

The Freethinker

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NEW WARNING AGAINST MEDIA BIAS AND GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE

Freedom of expression is inadequately protected by law in the United Kingdom and a tradition of freedom of expression is threatened by increasing governmental encroachment. This warning is contained in a Briefing Paper published by the National Council for Civil Liberties and Article 19 (the International Centre on Censorship).

The Paper describes concentration of media ownership as "another threat to both freedom of expression and British democracy". It points out that Rupert Murdoch, who controls News International, owns five British national newspapers and Sky satellite television company.

It urges that the proposed independent review of press law should examine the threat of excessive concentration of ownership. Such a review should also examine "the increasingly striking evidence of manipulation of the media by the Government Information Service which is now headed by Mr Bernard Ingham, the personal press secretary of the Prime Minister".

There is now more direct interference than ever before by Government Ministers in the BBC's decision-making. This has "compromised the Corporation's traditional independence and its much-admired philosophy of public broadcasting with the Government kept at 'arm's length'.

"Broadcasting can be seen to be the victim of a wider phenomenon in contemporary Britain: that is, the Government's unwillingness to tolerate any rival centres of power in the state, be they political, institutional, economic or moral. . .

"Government Ministers, through 'handlers', now attempt to determine how they will be interviewed in the interests of projecting Government policy rather than broadcasting information. Ministers increasingly refuse to be interviewed alongside

critics and insist on having the last word".

A short section on blasphemy — described as an "archaic crime" — refers to the debate that ensued over the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Despite strong protests by Christian groups, the Director of Public Prosecutions decided against prosecution and it was released nationwide. The blasphemy law debate has been revived following protests over Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. But because it relates to Islam, not Christianity, the book's publication does not constitute an offence of blasphemy.

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 had serious implications for journalists not wishing to reveal their sources. The Prevention of Terrorism and Emergency Provisions legislation also restricted press and broadcasting freedom.

The Paper warns of new moves to restrict the political freedom of employees in both the public and the private sectors. This will result from the Local Government and Housing Bill which is likely to pass through Parliament later this year.

"According to the Local Government Information Unit, over 70,000 employees will be affected.

"Not only will they be ineligible to stand for election as Members of Parliament or as Members of the European Parliament, but they will also be required to abstain from speaking or writing on matters of party political controversy".

The development of video cassettes led to campaigns against horror films known as "video nasties". The Video Recording Act 1985 imposed a precensorship system. The British Board of Film Censors, its name changed to the British Board of Film Classification, administers the scheme.

"It is the first statutory censorship board to be introduced in Britain since theatre censorship was initiated in 1737".



The Freethinker

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NEWS

STRANGE VALUES

Neil Kinnock has declared that he does not believe in God. During a television interview by Terry Wogan, the Labour leader said that when he had questioned the kind of religious faith he should have, "the answers came up negative . . . belief in a divine being is that step beyond my capacity to have faith".

Such an admission by a man who aspires to be Britain's next Prime Minister is highly significant. It indicates the extent to which religious belief and commitment have eroded during this century. Not so long ago it would have been an act of political suicide to publicly admit religious unbelief.

While applauding Mr Kinnock's scepticism, which goes back to his teenage years, many will find it curious that he has "embraced the social values of Christianity". Why on earth should he want to be even on nodding terms with the "social values" of a religion that has such a history of intolerance, anti-intellectualism and divinely inspired terrorism? Just about every form of political tyranny has had the blessing of organised Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church, always the largest body of believers, has at times been headed by power-crazed villains.

Historically, all churches, earthly interpreters and custodians of Christian "social values", were indifferent or actively hostile to movements for social progress and reform, while unflinching in their endeavours to crush the spirit of inquiry and freedom of thought. It is amazing that Mr Kinnock has embraced the "social values" of a faith, grounded in the infallible teachings of a holy book, the Bible, which relegated a large section of humankind to an inferior status. (It is even more amazing that some women, no longer content with arranging the altar flowers, are seeking ordination in the Church which not only supported but often demanded measures to ensure their subordinate role in society.)

There is a growing realisation that the earth's resources are not infinite. What kind of "social values" are embraced by the majority Christian church which actively undermines birth control programmes in countries which are seriously affected by over-population?

Neil Kinnock is not the first Member of Parliament to declare his religious unbelief, although most who do so are from his party. It is, however, quite inconceivable that all Conservative MPs believe in the Christian or any other deity. But unbelieving Tories remain in the closet, fearful lest such unorthodoxy would get them into hot water with the

VS AND NOTES

Party's politically and religiously faithful.

Rather than constantly writing letters to complain about alleged Left-wing bias in *The Free-thinker*, "non-political" correspondents could do something useful by joining their constituency Conservative Association and at least try to influence it along secularist lines. They will probably be given the bum's rush. On the other hand, a changed climate of opinion within the party would encourage unbelieving Conservative MPs to "come out".

THE EVIL MEN DO

The sour, baleful visage of Ayatollah Khomeini will glare less frequently from newspapers and television screens in future. The British Government sensibly decided against being represented at his funeral. In view of Khomeini's death sentence on Salman Rushdie it could hardly do otherwise. And it would have been extremely embarrassing for a British representative to have been present at such an unseemly affair, with frenetic mourners dragging Khomeini's body from the coffin.

The outrage which his death sentence on an author rightly provoked, should not deflect attention from the evil that was done to the Iranian people during Khomeini's reign of terror. This included 30,000 executions and the imprisonment of 100,000 political opponents. Hundreds of thousands of deluded followers, including children, went to certain death on the battlefield at the behest of an old man who said: "To kill and to get killed represent the highest duty of believers".

Khomeini's legacy to Iran includes a wrecked economy and an agriculture that cannot meet the needs of half the population. Three million Iranians who fled the Islamic terror included doctors, scientists and teachers. Their contribution to rebuilding the nation would be infinitely greater than that of the horde of parasitic mullahs who control Iran's social and political life.

Meanwhile, the "liberal" Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, has stated that "no one really wanted or was able" to quash the death sentence on Salman Rushdie. "We are talking about a religious sentence", he declared. "We cannot in the name of God take back that sentence".

Rational and humane people will have considerable sympathy with the beleaguered writer in hiding from would-be religious assassins. It is difficult to comprehend the strain being imposed on him and his family. But Rushdie is also being attacked by

non-Islamic and non-religious carpers operating under a subterfuge of respect for other people's religion.

Salman Rushdie's critics fall into three main groups: first, the bitchy back-stabbers of the literary world who are envious of his reputation and success; secondly, the saloon bar Rushdie experts who, until the *Satanic Verses* affair, had never heard of him; thirdly, the narrow bigots who automatically dislike anyone who is not a white-skinned conservative.

Hugh Trevor-Roper, the historian, added his drop of venom to the anti-Rushdie brew in *The Independent Magazine* (10 June). He commenced his rancorous piece by expressing the hope that Salman Rushdie is not faring too comfortably in his hiding place. This was soon followed by the routine sneer at "the Left-wing literary establishment", with Harold Pinter singled out for special mention.

Trevor-Roper recalled a rebuke to Voltaire for "insulting the religion of nations". Although finding Salman Rushdie guilty of "brutal and vulgar manners", the genteel, well-mannered academic did not endorse the death sentence on "the threatened scribbler". He did, however, offer his encouragement to any Islamic thugs intent on harming Rushdie: "I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit and literature would not suffer".

As Lord Dacre, the expert on Hitler's Diaries, Hugh Trevor-Roper will of course know that the Nazis also burned books and physically attacked writers they didn't like.

EVANGELICAL ODD MAN OUT

Billy Graham, the elder statesman of evangelical Christianity, has been telling the old, old story at three London venues and via satellite to audiences throughout Britain and Europe.

As on previous visits, the meetings end with hundreds rising from their seats to make "a public declaration for Christ". Just how significant are the conversion statistics? A large proportion of those who rise from their seats are members of the choir or have arrived with church parties. Billy Graham is often not just preaching to the converted, but converting the converted.

Billy Graham is the Mister Clean of American evangelism. Unlike the odious Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, he is untouched by sexual or financial scandal. Nor has he followed in Jerry Falwell's ultra-Right political footsteps. His close association with Richard Nixon was a chastening experience, and although seen praying in public with Ronald Reagan,

he has not endorsed the B-film actor's "evil empire" assessment of the Soviet Union.

For all the publicity and ballyhoo, including meetings with the Queen and the Prime Minister, Billy Graham is just another huckster of "that old-time religion". But he is basically decent, and that makes him unique among American evangelists.

TWO CENTURIES OF MAKING CHILDREN SUFFER

According to the *Baptist Times*, the Sunday School is "the one-time mainstay of a church's evangelistic programme". The good news is that the majority of British children never set foot inside one of these indoctrination centres.

Ever since Robert Raikes and others established the early Sunday Schools in the 18th century, many generations of young victims have been psychologically mauled by Christian brainwashers. John Wesley reflected the evangelical attitude to children when he counselled: "Break their wills betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pain it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child". He also held that games and play were "unworthy of a Christian child".

Sunday Schools did not spare the young from the more lurid biblical horrors. Like the churches, they laid particular stress on the inevitability of hell and damnation for the "unsaved". (With a particularly sadistic refinement, some of them collected a penny a week from pupils to pay for his or another's funeral.) Gentle Jesus played second harp to the wrathful god of the Old Testament. The impression which the bliss-or-blisters teachings made on childish minds was illustrated by one little girl who told the Commissioners on Child Labour in the Mines that until going to Sunday School she did not know: "If I died a good girl I should go to heaven. If I were bad, I should have to be burned in brimstone and fire".

Children of the poor were lectured on the virtue of humility, duty and patient acceptance of one's place. When, at Bradford in 1817, it was proposed that Sunday School pupils should be taught to read and write, the idea was countered by opponents who argued that "education would make the lower orders of society less disposed to submit to the constituted authorities and act in a subordinate capacity". Employers were keen supporters of Sunday Schools.

With the falling away of voluntary attendance at Sunday School, religious crusaders are anxious to retain their hold on captive weekday audiences in State schools. In this they have been encouraged and supported by Government backing for a more rigorous Christian indoctrination of the young.

HOLY FUN AND GAMES

The goings-on of televangelists in the United States have inspired a new product for the board game industry. A new game called "Fleece the Flock" has been launched. It is based on Monopoly, but instead of property tycoons the players assume the roles of greedy evangelists.

Equipped with collection plates, the players throw dice and go after the ownership of holy theme parks, television stations and record companies. They try to bankrupt competitors and conceal their own sexual escapades.

Elizabeth Fuller, who developed the game, said she came up with the idea when Jimmy Swaggart was caught with his trousers down. She teamed up with another inventor and illustrator. They formed their own company, Tongue-in-Cheek Productions.

Freethinker Fund

Following a split in Scotland's Free Presbyterian Church over the suspension of Lord Mackay, the Lord Chancellor, it looks likely that there will be an unedifying legal squabble as the godly fight for control of the Church's considerable assets, including a £2 million legacy. Religion is big money, and even small churches like the Free Presbyterian can amass considerable wealth. On the basis of membership, it is probably Britain richest church.

However, life is not all prayer, psalm singing and piety in Scotland. There is a strong freethought tradition, and *The Freethinker* always had stalwart supporters north of the border. Glasgow Humanist Society and Edinburgh Humanist Group are included in the latest list of contributors to the Fund. We thank them and others whose generosity enables *The Freethinker* to make ends meet.

E. C. Gray, J. T. S. Henderson and M. E. Nottingham, £1 each; D. M. Ford, W. C. Hall, F. M. Hoare and R. W. Walker, £2 each; E. Crosswell, £2.20; N. S. Thompson, £2.50; P. R. Smith, £2.70; J. R. Crellin, £4.40; Anonymous, D. Baker, J. A. Blackmore, N. Bruce, R. Cheesman, J. M. Crowley, I. T. Forbes, J. F. Glenister, R. Grindrod, J. Lippitt, A. J. Martin, H. L. Millard, M. Morden, P. Paris and D. A. Thompson, £5 each; R. Tolhurst, £7; R. J. Condon, D. James, L. Kerran, J. W. Krugel, E. J. Little and W. H. Sefton, £10 each; Anonymous and Edinburgh Humanist Group, £20 each; Glasgow Humanist Society, £50.

Total for May: £269.80.

A California court has overruled objections on religious grounds by the parents of an 11-year-old boy, and told doctors to give him life-saving blood transfusions. The parents are Jehovah's Witnesses.

Baker's Education Reform Act, or How Not to Use Your Loaf

MICHAEL DUANE

There are two primary schools not very far from where I live. The first is in a comfortable estate where the costs of the houses range from £112,000 to over £250,000. Many houses are empty during the day because both young parents work: at election time, Labour stickers are few and far between.

The road near the school is choc-a-bloc with cars in the morning and afternoon, delivering or collecting children and their friends. The head can raise £1,000 for school funds with no difficulty whenever he needs something for the school; so the school is well equipped with plenty of books, the latest in special apparatus for teaching science and maths and everything a school can need for sports. What he cannot buy with the official allowance can soon be got by an appeal to parents.

The second school serves what was once a council estate, with some houses now owned by their occupants. Unemployment is high in Devon, so there are fewer cars to meet the children and what there are look less new and carry older number plates. The school receives the normal basic allowances, with an additional allowance for special need based on the number of children whose parents are poor enough for them to be allowed free school meals. The sums that the head can raise for school funds are very small indeed, not because the parents are mean but that they simply have so little spare cash.

Given two equally valuable educational visits, the first head will not need to worry to the same extent as the second about whether he can afford it or whether he would be justified in asking his parents yet again to put their hands in their pockets. The facts bear this out. The first school undertook twelve visits and the second three during the same year.

Technically, the new education act "maintains the right to free school education by forbidding charges for any activities which take place in school time, with the exception of individual tuition in a musical instrument". But while schools are still free to "invite parents and others to make voluntary contributions", the context of such invitations will vary according to the predominant social background of the children.

In the 1950s I could, without hesitation, in backward, rural Hertfordshire, send a group of boys and girls to a ballet at Sadlers Wells or to the Oxford and Cambridge Games at the White City so that they could see a discus or a javelin thrown well. And this despite protests from my chairman of Governors that they would be better employed picking potatoes for local farmers. Another Governor told me that Sadlers Wells was a waste of time for working-class

children. The chairman supported her, saying "She is an LRAM so she knows what she is talking about!" The same chairman accused me of teaching that black men should marry white women. It turned out that I had shown a film-strip to illustrate the Mendelian laws of inheritance during a science lesson. Males — dog, horse, cock — were in a dark shade, the females in near white and the offspring in dark, light or intermediate colour in the Mendelian proportions.

Where the struggle to reach a basic literacy is a daily preoccupation of teachers in deprived areas it takes a robust faith to send children out of school for a day in the hope that the experience will provide new aspects to living, new insights and new motives for learning. The looming threat of a new form of "payments by results" in the form of national achievement tests, makes it even more difficult to plan good visits for our poorer children.

The original 1944 Act, founded on a massive response by the general public to the question, "What form should education take in the future?", was the first act to have such a democratic base. It tried to create a framework for the best (in the more democratic mood of the time) but left it to local wisdom to decide what that was. By basing education on stages rather than on types of school, it opened up the possibility of a less class-ridden system.

Sadly, the changes brought in during the last ten years have steadily pushed us back, through the ruthless application of monetarist dogma, to something that looks more and more like the pre-war school system. "You get what you pay for" is the ruling guide — so the poor get less and the rich get more; more money, more education, more culture; just more!

Conservative councillors in Kent have banned performances of Benjamin Britten's opera, *Death in Venice*, at a schools' opera festival. It was one of three productions included in Glyndebourne Touring Opera's programme. Opponents of the ban suspect that the decision was taken because of Clause 28 of the Local Government Act which prohibits councils from "promoting" homosexuality.

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.

The Bishops and Business

T. F. EVANS

The bishops have been at it again. It would have been too much to expect the seasons of Easter and Pentecost (does anyone now observe the Whitsun date?) to pass without some comment from the leaders of our dear old Church of England. Yet, how things have changed. In previous years, one would have expected a declaration about the importance of the Christian faith. Now what has come to be accepted as a regular incident in the great feasts of the Church is a pronouncement by the Bishop of Durham. This time he made a forthright declaration that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead should be carefully reconsidered. While the immediate response from some fellow-believers was not exactly that the doctrine be put to a practical test with the Bishop himself (and the accompanying hope that, in this one instance, it was found not to be true), there were calls for his resignation and other punishments, although no proposals for burning at the stake have yet been reported.

It would ill become *The Freethinker* to indulge in long discussions of theology which, by rights, should concern true believers only. Nevertheless, the Church of England is "by law Established" and to some extent it makes pronouncements on behalf of us all, whether we subscribe, in the non-financial sense, or not. It acts as the conscience of the nation. But we live in a pluralist society, so it is inevitable that idiocies should occur when tenets of faith are clearly seen by the majority to have no relevance to the facts of life or death today.

It has always been the practice of the human race to hope for some kind of survival after death. Yet the number who actually believe in the total survival and/or resurrection of the physical body must be very small indeed. All it seems that the Bishop of Durham has done is to emphasise that the doctrine, like so much in religion, must be taken in a metaphorical interpretation and, in that way, can make sense.

It has been remarked before that the term "the bishops", frequently employed in sections of the press as suggesting opprobrium, implies misleadingly that all bishops are of one mind on various important questions. This is clearly not so and never has been. Whether some *Freethinker* readers like it or not — and this will be touched on further a little later — the question of political attitudes cannot be left out. For many years the Church of England in its united or individual pronouncements has been expected to reflect a conventional and conservative approach (large or small "c") to problems of the day. (Of course there have been exceptions. The Left-wing Bishop Barnes of Birmingham and the openly Communist "Red Dean" of Canterbury were

tolerated by the Church because they were exceptions in the Tory Party at Prayer.)

Things have changed recently. What is important to note, however, is that the change has been gradual and it certainly does not mean that at any time a majority of bishops can be relied upon to follow a certain political line. In short, "the bishops" have become prominent because a few have expressed themselves as being not wholly of one mind with the prevailing political ethic of the last ten years or so.

Put another way, nobody would worry so much about Archbishop Runcie's obvious sympathies with the ordination of women if he had preached a really "patriotic" sermon on the occasion of the Falklands "celebration" service in St Paul's Cathedral. Similarly, the views of Bishop Jenkins on the virgin birth and the resurrection would probably be regarded as merely eccentric had he not also said that the social and political policies of the present administration verged on "the wicked". The cricket-playing prowess of Bishop Sheppard of Liverpool would have shielded him from any serious criticism had he not identified himself so firmly with what were taken as strongly anti-Government opinions in *Faith in the City*.

A challenger has now appeared in the other side of the episcopal lists. On Easter Day itself, the Rev William Westwood, Bishop of Peterborough, was the subject of a quite extraordinary article in the *Sunday Telegraph* entitled "Why no Gospel for the Better-off?" It is in fact a report of an interview with a journalist, so the Bishop may not be responsible for the title and an introductory line which says "many Anglican churchmen seem to be more interested in sociology than in Easter".

Bishop Westwood is quoted as expressing regret that the Church does so little for those who are succeeding in life. He comments: "By our perpetual stress on caring for those in need, we seem to have little to say to those who, by their own efforts, are helping to make provision for that caring. All we do is make them feel uncomfortable in the wrong sort of way. The result is that a lot feel there is no room for them in the Church".

The article goes on to reflect on the way in which biblical injunctions have been misinterpreted.

"Christ's challenge to the rich young man had been a personal one. It had never been intended as a challenge to everyone with a bit of money, yet it was constantly trotted out to make such people feel uncomfortable. We ought also to remember, said Westwood, that Jesus did not come from a poor family. He was a member of the upper working class or lower middle class, craftsmen who owned their

workshops, fishermen who owned their boats. Joseph would have felt very much at home in modern-day Peterborough".

There is not space to dwell on all the fascinating implications of this line of reasoning. May we expect next Christmas, in Peterborough at least, to have done with all that nonsense about "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed". Will we have, instead, sermons to congregations composed of members of the local Chamber of Trade, telling them that Joseph, while a very successful small business man of the type on which the salvation of this country now depends, had been astonishingly remiss in not providing adequately for his wife's pregnancy. If only he had kept his BUPA subscriptions up to date!

Bishop Westwood concludes that the Church of England should have "a more confident spirit" and proclaim the Gospel "as if it were a gospel for all the people of England". The tenor of the article suggests that "all the people" would include most of the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors. Would it also include the many people of non-Christian faiths, or of none? And would it include also the occupants of the cardboard-box quarters near railway stations in London and other cities?

To an outside observer, the Bishop of Peterborough appears to be on a loser. The entire spirit of the times is against him. We can agree with his diagnosis that people are showing little interest in organised religion, but the reasons may be other than those which he adduces. The Church — certainly the Church of England if we may continue to take this as our model — is in a position of great difficulty. And although Bishop Westwood appears to think that the Church is worrying too much about the deprived and unfortunate, there are other powerful forces that preach a different doctrine.

In many "advanced" countries of the world, the cry is not of personal holiness but of personal wealth. In a recent American film, *Wall Street*, the leading character makes a speech in favour of greed. He is loudly applauded by his fellows. Now whatever sins may be laid at the door of the Church — and there are plenty — its basic doctrine is not one of greed. It is that we should think of others rather than of ourselves.

During the last decade, we have been told by those whose business it is, or is conceived to be, to tell us what to do, that the very thing on which we should concentrate our powers is what the poet Wordsworth warned us against — getting and spending. He was not the only 19th-century writer with a thought for today. Charles Dickens, in *Our Mutual Friend*, written in the 1860s, might have had our own age clearly in mind when he tells the reader:

As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do in this world. Have no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners, Have Shares . . . O mighty Shares.

It is because of this that irreconcilable conflicts arise in the mind. We have a national religion. Church and State are one. Yet the "religion" preached by the State side of the partnership is at present directly opposed to that laid down by the Church side.

Some answers must be given to those of our readers who are so worried about what one has described as the promotion in these pages of "Political, socialistic and communistic ideas and beliefs". Unfortunately many readers find it hard to divide life into separate compartments. In that fine play, now at the National Theatre, Granville Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*, written in 1905, the prosperous and respectable solicitor who is engaged in Barlow Clowes-like activities says to his son: "You must realise that money making is one thing, and religion is another, and family life a third".

In Granville Barker's play, the respectable Voysey is a swindler and a fraud. No doubt the majority of today's business and professional men are honest; but we hear too much about City swindles, questionable take-overs and similar machinations to be absolutely certain that the standards of business are such as should rule the whole of life. Nevertheless we are told that business men (and presumably women as well) should have much more to do with the government of society, supplanting locally elected councillors on school governing boards and health committees for example.

This is why politics get so often mixed up with other things. This is why secularists and humanists feel that they should be concerned not merely with pointing out the follies and crimes of some of those with whom we disagree, but also by trying to find an integrity of total response to life. Moreover, we are being constantly abjured to do just that. We are told, in almost as many words, to think about "Victorian values". Our reply should always be: "Which Victorians? Which values?"

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The French Revolution in England

PETER BACOS

In his second article commemorating the bicentenary of the French Revolution, Peter Bacos examines its dramatic effect on the reform movement in England.

There was a growing movement for reform in England during the last quarter of the 18th century. John Wilkes and Major Cartwright campaigned for wider representation of the people. On social issues there was an emerging belief that the Government could ameliorate the condition of the poor. The Society for the Defence of the Bill of Rights was founded in this period, and 1780 saw the creation of the Society for Promoting Constitutional Information. Pitt was the chief parliamentary champion of reform and in 1785 he became the first Prime Minister in modern times to ask the House of Commons to reform itself. While, initially, the French Revolution gave a spur to this movement, it finally choked it. The century closed with some of the most repressive legislation against press freedom and rights of assembly known in England for decades. The passage of reform was delayed for 40 years because the Government was terrified that the contagion of democratic ideas would spread beyond the borders of France with similar results.

On 21 July 1789, the *Morning Post* described the fall of the Bastille in glowing terms. A few days later Charles James Fox described it as the greatest and the best event that had ever happened in the history of the world. The London Revolution Society, at a function commemorating the Glorious Revolution of 1688, lent support to events across the Channel, and listened to an address from Dr Price declaring that one of the most important guarantees of freedom was "the right to choose our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves". Dissenters were heartened by toleration granted to Jews and Protestants in France and wanted similar treatment for themselves.

Burke was the first Englishman to express dismay at the decisions of the National Assembly. His reaction came as a tremendous shock to his friends. Previously he had been identified with reform and, in 1782, as Paymaster-General in the Rockingham Ministry, had introduced measures to abolish sinecures, reduce the Pensions List and prevent further instances of corruption. He published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in November 1790. It was really a glorification of the British Constitution which he thought so perfect it did not need altering in any way. He viewed French history through a romantic haze, and failed to see any faults in the *ancien regime* that could justify the

violent change that had taken place in the French state. His veneer of liberalism cracked when he described the role of the masses, for whom he coined the epithet, "the swinish multitude".

One of the most famous societies that sprung to life during this period of radical ferment in England was the London Corresponding Society. It was founded in January 1792 by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker, at the Bell Tavern, and was the first organisation founded by working men to campaign for reform. It was different from the other societies, such as the Revolution Society or the Constitutional Society because it charged a subscription of only one penny a week. Its entrance fee of a shilling was also modest, whereas the latter charged five guineas. The men who joined were almost exclusively from the lower middle and working classes, and included watchmakers, cordwainers and carpenters. It was organised in branches scattered throughout London and provincial centres. It was known as the Corresponding Society because the law forbade it to federate with its divisions, and the only common action members could take was through the exchange of ideas. Soon there were offshoots in Sheffield, Manchester, Warwick and Stockport, and by the end of 1792 there were 3,000 names.

There were 38 replies to Burke's outburst, including Mary Wollstonecraft's, but by far the most effective was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* which appeared in February 1791. His views were diametrically opposed to Burke's, with whom previously he had got on. Already, in March, 1790, he had returned to England, bringing with him the key to the Bastille which he had been asked to present to President Washington. In a letter he described the key as symbolising "the first ripe fruits of American principles transplanted into Europe".

In his pamphlet Paine declared that it was up to each age to determine the system of government it wanted. His work was enormously influential, and it is estimated that 200,000 copies of it had been circulated by the end of 1793. The Corresponding Societies were instrumental in disseminating it, and Paine gave the royalties of £1,000 he had received to the Constitutional Society to propagate it even more extensively.

Soon many of the Whigs became alarmed at the turn events were taking in France. After the Terror it was becoming increasingly difficult for moderates to support the Revolution. As Fox refused to temper his initial euphoric response he split the Opposition, and only Pitt could derive comfort from its disunity. It was no surprise when, early in 1793, many of the Duke of Portland's Whigs joined the Ministry. The behaviour of the Radicals at home,

too, increasingly alarmed the men of property. Paine had called for an English National Convention. But Convention was an emotive word, associated with the fall of monarchy, the confiscation of church property and the Terror. The very word in the context of domestic politics caused panic in government circles. Moreover, it seemed that the French were fomenting revolution abroad, for the Edict of Fraternity offered the new republic's support to oppressed peoples struggling against tyrannical rulers.

Paine had published Part II of *Rights of Man* in February 1792. Here he was more outspoken than he had been earlier when he stated that hereditary monarchy was tyranny. He also advocated a programme of social reform that had to wait until the 20th century before it was implemented. He wrote that one day men would laugh at the idea of sending to Holland or Hanover for men who were not fit for the office of parish constable. The charge of seditious libel was brought against him and he fled the country. Earlier, at a dinner, he had proposed a toast to "the Revolution of the World". He made his conviction certain when, in a letter from Paris to the Attorney-General, he said it was impossible to believe that either Mr Guelph (George III!) or any of his profligate sons were necessary for the government of the country.

In February 1793 England went to war with France, and the Government could rely on the traditional hatred of the French to overcome any resentment aroused by political grievances. Soon the Government infiltrated many of the radical societies with agents and spies. The British Convention took place in Edinburgh in 1793, and the authorities were determined to break it up. Four of the main participants were arrested and sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay, three of them for 14 years and one for seven.

In May 1794 the Government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act and arrested 13 members of the Corresponding Society and the Constitutional Society including Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke, Thomas Holcroft and Thelwall. Hardy's trial lasted nine days and received enormous publicity. Some famous advocates involved were Lord Eldon for the Crown and Thomas Erskine for the defence. The latter so brilliantly exposed the Crown witnesses as informers and impostors, that the jury had no option but to throw out the charge. However, the Government panicked again the following year when food shortages provoked disturbances in many centres. This led to the notorious "Two Acts" passed in the winter of 1795-6. The first made it an offence not only to commit an act of treason but to write or speak one as well. Secondly, public meetings were illegal and even lecture rooms were classed as disorderly houses.

The state trials of 1794 almost destroyed the reform movement. The Constitutional Society and the Friends of the People disappeared, while the Corresponding Society was having difficulty attracting new members. However it did gain one significant recruit in June 1794 when Francis Place joined. The Government was frightened of rebellion and invasion. There was an uprising in Ireland, where the rebel leader Wolfe Tone was acting with the support of the French Directory. Even more alarming were the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, although these were spontaneous and not the result of collusion with the radical groups as many of the more hag-ridden members of the Ministry wanted to believe. Nevertheless its response was by now typical, imposing censorship on the printing presses by forcing them to register, and one further measure was to suppress bodies like the Corresponding Society by name.

In 1797 Charles Grey, the future Prime Minister, moved motions for reform in the House of Commons. He called for triennial parliaments and the phasing out of pocket boroughs and a household franchise for boroughs; but it was defeated by 256 votes to 91. The very word reform now attracted odium. Anyone who professed democratic opinions was suspected and feared by his neighbours. The demise of the London Corresponding Society took place in 1798 when the entire committee was seized because it was believed it was planning an uprising with the United Irishmen. In 1799 all combinations of workmen were outlawed. This measure was not influenced by the French Revolution, but was a response to the changes in society which were taking place as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. An urban proletariat was now being created which agitated for better working conditions for its members. It was an ominous portent of the class warfare which would gather in intensity as the 19th century wore on.

The Whigs were almost destroyed by the events of 1790-94, and for the next 40 years, apart from one interlude, they remained in opposition. By the end of the decade the LCS had disappeared, but it left a legacy. Its programme had included universal suffrage, annual parliaments and payment of members, and these demands formed the basis of "The People's Charter" 40 years later. Until the spectre of the Napoleonic Wars had lifted, it was fruitless and positively harmful to campaign for reform. However, the 19th century was to include within the Constitution those whom the 18th century believed had no political rights whatsoever. While the radical agitation of the 1790s ended in failure, in the long run its ideas prevailed. As George Bernard Shaw said: "Tom Paine has triumphed over Edmund Burke, and the swine are now courted electors".

STRUGGLE IN BABYLON: RACISM IN THE CITIES AND CHURCHES OF BRITAIN, by Kenneth Leech. Sheldon Press, £6.95

Kenneth Leech, more than any other Anglican, bears the mantle of Stewart Headlam. And he bears it not unworthily. There is a curious parallel in their clerical careers. For much of the 1970s, Kenneth Leech was rector at what had been Headlam's church, St Matthew's in Bethnal Green, London. While there he was the moving force in the Jubilee Group which, like Headlam's Guild of St Matthew a century earlier, was socialist in outlook and Anglo-Catholic in inspiration.

At the outset of this rather disjointed book, Kenneth Leech declares his support for the Marxist analysis of class society. In fact, he is more a liberal than a Marxist, just as Headlam was more a radical than a socialist. He is now director of the Runnymede Trust, and his essays reflect his long-standing interest in race relations, and his insistent argument that the Church has failed to tackle racism both within its own ranks and more widely.

His enterprise in corporate self-criticism is certainly thorough-going. "The Church of England in the East End of London was first and foremost an instrument of social control", he says. He laments the shortcomings of his own Anglo-Catholic tradition in the face of racism and housing racketeering in Notting Hill in the 1950s. The recent approach of the Church to the inner city, he suggests, has been confused, and too cosy in its intimacy with authority.

Kenneth Leech is generous to a fault. To argue that "the hand of God was at work" in the Brixton and Toxteth disturbances of 1981 because "as a result, some powerless people have been empowered" is perverse. To describe these riots as "uprisings" is political voyeurism. Certainly they were, in some sense, a revolt against authority, a squeal of rage, a carnival of the oppressed. They were also the occasion for robbery and rape.

This book also bears some of the problems incumbent in throwing together papers and lectures delivered over more than twenty years, however assiduously they are edited and revised. An uncritical acceptance of the need for slum clearance in inner London may have made some sense in 1967, when the chapter in question was first written, but it is much less plausible today.

What role, though, does Kenneth Leech see for the campaigning committed Anglican Church, a denomination which — he states — is on a world scale a mainly black church? He welcomes the

FREETHINKER

withdrawal of the Church from affairs of State (referring in passing to the "unfortunate" conversion of Constantine):

As the Church is pushed to the margins of society, it will begin to discover that it is not there alone: that there are other marginal people there, too. Some of them have been there for rather a long time. The rediscovery of our weakness and apparent powerlessness will be a painful but healing experience for a Church such as the Church of England, which sees itself as belonging more in the corridors of power than in the back streets. But I suspect that the role of the Church in the corridors of power is passing.

All well and good, if that means the withdrawal of the Church from publicly-financed education, the severance of the Church's links with Crown and State, the repeal of the blasphemy laws (and Kenneth Leech does not explain how marginal he wants the Church to become). Of course, it won't happen. Because it's not the Church which is on the margins of decision making, but Kenneth Leech who is on the margins of the Church.

CONFESSIONS OF A CONSERVATIVE LIBERAL, by John Habgood. SPCK, £6.95

John Habgood became Archbishop of York in 1983, and he has published here in book form a number of lectures, sermons and pieces of occasional journalism from the first five years of his archiepiscopate. Unlike most of those in the Anglican hierarchy, he actually earned his doctorate, and he is also rare in being one of the few bishops around today to have trained as a scientist. Before seeking ordination in the 1950s, he worked in a medical research laboratory in Cambridge.

Dr Habgood aims to represent a middle position between the mystical fog of the Bishop of Durham and the rigid authoritarianism of the Bishop of London, hence his choice of "conservative liberal" as the sobriquet most fitting for his particular position. His position is, however, open to criticism from both those more "liberal" and those more "conservative" within his church, and he has, in my view, entirely failed to cover his back against the sorts of objection atheists are likely to have. His attitude to evolution is instructive here. As a scientist, he will have no truck with "creationism" as represented by biblical fundamentalists. And yet "creation" is a tenet of the Christian creed which he by no means wants to jettison.

Unfortunately, these short items pay little attention to the real dilemma posed to belief by the

REVIEWS

Religious Experience?

DAVID BLACKMORE

growth of scientific knowledge. Dr Habgood is, however, keen to insist that even in the modern world, faith and intellectual integrity can go together, but he signally fails to show how. Whenever he comes to a crunch issue, he resorts to fudging and gerrymandering which we all know so well from Christian apologetics. Typically, he seeks to undermine reason to leave a sphere of influence for belief. Thus he writes (page 94): "Our islands of rationality are far more successful at predicting the flight of a space craft than they are at predicting the weather".

But this confuses the issue. Scientists do not just "predict" the flight of a space craft, they actually determine it by means of precise control systems involving incredibly sophisticated mathematics, engineering and electronics. It is, however, comparatively easy to predict the trajectory of, for example, a falling meteorite, as it is a simple, single object obeying the "laws" of physics. The weather, on the other hand, is neither under human control (like the space craft), nor a simple system (like the meteorite). So the comparison breaks down. What was the point of introducing it in the first place? Presumably to throw sand in the eyes of his readers.

In the midst of all his disingenuity, however, the Archbishop introduces off-the-cuff disclaimers presumably intended to assure his readers that he is seriously opposed to obscurantism and may safely be followed further. He writes (page 102): "Nothing is more infuriating than Christians who think they know everything". And again (page 74): "People look to the Bible for answers to inappropriate questions, or parade as infallible truth answers to contemporary problems which are clearly naive and insufficient". Most unbelievers would agree. Nevertheless, Dr Habgood clearly believes that the Bible is of unique and signal importance as a guide to life and faith. Can you guess why? Simply because it has traditionally been so regarded by Christians.

These essays are as full of question-begging assertions as any Christian propaganda you are likely to encounter. But the author hopes that his apparent reasonableness will disguise the profoundly unreasonable and arbitrary faith-determined assumptions that his "argument" rests upon. I doubt that he will take many with him — most readers will find him dull and unsatisfactory. His attempt to combine liberalism and conservatism ultimately means that he falls between two stools, and his writing lacks both the irrational excitement of redneck fundamentalism, and the rational excitement of genuine scientific discovery, as provided by books like Richard Dawkins's *The Blind Watchmaker*.

DANIEL O'HARA

Many religious believers argue that God is experienced on a personal basis, and that experiences are not in the domain of things that can be scientifically explored. Whether or not their beliefs withstand examination is a side issue to these people. I would like to consider religious experience, which can be defined as an experience which is a direct manifestation of a god (in particular, the Christian God).

A few years ago when I was nearly converted to Christianity, I had moved away from home for the first time to study at college, and due to the pressures caused by such a big change I was not having a good time. It was then when I met a Christian who was very confident in his beliefs and showed an interest in my problems. He said that God was interested in my welfare, and all I had to do to receive his help was to acknowledge his presence. (The Bible, upon which my faith was to be based, could be read afterwards, he said.) Up to that time I had been a passive atheist and was prepared to entertain any ideas. Just like it is in the textbook case, I felt a strong emotional uplift and was much more happy. However, I had not gone too far across the line, and my curiosity had not been killed off yet. Was this wonderful feeling due to the presence of God in the room, or was it due to the fact that I had relinquished a lot of the responsibility for my problems, and felt loved by someone who was a figment of my over-stretched imagination? In other words I questioned whether the feeling was due to God, or was due to my belief that there was a God.

As time went on I asked Christians more questions about Christianity, and getting no satisfactory answers I became convinced that Mankind invented God, and not vice versa.

This leads me to some observations. First, people have an experience, such as the sight of water in the distance on a hot road for example, they know how to determine whether or not the experience is due to an illusion or a mental aberration. In the example of the water, we could view it at different angles, take into account climatic conditions and the laws of optics, and consider a host of other clues. For example, are the people who appear to be walking through the water getting wet? Now if religious experiences exist, what criteria are there to distinguish the genuine ones from the illusory ones? To claim that an experience indicates an objective fact, there must exist objective and rational methods of demonstrating this. For experiences described as religious there aren't any such methods, therefore there is no justification in saying that these experiences indicate the presence of a god. If we were to

abandon such rational methods of verification of experiences, we would have to grant the existence of every god that various people have felt to exist, including rain gods, tree gods, war gods and mischievous gods in the malfunctioning photocopier.

Secondly, in life it is notorious that people misunderstand or fail to understand the state of their own minds and the causes of their emotions and feelings. If this was not the case, then psychoanalysts would sit in their offices doing nothing, and personality questionnaires would be a waste of time.

Thirdly, people who already strongly believe in God will be apt to interpret certain experiences (which they can pick and choose) as coming from God, and some of these experiences no doubt arise from believing in God. Like a dog chasing its own tail, this is a splendid example of circularity.

LETTERS

FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

Neale Blackford has an entertaining but somewhat unfair debating technique. He conjures up a concept of his own, throws it at his opponent and then berates him for holding it.

In his latest letter (June), he charges me with using science and logic as yardsticks for judging his hypothetical religious claims. Not being a scientist, I do not presume to make any scientific test. My letter, which he quotes accurately, referred to my experience and logic. And in the original article (February) which triggered this debate, I gave what seemed to me fairly logical reasons, based on my own experience, for considering theism as rational as a-theism.

Mr Blackford then goes on to draw a blueprint, based on a few random texts from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, for his concept of "a supernatural God" (his capitals) and accuses me of having first said I believe in this god and then denying it. He even claims to have drawn the elements of his version of the supreme being from my Bible (his caps), though I do not recall that I ever indicated what that might be.

If Mr Blackford enjoys designing gods, good luck to him; but he should not presume to attribute belief in them to anyone else.

If I may summarise yet again, what my article said was (a) since neither proposition can be proved, theism is as rational as atheism; (b) my experience leads me to believe that in addition to a physical body and a brain I have a mind/soul/self/psyche which is the essential Me; and (c) by analogy from my own nature I consider it possible, though as yet incapable of proof, that the physical universe is also the vehicle for a universal mind/soul etc.

If Mr Blackford wants a more precise definition, I can only point out that to define the infinite is a contradiction in terms. And as for hoping to persuade the rest of your readers to my point of view (another of Mr Blackford's charges against me), I deny any such intention. I'm content if I encourage one other person to think rather than adopt ready-made concepts. His conclusions must be his own. Isn't that what free-thinking means?

Yet Mr Blackford doubts my tolerance because, he says, in an article elsewhere (not, as he calls it, a

Fourthly, in attacks on religion it is sometimes said that religion is only for those who need crutches. This seemingly frivolous remark actually expresses something quite important. You hear plenty of stories of drug addicts, terminal patients and downtrodden people "turning to God". But it would sound absurd if someone said: "I was happy with my life situation, could cope with injustice, was not afraid of my death and generally had a sense of well-being. Then suddenly I accepted Jesus into my heart!" It would be absurd, because religion has nothing to offer to a person like this. However, there are many people who are not as gratified with life. They choose to use God as a kind of cement to fill up the gaps in their happiness, just as others always drag in God to account for something that science hasn't explained yet.

"God-spot") on the subject of blasphemy I "described certain of my fellow-believers as 'cranks'". What he omits to say is that the article in question argued for the abolition of the law on blasphemy rather than any attempt to widen it to cover all beliefs because "that would extend its protection to every crank who chose to invent his own religion and create a god in his own image". He also forgets, or missed, the fact that on another occasion I said I was quite happy to be regarded as a crank myself.

A crank is, after all, a device for turning reciprocal action into forward motion.

May I also suggest to another of your correspondents, David Blackmore, who seeks to distinguish between concepts of faith, that the distinction is false. What he calls "rational faith", i.e. faith based on evidence, is not faith at all; it is a judgment on the balance of probabilities. There is faith and there is knowledge, and there is nothing in between.

JOHN BRAY

WHAT ORWELL MEANT

Robert Sinclair acknowledges that Orwell was a socialist, and claims that Orwell's socialism tells against my argument that his writings were attacks on the perversion of socialism and on the exploitation of working-class aspirations. On the contrary, Orwell's socialist convictions support my argument.

In order to claim that Orwell attacked socialism as a whole, Robert Sinclair has to undermine the validity of Orwell's arguments. For instance, he asks "why should Orwell be so troubled by the inevitable massive failings of a system he supported?", implying that Orwell was a hypocrite. In fact his view was that in Russia and China, as in Britain, socialism as he understood the term had never been tried, and never would be tried as long as Leninists remain powerful or even influential in the Labour movement. (It is undeniably true, as Orwell would have warmly agreed, that the same applies as long as safely "moderate" reformists dominate the Labour movement.) He goes on to write "Orwell denied his attack [was on socialism] because he knew Nineteen Eighty-Four had been instrumental in the devastation of socialism. . ."; implying that Orwell was a liar. It is significant that the Leninists whom Orwell attacked likewise slander Orwell as a hypocrite and a liar; Sinclair is at least honest enough to admit that he is opposed to socialism.

It is of course possible that Mr Sinclair does not

understand that there are numerous varieties of socialism. In this respect too he is like the Leninist hacks who claim to be the "only real socialists", and vilify anyone who criticises their "Left-wing" pretensions. He should read R. N. Berki's *Socialism in the Dent Modern Ideologies series*.

Robert Sinclair closes by acknowledging that socialist views are worthy of debate in the columns of *The Freethinker*. In this his position is rather better than that of those humanists who are, as Karl Heath rightly pointed out, afraid of politics — or rather non-conservative politics — and wish to see it excluded from the pages of humanist journals. But rational debate cannot take place when the positions of opponents are distorted and their integrity impugned in order to bolster one's own argument. For the record, I did not suggest that socialist views were never expressed in the pages of *The Freethinker*; I merely asked that they be rationally debated there.

COLIN MILLS

MORE ORWELLIAN THAN ORWELL

Robert Sinclair (Letters, June) is incorrigible. It now seems that he knows better what Orwell intended in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than Orwell himself! It is impossible to argue with such impudent presumption.

JOHN L. BROOM

BLOODY SPORTS

I was saddened to read the comments by Ian Forbes on the "anti-Field Sports" article in *The Freethinker* (Letters, June).

Hiding behind that innocuous and misleading term, "field sports", lies a great deal of merciless and mindless cruelty inflicted on animals by some rather pitiless, pitiful and brutalised people. What is referred to as field sports is in fact blood "sports", i.e. the horrors of fox hunting, hare coursing, etc. It is tragic that large numbers of creatures are killed every year because some people have been conditioned into following a stupid and dull country tradition.

Blood sportspeople should think a little harder. We are entering the Green Age, with a massive increase in concern for people, the environment — and animals.

N. G. BALL

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN ANIMALS

Along with marine biologists, I've often puzzled about the function of whale "song". So I'm sure the scientific world must be grateful to Dr Jonathan Miller (*Freethinker* report, May) for saving biologists a deal of expense in research funds. Researchers in animal behaviour and communication can now pack their briefcases and go home, secure in the knowledge that Dr Miller has cracked it. So all the whales were saying was "MOO". Well, well!

Plainly Dr Miller, busy as he is with all his other commitments, has not had time to pop along to his nearest university library to read up the literature on whale social behaviour, or he would not have referred to their highly-complex song-patterns as "twittering". I am astonished to hear a man of Mr Miller's intelligence dismiss whale-song (which varies among whale schools of the same species according to area, changes seasonally, carries over vast distances of ocean, and displays other, poorly-understood features) as nothing more than "the lowing of cattle". It is precisely because whale-song is under water (although noises are also made above the surface) that it has only fairly recently begun to be properly recorded and investigated, in the same way that primate, bird and insect

calls are valid subjects for biological investigation. To dismiss whale-song as nothing but meaningless mooing is an anti-scientific attitude, and therefore irrational.

I'm also quite sure that marine biologists studying whale behaviour will be displeased to be classed with "the forces of irrationalism", and will be most unhappy that their painstaking work is lumped in with oriental head-banging rituals and occult beliefs about whales' psychic powers.

We can "learn something" from all living things, Dr Miller; it's what biological science is all about. Let's not rubbish whale communication before it has been rationally studied.

JANET E. McCRICKARD

DATING THE SHROUD

Freethinkers and secularists do their cause no good by attributing significance to the carbon dating of those textile remnants kept at Turin. Such attribution tends to suggest that if the rags had been found to be 1950 years old then meaning and credibility would have been lent to the Christian legend. It will not be long before some enthusiast, armed with media of convenient isotopic constitution, sketches an appearance on a surface of appropriate age and so creates a relic that would pass the test of dating.

All that is proven by the dating of the Turin remnant is that it could have played no part in events alleged to have taken place about 1950 years ago. Nothing is proven about the elleged events.

EDWIN LEFEVRE

HISTORY OF THE HALLS

Because of problems with getting proofs to and from Australia, a number of errors and ambiguities appeared in my article on the Hall of Science in Melbourne (May). Hands up those who spotted that note 3 appears in the text before note 2!

There was probably one other Hall of Science in Melbourne before the building of the New Hall of Science in 1889. When Joseph Symes arrived on the scene in 1884, the local branch of the Australasian Secular Association had its headquarters at 120 Swanston Street, known as the Secular Hall. To confuse future historians the main Sunday lectures were held in the Hall of Science (better known as the Nugget Theatre) in Bourke Street, which was also rented. In 1886 the Association had to leave the Swanston Street property (probably for the building of the Town Hall) and moved all its operations to Bourke Street. But this building, in turn, was sold to the YMCA in 1888. The ASA was compensated (£250) for the breach of lease but needed a permanent base. Building the New Hall of Science on the Victoria Parade site became a matter of priority.

The designer of the new Hall turns out to be Thomas O. Roper, then living in the inner Melbourne suburb of Carlton. He was probably not a qualified architect but was definitely in the building trade. The contractors were Cohen, Smith and Ellis, whose tender was for £1,339 17s 6d. The site cost roughly another £3,000.

The court case over the ownership of the Hall of Science and land was in March (not May) 1891. Symes gave notice of appeal, but his enemies moved quickly and it looks as if they seized the Hall the day after the case was heard.

My statement that after Symes's departure in 1904 the Hall "passed through a number of hands" could well be wrong. It had a number of caretakers, but it is possible that Dr Samuel Peacock continued to lease it

out (for use as a skating rink) until 1913.

The (New) Hall of Science turns out to be one of a number of buildings erected by freethinkers in Australia and New Zealand between 1882 and 1890. At the beginning of 1989 two were left standing; now there is only one as the oldest, in Dunedin, New Zealand, has just been demolished.

NIGEL H. SINNOTT

"GOSPEL TRUTHS"

The Bishop of Durham now declares that the Ascension of Christ as documented in the Gospels was only a visionary experience; that all those positive declarations of Scripture which seem to speak of the authenticity of the event are allegorical, metaphorical, analogical, oratorical, rhapsodical, categorical and all the other oricals that mean, in plain English, that they are downright lies.

There are few parts of the Gospel related with greater appearance of historical truth and narrative simplicity than the account of the Ascension of Christ. The assertion that it occurred only in a vision — all the appearance of historical truth and narrative simplicity notwithstanding — is a pretence. And when advanced by those who profess and call themselves Christians, it serves to show what unprincipled and dishonest people their Christianity has made of them. For any ecclesiastic to maintain that this portion of the Gospel was visionary, while any other part of it was real, is simply to regard it as historical or visionary at his own option, to make of it a nose of wax and mould it to the changing fashion.

If the Christian has the right to say that there are some parts of scripture which are not to be taken as strictly and literally true, but understood as metaphor and allegory, what right has he to dispute our assertion that the Gospel story is allegory and metaphor from first to last? Or question our claim that it was not written to pass for truth but as a vehicle to convey moral instruction, after the Oriental style? Or challenge our description of it as a fable with a moral to it — of which the slower wit of Western nations forgot the moral and ran away with the fable?

DANIEL H. BIRD

PAGAN RITES AND RIGHTS

I have just seen on television the massive police operation aimed at preventing hippie travellers celebrating the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge. One traveller was arrested under an ancient ecclesiastical law for reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outside a cathedral. The cost of this exercise to Wiltshire ratepayers will be enormous.

What a contrast to the treatment of the Islamic fundamentalist fanatics demonstrating against Salman Rushdie as reported in the June *Freethinker*. They, it seems, can get away scotfree with incitement to murder and assaulting those calling for free speech. Harmless hippies on the other hand were confronted with riot police, armoured vans and helicopters.

To add insult to injury, numerous voices are calling for the extension of the blasphemy laws to prevent criticism of Islamic dogma. Under these laws, would the hippies who follow various pagan cults be able to take action against the Wiltshire authorities? I think not; their action would be laughed out of court. Yet Islam is no more rational than their faith, and a lot more dangerous and violent.

Could it be that the real difference between the Islamic zealots and the hippies is that the latter do not have powerful and terrorist governments to back them or MPs to argue their case in Parliament?

TERRY LIDDLE

Religious Breeding Lobby Criticised by UN

Islamic and Christian leaders, including the Pope, were criticised by Dr Nafis Sadik, executive director of the UN Population Fund when she introduced the Fund's 1989 report in London last month. Dr Sadik accused religious leaders of keeping Third World women in the bondage of child-rearing and of obstructing programmes to curb the world's increasing population.

Dr Sadik said that religious leaders talk to the poor and illiterate. "They are the only groups they can really sway", she added.

The report says that many women, particularly in developing countries, have few choices in life outside marriage and children.

"They tend to have large families because that is what is expected of them. Investing in women means widening their choice of strategies and reducing their dependence on children for status and support. Family planning is one of the most important investments, because it represents the freedom from which other freedoms flow. . .

"Better employment opportunities are irrelevant if women are too burdened by child-bearing and domestic work to take advantage of them".

Over the last decade the number of governments supporting family planning programmes has increased from 72 to 86 per cent. Despite this progress, "there are still 31 countries in the developing world — 18 in Africa, eight in the Middle East, four in Asia and one in Latin America — where the vast majority of people have virtually no access to modern family planning facilities".

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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.

OBITUARY

Mrs M. Brunel

Margaret Brunel, widow of Christopher Brunel, survived her husband by only five weeks. She had been ill for some time and her death followed a serious operation.

A librarian by profession, Margaret Brunel was Librarian at the Marx Memorial Library, London, for several years. She endeavoured to make the library on Clerkenwell Green a welcoming place for visitors, and inspired loyalty and commitment in those she worked with.

She later took up a post in the Computer Studies Department at Queen Mary's College. Here she became an active member of the National Association of Local Government Officers, serving as branch secretary and chairman.

Her marriage to Christopher Brunel was supremely happy. He also was actively involved in several organisations, notably the Thomas Paine Society of which he was chairman since its inception. But Margaret did not live in his shadow, making her own unique contribution, mainly in a voluntary capacity, to the Labour and trade union movement.

Final tributes were paid to Margaret Brunel at the City of London Crematorium.

Dr E. F. Richard

Edwin Frederick Richard was born in 1901 into a well-to-do German family directly descended from one of the Huguenots who had fled France in 1696. He completed his studies at the University of Berlin, qualifying as a doctor of medicine at the age of 23.

In spite of his wealthy background, Dr Richard was a lifelong democratic socialist. In the early days of the Hitler regime, he was caught distributing anti-Nazi leaflets and charged with treason. Had he been found guilty under that charge, he would have been executed. Instead he was convicted of a lesser charge and sent to a concentration camp near Berlin for four years.

Dr Richard was in Paris when the Germans marched in. He failed in an attempt to reach England, and was again arrested, this time by the Petain Government. He was sent to a camp in Algeria, where he was responsible for the health of its 3,000 inmates. When the Allied forces liberated northern Africa, he joined the British Army as a medical officer, and in due course was made a colonel.

After the war, Dr Richard settled in London, setting up his practice in the working-class Elephant and Castle area. He was a firm supporter of the National Health Service and held in high regard by his patients.

As a young man, he had rejected the Christian creed in which he had been brought up, and he

EVENTS

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031 667 8389.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm. (11 August, Discussion and Social.)

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, 1 August, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

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, 17 July, 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.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL OUTING

Sheffield Park and the
Bluebell Railway

Sunday, 10 September

Details from the NSS,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL
telephone 01-272 1266

remained a convinced atheist, rationalist and humanist. Among his various affiliations, he was a long-standing and generous member of the National Secular Society and a subscriber to *The Freethinker*.

After retiring at the age of 83, he moved to Portugal. His one reservation about living in Portugal was that he might die there and be given a Christian burial. When his health began to deteriorate, he returned to London where he died in his sleep.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Golders Green Crematorium, London.

NSS President Condemns Islamic Terrorism

Fresh from her painful personal encounter with a recent Muslim demonstration in London, Barbara Smoker chose "Melting-Pot or Multi-Culture?" as the title of her Sunday lecture to South Place Ethical Society on 2 July.

The president of the National Secular Society said she was as concerned as anybody about the right of minority groups to pursue their own chosen lifestyle. But she was also concerned about the rights of minorities within those minority groups, particularly their women and children.

"If families come to settle in this country, surely they should be willing for their children to become part of it", she said.

"By demanding their own religious schools, and the public funding of those schools, they are contriving to prevent their children from assimilating with the host community.

"While upholding the right of immigrant groups to foster elements of their own cultural background in their adoptive country — and, indeed, seeing this as a positive contribution to the varied general culture — I do not think that this communal right should override the rights of individuals within those groups. Particularly affected are the members of those groups born since immigration, and, especially in patriarchal groups, their women. After all, the individual is not only the smallest, but also often the most oppressed, of all minorities".

Barbara Smoker said we must consider the fabric of our own culture.

"The country's laws and the hard-won rights of its population as a whole should not be waived too readily in favour of the newcomers, generally in the name of religion.

"When Ayatollah Khomeini issued the notorious death sentence on Salman Rushdie, a British citizen of Muslim origin living in Britain, our Government was slow and half-hearted in its condemnation of it, and members of the Labour Party joined in the apologetic regrets for the hurt feelings of Muslims. So did spokesmen of all the major religions; the Archbishop of Canterbury urging the extension of blasphemy protection to Islam and other religions, rather than renounce it for his own".

Referring to the large Muslim demonstration organised to demand the extension of blasphemy law to Islam, Barbara Smoker said that while disagreeing with the demand, she upheld their right to demonstrate peaceably in support of it.

"Not only was the Muslim demonstration far from peaceable, but the blasphemy issue was largely lost in violent incitement to murder", she added.

"Those guilty of this incitement to murder were not told this was disallowed on the demonstration, nor were any arrests made on a charge of incitement.

Even those demonstrators arrested later for physical violence against the police were released without charge. Not even the Muslim spokesmen who have used television to call for murder have been prosecuted for this offence.

"Having thus flouted with impunity British laws and customs and sensibilities, Muslims have proceeded to further acts of violence, such as arson, and have continued their monstrous demands for the banning of *The Satanic Verses* and death to the author.

"Many other Muslims in this country are appalled and ashamed by all this. They realise that nothing is more likely to cause real racist hostility against their whole community. But their voices are hardly heard above those of the religious leaders and the rabbis behind them".

Miss Smoker claimed it is unlikely that any of this would have happened had not Muslim religious leaders got away with earlier demands for exemption from various laws in the name of religion.

"For instance", she declared, "our slaughter laws, which demand the pre-stunning of animals killed for meat, are waived in favour of both Jewish and Muslim religious methods of slaughter, which forbid pre-stunning. Each of these religions denies that their particular method is cruel, but agrees that the other one is! If this law is unnecessary to ensure that animal slaughter is as humane as possible, then it should be repealed. If it is reasonable, then it should apply to all.

"I have become quite accustomed, over the past few years, to the charge of being 'racist' whenever I have opposed the provision of halal and kosher meat, the waiving of conservation and planning laws for the building of mosques, the demands for publicly-funded schools for Muslim and orthodox Jewish girls, and other such special provisions. The same charge was repeated when I was instrumental in allowing the anti-Zionist play *Perdition* to be put on at Conway Hall last year after it had been denied access to theatres all over the country.

"In vain have I protested that it is hardly 'racist' to oppose policies that are put forward by fundamentalist co-religionists who are not always of the same race and that are opposed by some other people who are of the same race. . .

"Soon, Muslim religious leaders in this country may well demand, in the name of religious freedom, that they be allowed to follow the Koran in the matter of judicial penalties — to chop off the hands of any members of their community caught stealing and to stone to death any of their women caught in adultery. What would be the 'progressive' response to that?"

