaser to examine it too carefully?

If someone came to your door with a cardboard box and told you that it contained gold and jewels worth thousands of pounds, but that you could have it for a mere £100, what would your reaction be? Rush for your cheque book so as not to miss the chance of so stupendous a bargain? I doubt it very much indeed. You might quite properly ask to see the contents, and either examine them yourself, or, unless you were an expert, call in a jeweller to check that the jewels were not fake, or not stolen. In all probability you would either call the police or simply send the box back. You would quite rightly suppose that either there were no jewels in the box, or else they were fakes, or if real, then stolen, and in any of these cases, you would be a fool to part with a penny piece. Up to this point, I assume you follow and agree with me.

Well now, what possible reason could one possibly have for not treating claims to have knowledge of God with equal reserve? People who make such claims are likely to fall into one of three categories: (1) they have been deceived by legerdemain into thinking that theistic claims are reasonable or true; (2) they have misinterpreted some emotional or aesthetic experience as a communication from, and therefore as evidence of the existence of, God, or (3) they are cynical charlatans out to deceive and make money out of the gullible and emotionally unstable. As there is not, and could not be, evidence for the existence of God, I am forced to the conclusion that all who make theistic claims must fall into one or other of the three categories I have delineated above. If you think there are other possible categories, please feel free to delineate them yourself, and let us see if they

hold water.

And into what category would you place yourself, I wonder? I can only say for myself that when I counted myself a theist, I fell into category (2). I regard those who belong to category (3), of whom there are many in the USA, as the most despicable and evil living. I suspect that you belong to category (1), but you must tell me if you think this fair.

## "Humanist Party" Warning

The current issue of *Econews*, newspaper of the Green Party, warns readers to "be aware of the growing activities of the 'Humanist Party'".

*Econews* reports that the "Humanist Party", which is putting up candidates in European countries, has been active for some time in north, central and south America. It claims "considerable evidence is coming to light that this party is the latest manifestation of a rather sinister cult, known alternatively as The Movement or The Community.

"Based in Argentina, and seemingly with access to plenty of money, The Movement set up groups in south and north America with names such as Futuro Verde or Green Future. The Chilean group Los Verdes is thought to belong to this movement. Its previous incarnation was Futuro Verde, working out of the same address and — unlike most south American groups — with sufficient resources to send very expensive mailings and colour photographs all over the world.

"The Humanist Party/Movement's methods of recruiting and influencing members seem to owe more to pseudo-religious sects such as the Moonies or that of Jim Jones than to anything else. Reports from north America, the north of England, Italy and West Germany tell of how warm and emotionally sustaining the local groups are, but also of how members are encouraged to cut off their relationships with people outside the groups, and of how individual 'progress' and success is measured by how many new members one can recruit".

European Greens are collecting information about the Humanist Party/The Movement/The Community. The UK contact is Sara Parkin, c/o The Green Party, 10 Station Parade, Balham High Road, London SW12 9AZ.

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**The Rev Victor Gillett, vicar of Moulton, Northamptonshire, has infuriated local Roman Catholics by cancelling a 20-year-old arrangement allowing them to use his church for weekly Mass. He made the announcement during Christian Unity Week.**

## Letters

LBC rallied public opinion against Tory appeasement of Fascism, and enrolled thousands of people who had never previously engaged in politics.

What is the over-riding issue now? My wife, Grace, claims that it is Human Rights. Our civil liberties are threatened, the BBC is threatened, decent human values are subordinated to market forces, natural resources, food and the environment are threatened by private profit, education bids fair to become a commodity. In addition, our local provincial press is now filled with advertisements from loan sharks, massage parlours and 0898 "Hot Phone-ins" to "Suspenders", "Oh, Oh Girls", "French Maid", "Strip-Tease" and "Night-Nurse". Britain has become sleazy, dirty, unhealthy, selfish and uncaring. The unholy alliance of Thatcher and the Murdoch empire is creating a country fit for "Yuppie lager-louts" to live in.

KARL HEATH

### HUMANISTS CONDEMN ATTACKS ON THE SATANIC VERSES

The Humanist Liaison Committee, which represents the Rationalist Press Association, British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and South Place Ethical Society, strongly condemns the current attacks on Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, and especially deplores the outrageous threats against the book's author and publishers, all inspired by traditional religious prejudice of the worst kind.

We also oppose the current campaign to extend the blasphemy law to cover religions other than Christianity. This law has done quite enough damage to the freedom of discussion in religious matters during the past few centuries, and to give it further scope in our increasingly pluralist society would simply strengthen the power of fanatical minorities to impose their views and divide the community in a dangerous and unacceptable way.

Humanists insist that the only way to improve relations between different religious and racial groups in this country is to encourage the practice of mutual respect and maximum toleration among all forms of belief and expression, for which we have ourselves struggled for many years.

NICOLAS WALTER  
Humanist Liaison Committee

### A BELIEVER'S CONFUSION

I was not very impressed with John Bray's article "Let me be ME — and Free" (February) which I thought was unworthy of *The Freethinker*.

If we are unable to form an accurate internal picture of the world then how does Mr Bray explain our existence? All life must be able to understand what happens around it to obtain the things it needs and avoid the things that are dangerous. Our very existence proves that we are able to relate to the outside world and that we do it efficiently. The possibility that what we perceive is a mere illusion is so remote that it can be discounted.

To deny truth is to assert that anything can happen and anything can be. All reasoning then comes to an end and we can neither assert nor eliminate anything. This argument therefore leads nowhere.

Belief should not be confused with fact. If something is a fact then believing in it does not make it any more so and is therefore pointless. If something is not a fact then no amount of belief will make it so. To ascertain a fact we examine the evidence and experiment. As there is no real evidence for the exist-

ence of "mind" and no observable phenomena which require its existence, we must conclude that, until such evidence or phenomena is found, the existence of "mind" has not been proved to any degree of satisfaction. The same rule applies to Mr Bray's "ghost". And just because something cannot be disproved does not make its existence as equally probable as its non-existence.

Mr Bray's beliefs are as worthless as the arguments he puts forward to support them.

K. HUDSON

### PETER DE ROSA AND THE PAPACY

In fairness to Peter de Rosa, I must say that all the points in Barbara Smoker's letter in the February *Freethinker* are fully and fairly stated by him, and even stressed. Although the Birth Control Commission was set up by John XXIII, it was enlarged and its remit revised by Paul VI. Cardinal Heenan was a member of it, and he told me in a long talk we had once that the overwhelming majority, including himself, were in favour of recognising contraception, and made that recommendation. This was before the papal decision. De Rosa says that Paul VI was a Hamlet of indecision, and after prolonged dithering felt safest in falling back on the traditional Vatican line, in spite of the advice he had asked for and was given. De Rosa spells out the consequences Barbara Smoker mentions; and it is central to his purpose to do so.

H. J. BLACKHAM

## "All Credit" to Affirming Governor

Bill Hayden, Australia's new Governor-General, is an atheist. And his decision to affirm rather than swear on a Bible at the induction ceremony last month was supported by the country's church leaders.

"It would be odd if Mr Hayden were to swear on a Bible, given his beliefs", declared David Gill, general secretary of the Australian Council of Churches.

"Public office is open to all people regardless of religious conviction, and it would be quite wrong for the churches to react as if only a Christian could occupy the office of Governor-General", he added.

Bishop James Grant said: "It would be hypocritical for him to swear on a Bible. If he prefers to make an affirmation, then all credit to him". The Anglican Church felt that Mr Hayden's decision to affirm showed integrity.

Fr Tony Kelly, a leading Roman Catholic theologian, said that for anyone who did not believe in God to swear on a Bible would reduce the act to a "vacuous symbol".

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Great stuff, this communion wine. The Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney has received a letter addressed to The Right Reverend Frederick Darwent.

## Freethinker Fund

The Fund has got off to a cracking start, with donations ranging from £1 to £100. It is hardly necessary at this time to emphasise the need for a monthly journal to combat the irrational and intolerant clamour of religious bigots.

There appears to be no shortage of money to promote bad causes. Our thanks to all who support "the best of causes", including those whose names appear in the first 1989 list of contributors to the Freethinker Fund.

H. K. Bell, M. Denyer, J. Farrand, V. Gibson, R. Grieve, R. Hopkins, R. Lawton, M. V. Lea, E. T. Rose, W. Turner, M. S. Watson and F. T. Westwood, £1 each; D. Berman, £1.40; R. W. Awberry, M. C. Bartholomew, C. G. Black, T. E. Mapp, J. G. Peace, A. Stern, J. M. Tolhurst and I. Young, £2 each; T. M. Graham, J. W. Lewis, R. Patterson and R. V. Samuels, £2.50 each; C. Rodger, £2.80; H. Strand, £3.20; R. Gerrard and R. Huxtable, £4 each; P. Kennedy, £4.40; B. L. Atkins, R. Birrell, K. Brawley, R. Brown, C. M. Burnside, S. W. Butterworth, B. Cattermole, R. S. Eagle, O. Ford, D. Franklin, C. R. Glaser, H. C. Harding, B. Hayes, J. Hazelhurst, D. W. Hildred, A. Holland, J. Lavity, J. Lippitt, V. C. A. Mitchell, D. O'Hara, R. J. Orr, M. Perkins, V. S. Petherham, S. J. Sanders, E. Stockton, G. Strang, N. Toon, G. T. Walker, A. Williams and D. Wright, £5 each; C. Morey, £7.50; J. N. Swann and A. C. Woodford, £8 each; A. C. Charles, W. Donovan, J. Madden, E. W. Sinclair and C. Wilshaw, £10 each; J. B. Glionna, £14; Anonymous, F. H. and U. Neville, and J. M. Joseph, £15 each; J. Blecker and J. Vallance, £20 each; B. Able, £25; C. Okell, £50; D. C. Campbell, £100; S. Dahlby, \$18.

Total for January, £557.30 and \$18.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers:

BENNY GREEN  
JONATHAN MILLER  
DANIEL O'HARA  
BARBARA SMOKER

The Coburg Hotel,  
Bayswater Road, London

Saturday, 15 April,

6.30 pm for 7 pm

Vegetarians catered for  
Advance notice essential

Tickets £15 each from the  
NSS, 702 Holloway Road,  
London N19 3NL,  
telephone 01- 272 1266

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 April, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Beatrice Clarke: Rebecca West — a Feminist Theme.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 4 April, 8 pm. John Aldams: Effects of the 1988 Education Act on Religious Education and Assemblies.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 30 March, 7.45 pm. Chris Ford: Church and State in the USSR.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Monday, 13 March, 7.30 pm. M. Kozineva: What Really is Happening in the Soviet Union?

**Scottish Humanist Council.** Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 22 April, 10 am - 5 pm. Annual conference. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, telephone (0563) 26710.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 April, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Mervyn Barrett: Alternatives to Prison.

**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.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 20 March, 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.

Holiday accommodation to let: a self-catering chalet to sleep a maximum of six, situated eleven minutes from the sea at Mablethorpe. March to May and October to November, £40 per week; June to September, £70 per week. Further details from Secular Properties Company, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB, telephone (0533) 813671.

# Blasphemy Law Protection Would Strengthen Fanatical Minorities, Says NSS President

"Britain has experienced the terrifying effects of an Iranian religious leader inciting his co-religionists in the western world to assassinate an author, Salman Rushdie", declared Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, when she addressed a seminar on censorship, organised by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain.

"The author and his family have had to go into hiding", she added. "The publishers have also received death threats, and booksellers and libraries have been forced to withdraw the book.

"The British Government dithered for several days before deciding, with full support from the European Community, that it had no alternative but to sever diplomatic relations with Iran, with a consequent increase in fears of those with friends and relatives held in that country and its allied countries.

"During those days of British indecision, the Iranian chargé-d'affaires, in a BBC TV interview, justified Islamic demands for the assassination of Salman Rushdie by saying that, since Christianity is protected in this country by a blasphemy law, Parliament must have decided that such a law was necessary. And neither the interviewer nor anybody else on the programme put him right on this. Presumably they didn't know the facts.

"The facts are that Parliament, insofar as it has considered the matter at all in the present century, actually repealed all blasphemy statutes as archaic — but unfortunately left the medieval common-law offence of blasphemy untouched — although that was the law that had always been mainly used, since it did not require the prosecution to prove that the defendant had been brought up as a Christian, whereas the later statutes did require that, as an advance on the previous practice of executing Jews, whose lifestyle was a blasphemy against Christianity. So in theory, presumably, anyone living in Britain who professes a creed that is not in accordance with Christianity is in breach of the law".

Miss Smoker reminded those taking part in the seminar that when the statutory laws of blasphemy were abolished, assurances were given that the ancient common-law offence would never again be invoked.

"It was, of course, successfully invoked against *Gay News* at the instigation of Mary Whitehouse.

"Abolition of the blasphemy law, which does not figure in the legal system of most European countries, has now, in the light of Muslim demands, on the unanswerable grounds of equity, become a matter of urgency. Muslim extremists are even more touchy than Christian extremists, and if our law gave blasphemy protection to Islam, no one would

dare to mention it except in the most respectful terms, for fear of incurring heavy legal costs — if nothing worse.

"Only a week or two before the Ayatollah Khomeini incited millions of zealots to commit murder, a group of liberal-minded MPs in Westminster signed an Early Day Motion tactically calling for an extension of the blasphemy law to every major religion, as an alternative to abolishing the offence altogether. Let us hope that the Rushdie affair has opened their eyes to the danger of making any such proposal, even for tactical purposes.

"But some other public figures have, in the light of that affair, reiterated their demands for the extension of the blasphemy law to Islam and other religions. The Archbishop of Canterbury has alienated many of his own co-religionists by publicly adding his voice to that demand; while the Catholic Lord St John of Fawsley (formerly Norman St John Stevas) said on radio last weekend that in his opinion the special protection of the criminal blasphemy law should be extended only to monotheistic religions — which would mean its applying to some of the worst of the new religious cults, but not, for instance, to Hinduism.

"The legal justification for blasphemy law is to prevent 'breaches of the peace' caused by the abuse or ridicule of people's strongly-held beliefs. But in practice it surely strengthens the power of fanatical minorities not only to stifle criticism but to whip up socially divisive action.

"Needless to say, we atheists have always had to put up with abuse and ridicule from Christians, but we have never breached the peace on that account. Are Christians so much less tolerant and peaceful than atheists that they cannot be trusted, unless given special police protection under the criminal law, to keep the peace when abused or ridiculed? And aren't they supposed to 'turn the other cheek'?

"Historically, atheists have complained only about being tortured, burnt at the stake, and so forth — not about mere verbal abuse. On the contrary, we have always favoured the robust exchange of ideas".

The Committee Against Blasphemy Law, formed at the time of the *Gay News* trial, has issued a statement opposing any extension of blasphemy law. It advocates total abolition.

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**Diplomats have confirmed that a number of Christians have been expelled from Mauritania for distributing literature. Christianity is illegal in the country where 99 per cent of the population is Muslim.**

