

The Freethinker

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SURVEYS SHOW LARGE INCREASE IN "NO RELIGION" BRITONS

A survey conducted by British Social Attitudes researchers has revealed that Britain has become one of the least religious countries in the Western world. The proportion of British people saying "no religion" is now 34 per cent.

This annual in-depth study of people's beliefs and perceptions is conducted under the auspices of the independent, non-commercial Community Planning Research organisation. This year its findings are based on comparisons between Britain and other countries.

The Netherlands tops the chart of religious unbelief with 54 per cent opting for "no religion", Britain is in second place, with Australia third (11 per cent). Six per cent of Americans say they have no religion, a figure that is likely to increase as the impact of televangelist financial scandals and hypocrisy over sexual behaviour takes effect.

One in five British participants in the survey said they attended church at least once a month. The picture is slightly rosier for the churches in Australia with 25 per cent of regular churchgoers. The United States figure of 54 per cent is the highest. Not surprisingly Italy heads the churchgoing table on mainland Europe, but even there the proportion is down to 45 per cent.

Only 49 per cent of Americans accept the Darwinian theory of evolution, whereas the proportion in Britain is 79 per cent. The authors of the study believe that the influence of Christian fundamentalism in the United States accounts for the rejection of Darwinism.

Barbara Snoker, president of the National Secular Society, said it gave her "a feeling of unholy patriotic pride to have it confirmed that, despite the shame of having an Established Church and compulsory religion in schools, Britain is among the world's

most irreligious societies". She added that if England were considered separately from the far more religious countries of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, "it would probably match the marvellously rational Netherlands in this respect.

"Perhaps the international humanist movement could set up some sort of honour to be presented at the start of each decade to the nation moving most rapidly away from religion. As we enter the last decade of the 20th century, the Dutch, with an actual majority now of non-believers, must obviously be the current title-holders.

"It is clearly because of the steady drift away from Christian belief and observance in most Western countries that Christian prelates are trying so frantically at present to heal the centuries-old schisms in Christendom, despite the additional rifts caused by such acute problems as modernising the liturgy and ordaining women. Ecumenism may be difficult for many Christians to accept, but the important thing now for the very survival of Christianity in the developed world is for the various Christian sects to band together against the creeping secularisation of society."

The findings of another but different type of survey are also bad news for the churches. This year's annual youth poll conducted by Barclays Bank, shows that 40 per cent of those who responded care very little about religious faith. But they are very concerned about "green" issues and animal welfare. Significantly, the 20,000 participants in the Barclays survey were in the 11-19 age bracket.

Nicolas Walter, managing director of the Rationalist Press Association, said: "These figures are encouraging, if surprising. Most recent surveys have suggested that regular churchgoers are about 11 per

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

GODLY GHOULS

The beliefs and actions of religious pressure groups range from the honestly misguided to the completely barmy. But most of those operating under the pro-"life" (anti-abortion) umbrella are downright cruel. The latest example of their inhuman attitude is the irresponsible attacks being made on clinics by a bunch of pious thugs known as Rescue. Attacks have taken place in London, Manchester and Birmingham, and more are planned.

Like so many unsavoury religious imports, Rescue has come to Britain from the United States where it is known as Operation Rescue. Attacks on clinics have been fomented by a group of over 20 Americans who came to Britain for the purpose during this year. Their activities are being co-ordinated by Fr James Morrow, a Roman Catholic priest.

Rescue describes its activities as "pavement counselling", a euphemism for accosting already distressed women arriving for an operation and showing them photographs of aborted fetuses. One clinic where the ghouls harassed women is in Kilburn, an Irish quarter of north London. Inevitably many of the women were Roman Catholics already suffering feelings of guilt and fear in addition to an unwanted pregnancy.

Groups like Rescue are the successors to those religious crusaders who in the past resorted to every device, including violence, in their campaigns against birth control. Then as now, the Roman Catholic Church was the most implacable enemy of people's right to curb their fertility. But the family planning movement had many influential enemies in the Church of England and other Protestant churches as well. A committee of Anglican bishops denounced contraception as "dangerous, demoralising, sinful". One of their number declared with all seriousness: "The only thing that justifies ultimately the intercourse between the man and the woman is the purpose and desire to have children".

Like abortion clinics today, the first family planning clinics were also vandalised. Callers seeking advice were accosted by the godly. One mobile clinic was burned to the ground by a devout Roman Catholic lady who acquired a two-gallon can of petrol for the holy deed. Most of the vandals were lay Christians, but the inspiration and encouragement was clerical in origin.

In recent times the ardour of some Roman Catholic opponents of birth control has been cooled by the realisation that their Church's proscription on contraception is the cause of many unplanned preg-

AND NOTES

nancies which are terminated. It is clear that despite Pope John Paul II's and Mother Teresa's exhortations, the Church has lost the battle against birth control, in Western countries at least. And the unscrupulous methods to which sections of the anti-abortion movement are now resorting, indicate panic rather than confidence.

Since 1967 Britain has seen dozens of anti-abortion rallies into which even young children have been dragooned. Dog-collared and wimpled celibates have been much in evidence too. Sunday after Sunday, Roman Catholic churches have reverberated with anti-abortion tirades. But "pavement counselling" is a nastier business. The more orthodox anti-abortionists, mindful of their charity status, will not publicly endorse such tactics. And it is unlikely that many women who have decided on an abortion will be deterred by religious hoodlums from the United States.

RATIONAL FEMINISTS

Last month saw the launch of a new organisation called Feminists Against Censorship. Its slogan, "Don't support censorship under any guise", is a welcome relief from the vociferous demands by other feminists for more censorship.

In its statement, "Who Defines Pornography?", FAC points out that the traditional pro-censorship lobby has sought to suppress safer sex, abortion and birth control information by claiming that it was pornographic. The message to those feminists who have jumped aboard the Clare Short—Mary Whitehouse bandwagon is: "It is inconsistent to oppose Clause 28 one year and support censorship the next".

Feminists Against Censorship argues that supporting censorship, with a single-minded focus on pornography, as some feminists do, is a retrograde step which distracts attention from more pressing concerns. It declares that many anti-pornography feminists "are so concerned with pornography that they are ignoring the damage done to women by cuts in the NHS, the increase in racist attacks, assaults on lesbians and gay men, the promotion by the Government of an ideology which reduces the freedom of women in the name of the Family and the erosion of women's rights throughout the world".

Referring to the claim that the danger allegedly posed by pornography justifies increasing State power in the form of new legislation, FAC says that experience in other countries shows how wrong-headed this is. Such legislation would be distorted by conservatives and have a devastating effect on alter-

native publishers and booksellers.

The FAC statement concludes: "Suddenly the feminist movement that once fought for freedom and sexual self-determination is advocating giving power over our lives to the judges and the police; suddenly what it says about our freedom and our sexual desires sounds like the ravings of the Right. Suddenly feminism is about censorship rather than about opening possibilities".

The formation of an anti-censorship feminist organisation is well overdue. For far too long intolerant and censorious termagants have been allowed to hijack the appellation "feminist" and purport to speak for all women.

● Feminists Against Censorship, c/o 38 Mount Pleasant, London WC1X 0AP.

MURDOCH AND MORALITY

You have to hand it to the Dirty Digger. Rupert Murdoch has nerve (or perhaps it's just a quirky sense of humour). The owner of 38 per cent of the British press predicted in an interview last month that we are all set for a religious revival in Britain. Murdoch was somewhat vague as to the form this disaster will take, but he obviously believes that religion is "a good thing". He has already put his shoulder to the religious revival wheel in the United States by donating free air time on his Sky Television channel to the fundamentalist "Hour of Power" programme.

The press baron said his newspapers would make their contribution to religious revival by "maintaining high moral values". Already it is noticeable that his guttersnipe daily *Sun* is adding Christian uplift to its contents, alongside the sleaze, character assassination and jingoism.

Mr Murdoch also revealed that all is not well with Sky Television in Britain. It has been losing £2 million a week since February, and if things don't buck up the channel may have to close. Whatever Rupert Murdoch's feelings about ultimate reality, it is a safe bet that his down-to-earth executives are less concerned about afterlife in the sky than life after Sky.

The seventh Symposium of European Bishops, attended by 79 bishops from 24 countries, concluded last month that only 45 per cent of Europeans believe in an afterlife. And many force themselves to do so without being convinced. The bishops believe that the "dimension of mystery" connected with birth and death had been reduced by the advancement of medical science. They heard Pope John Paul II declare that birth and death had always represented challenges for the Church. This challenge has become more assertive because of "the scientific and technological progress of this our century".

SUNDAY CHOICE

Supporters and others on the Keep Sunday Special Campaign's mailing list recently received a heart-rending epistle on the plight of an engaged couple, Sarah and Keith (fictional characters, like so many in Christian propaganda), whose future happiness is clouded by the threat of Sunday trading. Two themes run through the document: first, that Sunday shopping undermines family life; secondly, in order to avert this catastrophe, send a donation to the Keep Sunday Special Campaign.

The KSSC endeavours to present Sunday restrictions as a social service designed by the Almighty to protect the welfare of families, small shopkeepers, workers, churchgoers, the Noise Abatement Society and old Uncle Tom Cobley and all. Unlike the venerable Lord's Day Observance Society, the KSSC virtually excludes references to the Old Testament edict on Sabbath observance. Hardly surprising, really, when the Fourth Commandment decrees that the seventh day, not the first, "shall be the Sabbath of the Lord thy God". And of course no mention

is made in either KSSC or LDOS propaganda that the newspapers, milk and much of the food that pious folk buy on Monday, is packed and transported on Sunday.

Meanwhile, good news from Wales. The gloomy Sunday lot have suffered another severe setback in what was once a stronghold of "our Lord and His Day". Two of the three remaining "dry" districts have voted for Sunday opening of public houses. And polls in 12 other districts already "wet" produced majorities in favour of Sunday opening being allowed to continue. So Dwyfor, in Gwynedd, where the campaign against Sunday opening was led by local clergy, is the only district in Wales where Sunday drinking is not allowed — officially.

The ban on Sunday opening of public houses was introduced over a century ago when Wales was in the grip of religious fervour.

Of the 8,360 Soviet Jews who passed through the Vienna transit camp in October, only 115 opted to live in Israel.

SAID IN '89

The only way to make the world free from disturbing literature is to make it free from literature. *Mervyn Jones*

Faith is not knowledge. *Lord Hailsham*

A new, wider law on blasphemy is probably unworkable today. If it was workable, it would carry dangers that would outweigh the benefits. *The Rt Rev Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford*

Everything is possible with mumbo-jumbo. *John McVicar*

Christians have always been more inclined to war than non-Christians. *Dr Francis Langan, Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Derry*

Where there is strife in our world, you do not have to look hard to see the hands of various brands of fundamentalism — Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, Christian fundamentalism in Ulster, or Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. *Dr Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury.*

God is a terribly good character in fiction. *John Mortimer*

When I die I will be reduced to ashes, and that's that. *Ludovic Kennedy*

Much contemporary evangelism is manipulative, crass, cringe-making, guilt-inducing. *The Rt Rev Richard Holloway, Bishop of Edinburgh*

Religious faith deserves a chapter to itself in the annals of war technology. *Richard Dawkins*

Is a sermon more privileged than a poem? *Tony Harrison*

Far from being villains, nuns, and possibly to a lesser extent, monks and priests, are generally victims of their own guilt-ridden psychology fed by religious myth. *Barbara Smoker*

The giving of offence cannot be a basis for censorship, or freedom of expression would perish instantly. *Salman Rushdie*

Man has a neurotic need for scapegoating. *Bernice Reubens*

To murder the thinker does not murder the thought. *Arnold Wesker*

I believe in God, but when you're dead you're dead. I don't believe we'll all be rising again afterwards. *Robert Maxwell*

Christians are sometimes given to making statements they cannot substantiate. *The Rev Tony Highton*

One is attracted to the faith. Believing is the problem. *Graham Greene*

Enforced Worship Will Divide Our Schools

KARL LENNOX

Christian conservatives in Parliament, backed by outside religious pressure groups, introduced clauses into the Education Reform Act aimed at entrenching Christianity in the nation's schools. Karl Lennox, a primary schoolteacher, highlights the dangers of the new religious indoctrination scheme. This article is published by kind permission of the writer and of Tribune weekly in which it originally appeared.

In September, the new national curriculum became compulsory. The Government says that it will ensure the raising of educational standards in our schools, principally because attainment targets have been set: teachers know — especially in the primary sector — just what is expected of them. It brings standardisation and uniformity throughout the length and breadth of the country. White, middle-class juniors in "green belt" Surrey are following a similar curriculum to the poor, working class and immigrants in the depressed industrial areas of the North. Unequivocally, this is a recipe for success.

Eventually, all ten subject areas will have a rigid, defined syllabus for teachers to follow; all, this is, except religious education. This discipline has been left in limbo. It is not one of the ten foundation subjects and yet State schools will have to show that it is being taught and that it is "in the main Christian". Also compulsory will be a daily act of worship which again will have to be "broadly Christian" in content.

The Government states, in one of its myriad of national curriculum documents, that "the position of religious education is strengthened by the Education Reform Act, in particular by the requirement for local education authorities to set up standing advisory councils on religious education". And yet, when a recent survey asked LEA advisers for religious education exactly what "broadly Christian collective worship" meant, they gave varied and often diametrically opposed interpretations.

One thing is clear, however: the teaching of religious education, and in particular the nature of assemblies, is going to alter considerably in many State schools, both at primary and secondary level. Many observers in education and in the ethnic communities foresee real dangers, especially in multi-cultural areas.

Of course parents can still withdraw their children from assemblies and other religion-related topics. Already, in many multi-cultural schools, ethnic minority children are withdrawing in droves. Community leaders see the Government's actions as divisive: a provocative attempt to isolate them and re-Christianise schools, thereby alienating ethnic

children, making them feel second-class citizens.

If, indeed, the Government does see its Act as a means of re-establishing old Christian values in schools, it could well backfire on it.

One large comprehensive school in Essex with 1,300 pupils — all of whom come from white middle-class backgrounds — recently sent out a letter to parents, advising them of their right to withdraw their children from Christian assemblies. The staff were stunned when almost 90 per cent requested that their children be withdrawn.

In multi-cultural areas the consequences of the Education Reform Act could be much more serious.

Recently, publicity has been given to the pluralism of society in Britain and how this Government is attempting to tackle the problem of racism. The Act will not facilitate co-operation and equal opportunities for all pupils. It will create polarisation in multi-cultural schools and religious education will be the wedge that drives pupils irrevocably apart.

The Government's answer to legitimate criticism has been typically woolly. It says it has made it possible for schools with a high intake of non-Christian pupils to apply for an exemption from the predominantly Christian worship *diktat*. This, surely, is merely the ostrich burying its head in the sand. It also goes against the Government's claim that the new national curriculum will provide the same education for all children, irrespective of race, creed or colour.

The national curriculum could have taken the opportunity to dereligionise state schools: to remove the source of potential offence, thereby defusing the mounting tension in multi-cultural areas.

The Government, of course, justifies its actions by pointing out that parents have the right to choose their child's school. If this really is the case, then parents already have the option to send their offspring to a church school, be it Catholic or Church of England. For parents of other Christian denominations and religions, who tend to give their children independent religious instruction anyway, the State should provide schools whose curriculum does not highlight, negatively, cultural differences or cause religious offence.

Removing compulsory religious education from State schools is the first step towards a truly pluralist society.

Two Islamic militants have been sentenced to ten years in prison by an Egyptian court. They were found guilty of murdering a Cairo grocer who refused to switch his radio from a programme of classical music to readings from the Koran.

Crocodile Tears

BARRY DUKE

South Africa's Dutch Reformed Church, principal architect of the monstrous policy of apartheid, seems to be having second thoughts about the morality of enforced race separations. But do these doubts spring from genuine remorse over the millions of lives wrecked by apartheid during a period of almost half-a-century? Or are the sentiments now being expressed simply a manifestation of fear? Barry Duke considers latest developments.

I could not help but laugh out loud over the following paragraph in an article entitled "Pricking the Afrikaner Conscience" in a recent issue of *The Christian Science Monitor*: "At a meeting of the White Dutch Reformed Church and its black and mixed race counterparts last March, Johan Heyns (leader of the Dutch Reformed Church) is reported to have wept in confessing the error of apartheid".

My laughter was hollow — born of nightmarish memories of having been raised in the midst of Afrikanerdom in a semi-rural part of the Transvaal. To me, the very notion that any one of these people might have feelings of regret or remorse is simply incredible.

The product of generations of inbreeding, all weaned on the bitter milk of fundamental Christian nastiness, these were the people who, in their Sunday best, and Bible in hand, would nonchalantly spit at or beat up any black person they might encounter on their way to or from church.

These were the people whom I once encountered screaming abuse at a young white woman who rushed to the aid of a black traffic accident victim. Until the day I die I shall never forget the hate on their faces as they spat and howled and jeered at the woman as she sat in the middle of an intersection, cradling the black man's injured head in her lap.

These were the people who, in making it a crime *not* to discriminate against blacks, coloured and Asians, erected legal and social barriers that prohibited the natural formation of bonds and the establishment of rewarding relationships between people of different colours. By enshrining racism in law, they destroyed at a stroke the last vestiges of civilised values that existed in South Africa before they turned it fascist. These were the people who, in their desire to commit genocide, tried their damndest to provoke a black uprising so that the full might of the State could be used to rid South Africa of "Die Swart Gevaar" ("The Black Menace").

Remorse? Among people who possess no natural dignity, and therefore will not tolerate it in others? Remorse among people who would make America's Southern red-neck Baptists look like urbane liberal

sophisticates? Remorse among a nation of bigots so punch-drunk on their noxious brand of Calvinism that they regard all aspects of decency, compassion and fair play as "communistic"? Remorse among people whose idea of sport is to pepper infants with buckshot?

I think not. When leading lights in what so many are pleased to call the Much Deformed Church break down and cry, one can be forgiven for cynically regarding their snivelling as the classic reaction of bully boys facing the prospect of a damn good hiding.

With heavy, but unintended irony, Professor Heyns said: "We are all disillusioned after the very great hopes we had that apartheid would succeed. We thought the experiment would be a roaring success. Instead it was a total failure".

The "great hopes for apartheid" that Heyns refers to were harboured only by those who believed that their god had settled them in South Africa with the express purpose of providing them with a vast reservoir of near-slave labour; people who, because they were black, were seen as sub-human, and could, and therefore *should* be treated as animals.

For apartheid to "succeed", the Afrikaner would simply continue to keep four-fifths of the population in a state of abject poverty, ignorance and subjugation, aided and abetted by such apologists for the system as Margaret (Minority of One) Thatcher, who is content to sit back and watch apartheid being "reformed", and applaud when de Klerk desegregates beaches and hotels. These latest "concessions", by the way, have no significance whatsoever. They amount to nothing more than the removal of a brick from the South African equivalent of the Berlin Wall. Racism cannot be reformed. It has to be eliminated. When the non-white population are given the same residential rights as whites; and the same health care, and educational facilities, then, and only then, should we start applauding.

The apartheid "experiment" was "a total failure" not because it is now perceived to be monstrously immoral, based as it was on Hitler's Third Reich principles of a Master Race — in South Africa the principle was called "Baasskap" — but because it is turning out to be totally unenforceable. Sanctions, combined with growing political awareness among young black radicals, and consumer boycotts and strikes, have demonstrated just how vulnerable the Nationalists are to pressure from abroad and from within.

But like rats, the Nationalists are never more dangerous than when they are cornered. Many believe that the situation has, over the past few years, improved. This perception springs from the absence

of television coverage — the result of a determined attempt on the part of the regime to remove images of violence from foreign screens.

But the violence itself persists. The republic's state of emergency, and the rigorous censorship accompanying it, simply means that President F. W. de Klerk, with his death squads, agents provocateur, and trigger-happy police and army, are able to continue doing their murderous work out of camera shot, while trying to dupe the world into believing that "changes are taking place".

When apartheid goes — and like the Third Reich it will be history before the turn of the century — it will have vanished not because of Afrikaner remorse, but because the oppressed majority will simply have taken what was rightfully theirs.

Professor Heyns and his ilk are great believers in the power of prayer. They had better start praying now that when the new era dawns, they won't be subjected to the same sort of treatment currently suffered by blacks, and many white dissidents too, under the Afrikanerdom's jackboot.

Christians in Retreat

DANIEL O'HARA

In Western Europe at least, the Christian religion really does seem to be tottering towards its demise. A recent poll reveals that in this country, the proportion who ever attend church willingly is down to 20 per cent, and in the Netherlands a majority of the population (54 per cent) now describe themselves as atheists. We cannot, however, expect the churches to quietly pack their bags and go away. Those with entrenched vested interests, in clinging to such power and influence that they still command, can be expected to seek fresh ways of exploiting their advantage. Other groups, from the hysterical lunatic fringes of religion, can be expected to become more strident and aggressive in promoting their nefarious doctrines and duping the gullible.

The ways in which the mainstream churches seek to counter the growing disaffection of the public can take many forms, and in this article I am going to concentrate on two examples, one strategic and one theological, of their attempts to stem the tide of secularisation. I shall also endeavour to show why such attempts are doomed to failure.

The first example is the Church of England's response to an ever-decreasing number of suitable candidates for ordination. In November 1987, on the recommendation of its Vocation Committee, the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry (ACCM) set up a Working Party chaired by Peter Baelz, a former Dean of Durham, to produce for the church "a theological statement and a policy for vocational development, and to make recommendations for practical action". The Working Party has recently produced its report, entitled "Call to Order", and though this has been widely commended for study by the Bishops, to this outsider, at least, it makes a depressing reading. Though this is in effect a "strategic" document, it is also, as it was intended to be, hedged about with "theological" verbiage of the most glutinous and repulsive kind. Freethinkers should, perhaps, be encouraged. If the Church is capable of not only producing but also commending something quite so tacky as "Call to Order", its

days are clearly numbered.

Though dressed in high-flown language, and full of impressive-sounding, though vacuous, phrases and sentiments, "Call to Order" is an exercise in fatuousness which will have the success it deserves. *The Freethinker* is not a theological journal, and I shall not therefore bore readers with what could only be a tedious analysis of this turgid document. It is, however, interesting that such a large proportion of the space in what is basically a response to a strategic problem should be given over to vapid theologising. This emphasis demonstrates why the approach will fail. The authors are keen that discussion groups should be set up at all levels within the Church to explore the concepts of vocation, service and ministry (key theological concepts). But can intelligent people be satisfied with discussions that take as read the underlying but unexamined notions of God, Creation, Sin and Redemption upon which the whole religious enterprise depends? The authors are candid enough to admit (Para 18): "The reality of God's action in the world cannot be proved with dispassionate objectivity". They should have been bold enough to admit that it cannot be proved at all, and that the very idea is nonsensical. But no, they go on to assert piously: "Its discernment requires the deeper insights of faith and love". This is the typical way in which religionists seek to wrong-foot the sceptical: they are saying, in effect, "unless you can see God at work in the world, you are lacking in faith and love". A similar tactic was used by the charlatans who sold the Emperor his non-existent new clothes in the Hans Andersen fable. Sceptics must stand up to this sort of moral blackmail. They can do so by insisting that "love" is an entirely natural phenomenon, as much a product of evolution as eyes and ears, and that "faith", far from being the virtue Christians would have us believe, is in reality a vice of lazy minds.

The parts of the report which have attracted greatest attention in the secular media are those which suggest that the Church should adopt tactics

analogous to the "head-hunting" of top employment bureaux. It is suggested (Para 113) that the Church may wish "to challenge a successful engineer, writer, doctor, farmer, mechanic, etc, to give up his or her work in order to take on the duties of pastoral office. . ." In suggesting that it may need to remunerate them accordingly, it would appear to be urging a reversal of recent policies in which the Church of England has increasingly relied on non-stipendiary ministers who are paid nothing at all. The Report also suggests the Church should target "young black Anglicans . . . to offer themselves for ordination". (Para 127) Hasn't it been noticed that the black community, with a few notable exceptions, has given the Church of England a wide berth and set up its own black-led churches? Who could blame them in view of the appalling historic racism of the mainstream churches?

A "Call to Order" may have influenced one senior church bureaucrat to offer himself for ordination. Derek Pattinson, soon to retire as Secretary-General of the General Synod, has suddenly announced a decision to prepare for ordination next year. How many others will heed the call? This, after all, is the Church which is still, in many quarters, uneasy about having women, homosexuals, divorcees and the partners of divorcees admitted to its ministry.

My second example concerns the way in which theologians seem all too ready to jettison certain aspects of traditional dogma in the mistaken belief that this will make the faith more credible to the man in the street. In this case, the traditional dogma which is being pushed overboard with unseemly haste is the impassibility of God (the traditional view being that God is beyond suffering and change). *The Independent* has for several weeks been opening its Saturday "Faith and Reason" column to theological athletes keen to demonstrate their prowess by showing how far they can throw this ancient dogma. On 18 November, a certain Dr David Pailin established a new record. He opens with a shocking admission of physical violence: "I once kicked a philosopher. He had summarised his view of what is real by saying that only what can be kicked exists. God, however, cannot be kicked. Therefore, God does not exist. It was then that I kicked his leg and said, 'I have just kicked God' ". He goes on to argue: "God is aware of everything. Whatever happens is experienced by God. No one suffers alone and no one rejoices alone. However isolated and misunderstood a person may feel, God shares their feeling totally". And on and on he goes, insisting that every crying child and worrying parent and suffering victim has God crying and worrying and suffering in them and with them. "All is shared by God (joy and sorrow) and so is in God".

Dr Pailin is, at least, ready to acknowledge his debt to A. N. Whitehead, Bertrand Russell's erstwhile

collaborator who, when very old and soft in the head, slipped into this so-called "process" way of thinking about God and the Universe. Forty years later, this pantheistic vision was revived and given a new twist by the American philosopher, Charles Hartshorne. While I was studying in Philadelphia in the late 1960s, "process theology" was all the rage. I had assumed it had later withered on the vine; but no, along comes Dr David Pailin to prove again the old adage about bad pennies.

Taken seriously, in pantheism, or "panentheism" as Hartshorne, John Cobb and others prefer to call it, God is to be equated with the sum total of everything, or is at least in everything as an all-pervasive "polarity". What this adds to our understanding of anything is obviously nil. If ever there were a case for wielding Occam's Razor deftly, this, surely, is it. But "process theology" is not only philosophically redundant, it is also morally repugnant. What does it do to someone dying of cancer or AIDS to be told: "God is in there suffering with you"? What good is such a God? Have not the likes of Dr Pailin swapped the idea of a powerful God, who might conceivably have been expected to do something, for a weak and attenuated ghost who is about as able to do anything as we are to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? Such a notion is an insult to the intelligence! A "god" who is ubiquitous but useless like the aether, is as redundant as any other concept of God is incredible.

Dr Pailin should recall the useful maxim of W. S. Gilbert: "When everyone is somebody, then no-one's anybody". For all practical purposes, his "God", who is absolutely everywhere, is indistinguishable from a "God" who is nowhere at all. If I were Dr Pailin's housemaster, I should set him the task of copying out Barbara Smoker's "Good God!" until he had learnt his lesson.

Freethinker Fund

Throughout the year, every year, readers contribute generously to the Fund. The latest list of donations is given below and the 1989 total will be announced next month.

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Total for October: £211.20.

Good Old Time Religion

R. J. CONDON

As one gets older one's memory tends to sharpen. Not indeed for what happened last week or even five minutes ago, but the events of one's childhood stand out with increasing clarity. I am thinking of two in particular, whose recounting may prove entertaining.

My parents' first married home was a flat in London, where in due course I appeared. The street consisted of terraced houses, looking much alike and without any feature of distinction. The one exception was a large old house standing in its own neglected and overgrown grounds. It had been empty for as long as anyone could remember.

It ought to have had a reputation for being haunted if any house did, but despite its mysterious air it escaped that honour, at least for a time. But then something happened. Strange figures had been seen moving behind the dirty glass of the windows. News of the haunting spread like the proverbial wild-fire. At dusk the following evening there we all were, children and some adults, waiting for we knew not what.

Darkness came, and with it the lamplighter — it was that long ago. Still we waited. All of a sudden there was a commotion in the bushes as though a fight was going on. Out came two men in uniform, dragging another man with them. The crowd cheered with excitement — it hadn't been a wasted vigil after all.

The captive, a powerfully built character in a ragged overcoat and a huge conical hat, struggled fiercely and occasionally turned to glare at the crowd. We were thrilled to bits — what wouldn't he do to us if he broke free?

The two uniformed men, with their still-resisting prisoner, began to walk along the road, right in the centre of it to be exact. We spectators followed them in a kind of triumphal procession.

And so we marched through the night, but not for long. It became apparent that things were not what they seemed. The men in uniform were singing, softly at first and then loudly. They were singing hymns, and what was more the prisoner was singing as well. Then he threw off his overcoat and hat to reveal that he too was in uniform.

We reached a shopping area. Under the bright lights we saw for the first time just what those uniforms were. Our pied pipers were Salvation Army men, who had been sent out to attract a congregation for the street meeting they and their colleagues regularly held at that spot. The Army was given to stunts like that in those days. Disgusted, we trooped back home. After 60 years I have forgiven but not forgotten.

When the flat became too small for a growing family, we moved to our grandmother's house in

another part of London. Grandma was blind and deaf, and we were to look after her. It would only be for a short while, and then we would have the house to ourselves. Not content with living another 20 years, Grandma threatened to return and haunt us. But that would be a long and painful story.

Our new home was close to a "tin" chapel, so called because many such buildings were constructed for cheapness out of corrugated iron sheets. In this particular Bethel there worshipped a sect of fundamental Christians. According to their noticeboard they were Strict Baptists — no connection with that easy-going lot in the High Street. Their minister — after all these years I still remember his name — was Pastor Leonard S. Hill.

When the weather was kind the congregation held their services in the street outside the chapel, and passers-by were entreated to join in. Pastor Hill, a tall, thin young man with the rapt expression of an enthusiast, both preached and accompanied the hymn-singing on a harmonium.

Sunday after Sunday, for years on end, this simple scene repeated itself, local people regarding it almost as part of the furniture. Even a slight change would have been unthinkable, but one day, for some reason, the sheep decided to upgrade their shepherd. The notice-board was repainted and Pastor Hill became the Reverend Hill, complete with dog-collar. And I had the privilege and pleasure — especially the latter — of witnessing his very first perambulation abroad wearing the insignia of his office. The expression on his face was ecstatic as he squinted down, first with one eye and then with the other, at his brand new collar. Satan is ever lurking to trap the unwary, and here he had caught a minister. The danger to his soul unheeded, the Reverend Hill was committing the deadly sin of pride.

Why do I bring this matter up after so long a time? Because I feel myself being manoeuvred into a somewhat similar position. As an officiant at non-religious funeral ceremonies I get correspondence from undertakers, some of whom insist on addressing me as "Reverend Sir". I have now come to expect it. As Grandma used to say, "I've got the name so I'll have the game". I rather fancy myself in a clerical collar.

Three trainee rabbis from Gateshead Talmudic College were given a 12-month conditional discharge by North Shields magistrates after being found guilty of assaulting a courting couple. The court heard that Michael Halberstam, David Steiner and Yossef Levison played peeping Toms on the couple as they cuddled in a car park. They have been expelled from the college.

ONE WORLD — THE INTERACTION OF SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY, by John Polkinghorne. SPCK, £4.50
SCIENCE AND CREATION — THE SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING, by John Polkinghorne. SPCK, £4.95

SCIENCE AND PROVIDENCE — GOD'S INTERACTION WITH THE WORLD, by John Polkinghorne. SPCK, £5.95

John Polkinghorne, FRS, is Honorary Professor of Theoretical Physics in the University of Kent, Canterbury, and Fellow, Dean and Chaplain at Trinity College, Cambridge. It is Polkinghorne who is always produced as the classic example of a highly respected scientist with impeccable scientific credentials and who is also a devout, committed Christian, whenever a scientist proclaims his or her atheism. The inference is that here is a first class mind who grasps the fundamentals of both science and religion and finds, unlike me, no evidence of conflict. As a scientist, Polkinghorne takes on board all the amazing prehistoric mythology that Christianity has so proudly preserved for us as a living fossil. How on earth does he manage it and retain any semblance of intellectual integrity? How is such a thing possible? Well, actually, as his three books amply demonstrate, it is not.

Let us trace Polkinghorne's Progress as revealed in this trilogy. First, he proclaims the thesis that science and theology are "both exploring aspects of reality". We meet Descartes' dualism of mind and matter, "the ghost in the machine". The rationalism of the Enlightenment created the irrational evangelical backlash of John Wesley and his ilk. But Paley's evidence from design, he acknowledges, sank without trace with the advent of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. After this historical start, Polkinghorne tackles the nature of science. We are treated to a ramble through Polkinghorne's own patch of subatomic particles and forces. We are terribly impressed but as to the nature of science we are not much the wiser. Admittedly we meet Popper and his falsifiability, Kuhn and his paradigms, and yes, our old anarchist Feyeraabend where anything goes. A wonderful section of obfuscation. So on to theology. Another intellectual romp, a *tour de force*, again leaving us no wiser than when we started.

But enough of such frivolities. Now we come to "the nature of the physical world". Posh names again to the fore: Jacques Monod, Teilhard de Chardin (I thought his thoughts had long been confined to the dustbin of history), Heisenberg, and even Schrodinger's cat. Fred Hoyle (yes, him again) and Francis Crick worry about the astronomical odds to produce life without help from above (or is it outside?). Of Michael Faraday, another committed

Christian, it was said that when he entered his laboratory he forgot his religion, and when he came out he forgot his science. For Polkinghorne there is but "One World". The first part of his journey has not taken us very far.

So on to the second lap, *Science and Creation*. Now is posited the difference between theism and Christianity — for the Christian "the cosmos is not self-sustaining but is kept in being by a continuous act of will by its Creator". This volume simply wanders up and down the same old alleyways. At the end we are confronted with "theological science" and encounter "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". Now at last, we get more than a hint as to the nature of the path Polkinghorne intends to lead us up.

The first two volumes were "concerned with the generalities of physical process"; the third volume is about "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . a God believed to be in continual interaction with all his creation. He is to be addressed in prayer, for he exercises a providential care". That sounds clear enough; but wait, what about this? "There is no doubt that part of God's interaction with the world must be that of letting agents or circumstances take their course. Without that there would be no true freedom, and the gift of love in creation must be the gift of freedom, both to human-kind and also to the universe itself, as it explores its own inherent potential through its evolving process". According to Polkinghorne this answers the question "Why did God allow Auschwitz?"

And so to miracles. This issue was raised by the Professor of Genetics, Sam Berry, and a bevy of other scientists who proclaimed their belief in the virgin birth and the resurrection. They claimed that science had nothing to say about miracles, but this is not true. Once it is claimed that an event has occurred such as the extinction of the dinosaurs, or a virgin birth or resurrection, it comes into the domain of the historical sciences and can be subject to investigation. But Polkinghorne makes no attempt to deal with the problem; "modern science does not draw those bounds so tightly that there is no scope for the particular action of a personal God".

The centre-piece of the Christian faith is evil, with Christ dying on the cross for our sins. It is this, the principle of vicarious atonement, that has led many of us to reject Christianity as fundamentally immoral. No one has explained it better than Thomas Paine: "The theory or doctrine of redemption has for its basis an idea of pecuniary justice, and not that of moral justice. If I owe a person money, and cannot pay him, and he threatens to put me in prison, another person can take the debt upon him-

REVIEWS

self and pay it for me. But if I have committed a crime, every circumstance for the case is changed. Moral justice cannot take the innocent for the guilty even if the innocent would offer itself. To suppose justice to do this, is to destroy the principle of its existence, which is the thing itself. It is then no longer justice. It is indiscriminate revenge".

The chapter on prayer concludes "the cross provides the only framework in which we can begin to make sense of the Christian experience of prayer". The penultimate chapter on incarnation and sacrament is simply an embarrassment.

End of journey? Sunk in the slough of Christian orthodoxy. As I began to trace Polkinghorne's Progress I did expect to meet some challenging arguments. What I was not prepared for was the deep sadness at observing the progressive disintegration of the intellect. I expected at least to have respect, not to be left only with the feeling of pity.

BEVERLY HALSTEAD

READS, by Brigid Brophy. Cardinal, £3.99

These 19 essays were written between 1962 and 1989, and many of them are revised versions of essays which were first collected in Brigid Brophy's 1966 volume, *Don't Never Forget*. Characterised by definite, sometimes idiosyncratic, opinions and by imaginative comparisons between the arts, the essays are constantly stimulating and challenging. Brophy throws out her *ex cathedra* statements with quite breath-taking finality. "The three greatest novels of the twentieth century are *The Golden Bowl* by Henry James, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* by Marcel Proust and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* by Ronald Firbank", she tells us. "All baroque and rococo are acquired tastes", she pronounces elsewhere.

In "Lisbon: City as Art" her appreciation of that fascinating city, "one of the most ravishing works of art in Europe", becomes engagingly lyrical. The curving iron balconies on houses are "like a flutter of black lace at the bosom". The steep tramlines on the roller coaster hills of Lisbon "look like the tracks left by virtuoso skiers".

Several of the essays concern homosexual writers or themes, like Ronald Firbank, Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, and an American writer new to me, John Horne Burns. She sets Sartre right on Jean Genet in her critique of his introduction to Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*. Although her very decisive treatment of her subjects may seem a little grating to some readers, there are undeniable compensations in her shrewd perceptions and unconventional angles.

"Fictions are elaborate metaphors from which the other half of the equation has been stealthily removed; they are still metaphors, but not metaphors of anything". In the same essay, "Genet and Sartre", she speaks of "the sensation of unreality which comes from being unable to choose between two realities".

Brophy's essays on Thackeray and Jane Austen are full of interesting insights. "Thackeray is a moralist, concerned with good and bad, whereas Dickens is a supernaturalist, concerned with good and evil", she says. Of Jo March in *Little Women* she says: "All that stands between her and Emma Woodhouse is her creator's lack of intellect. Alcott is not up to devising situations which analyse and develop, as distinct from merely illustrating, her characters".

We expect strong opinions from Brigid Brophy, and besides her analysis of literature and art, she devotes some space to her concerns for animal welfare and for free circulation of ideas ("I have never supported censorship, even for *Peter Pan*"). She memorably dismisses a bullfighter as a "butcher with balletic tendencies". She mentions in passing the infamous Clause 28, which forbids local authorities in England and Wales to "promote homosexuality", noting that the present Marquess of Queensberry, whose ancestor caused Oscar Wilde so much trouble, has gone on record as opposing it.

Altogether *Reads* is vintage Brophy, the essays having been culled from various periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic over three decades. Those who already have a taste for her writing will find the essays engrossing, and others may discover here a writer with wide-ranging interests, thought-provoking ideas, and stimulating commentary.

SARAH LAWSON

Singapore's National University has issued a warning to preachers who are endeavouring to convert students suffering from depression after failing their examinations. The University Christian Fellowship has condemned the move.

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Is Religion the Necessary Basis of Morality?

EMANUEL HALDEMAN-JULIUS

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was probably the most prolific freethought publisher of all time. Born in Philadelphia, USA, he left school at the age of 13 and started work in a newspaper office, thus beginning a remarkable career in journalism and publishing. In 1919 he bought a newspaper in Kansas and published the first of the Little Blue Books. More than 2,000 titles appeared in the series, selling at a few cents a copy. Several hundred million copies were sold throughout the world. Little Blue Book authors included Robert Ingersoll, Thomas Paine, J. M. Robertson, Chapman Cohen, Bertrand Russell, Joseph McCabe and Voltaire. To commemorate the centenary of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's birth, we publish an extract from one of his essays.

Let us glance for a moment at the claim that religion is the necessary basis for morality, that religion and morality are indeed one, that there can be no morality without religion. Aside from the phantasmagoria of the Bible, this is the biggest lie the Christians try to put upon us.

This claim of Christian morality is not only a lie. It is a kind of pious theft. The Christian would steal the credit that belongs to all other influences of life, with one sweep of sanctimonious plunder, the churchman would expropriate the ethical values of the ages of human evolution. The whole structure of social law, and the whole body of individual ethics, he would falsely identify as the property of himself and his peculiar *God*. He would rob the philosopher of his ethical goods. He would rob the artist. He would rob the scientist. He would rob the moralist untrammelled by theological notions. He would rob the teacher and the thinker. The Christian would rob man himself who, in the age-long struggle with natural forces and the adjustment of his social interests, has learned a few things that were not originally written in any book, sacred or profane, about the business of life.

There is a material basis of morality which the Christian finds it convenient to ignore. When man learned how to provide himself more easily with food, when he learned how to build for himself a better kind of shelter, when he learned how to labour more intelligently, how to formulate laws for the better protection of his life and goods, how to enter into mutual arrangements for his safety and social well-being; when man, his wits sharpened by necessity, learned how to manage these simple but fundamentally important material things, he achieved a very practical and potent sort of morality. And religion did not help man to achieve this morality. Man had to solve these very material and very moral problems of existence, or perish. Not how he was to die, but how he was to live, was the

question. As a matter of good sense, if man had been less superstitious, less religious, less borne upon by dark and terrified speculations about another life, he would have progressed much faster in arranging sensibly the affairs of this life. Man, for example, would have learned more quickly how to use fire had he not worshipped it in fear as a portent of the gods.

The truth is that religion, far from being a moral force, has given its sanctifying allegiance to the greatest immoralities in the history of man. Thinkers and humanitarians and liberators have always recognised the Church as their great enemy. The moral and intellectual evolution of the race has been harried and impeded in every age by priestly force and craft. And religion has been defeated, on first one ground and then another, by the growing ethical sense of mankind. The churchman trips himself upon his own quibble. He protests, in a most aggrieved tone, that the abuses and iniquities of religion were the fault, not of religion *per se*, but of the undeveloped mind and morals of the race. So in a dark age of mankind, religion, helpless and blameless, has been guilty of dark practices. What is this but a confession that religion is not the great light, the great moral regulator of society? We can see that there has been much religion with little morality. It is written plainly for all to read that religion, instead of leading man to higher morality, has followed man to the lowest depths of immorality.

When man believed in slavery, religion backed up this article of the age's morality with a mighty and prolonged "Amen". The Church has defended human bondage in every form.

The Bible has furnished innumerable texts for the tyrants and slaveholders. The medicine men of religion have in every age brewed doses to stupefy the herd into hugging its chains. The Church has upheld the institution of slavery in slave countries and dared to oppose slavery in free countries.

The immoral record of religion is immense. History is full of it. We read of religious wars: and what can be more terribly immoral than to drive men into killing one another for the sake of conflicting ideas of Godolatry? Crime of crimes — most dark and damnable of all immoralities — we see religion binding the intellect of man, forcing scholars to recant their intelligent teachings, burning with hoodlum holiness the books of the thinkers, hounding with spies and thugs the educators as if they were criminals. We see that, under the absolute sway of this holy, most moral religion, it was regarded as a crime to think. It was the age — the *very religious* age — in which there could be no ignorance without

religion, and no religion without ignorance.

A great deal of water has passed under the bridge since the days when no sinner was safe and only marauding, murdering saints could lay down the moral law to mankind. This water has been less and less reddened with the blood of heretics. As man has grown in morality — guided by intelligence, by the arts and sciences, by the gradually perceived necessity of making the world a little safer for progress — the ignorant immoralities of religion have lost the power they once fearfully held; and these immoralities, although they have survived in spirit and theory in the holy of holies of the tabernacle, have been abated in practice. Religion, for all its babble of morality, has appeared in history as an immoral force that has been compelled, from age to age, to accommodate itself to the progressive morality of the race: a morality growing up outside of the Church and perforce asserting itself generally in opposition to the Church and to religion.

We owe to the thinkers and scientists, to the artists and inventors and builders — and to the operation of social forces — the moral and material gifts that are ours today. Our age, for its more obvious great advantages, is chiefly indebted to science. We are safer, cleaner, more productive. In short, we are, in external habit at least, more civilised — and we cannot thank the Church for our situation. We have to thank not religion, but science, which religion assailed furiously as the foe of righteousness and before which religion has reluctantly retreated. We no longer witness the spectacle of witch-hanging, nor see demons in human form, because science has taught us that insanity is pathological rather than theological.

It is due to religion that we have had ever with us, and have with us not less blatantly and irritatingly today, the most immoral of tendencies: the pseudo-moral desire to reform the morals, compel the beliefs and dictate the habits of other men. The Christians (and on this score we cannot wholly exculpate one Jesus of Nazareth, who came preaching from the provinces) saddled upon mankind the evils of proselytising. They started — introduced to our Western World at least — that evangelical rage which has swept amazingly down the ages; which has grown until it has assumed a multitude of forms and spread like a subtle poison into all man's intellectual activities. Each and every one in his turn and in his mind is fair game for any meddling fanatic with a dyspeptic, bilious call to preach and convert and save. The soul-savers are constantly on our trail — preachers of faith, folly and fantasy, of cure-alls and cosmic trifles, of uplifting and go-getting. They are as the sands of the seashore, and their babble is as irritating and distracting as a sandstorm.

The intolerance of the preacher and censor ranks as one of the greatest immoralities of religion.

LETTERS

FLAWED

I am puzzled by Daniel O'Hara's article, amusingly entitled, *The Roman Fall of Dr Runcie* (November). Though it does less than justice to the achievements of the Archbishop's visit to the Pope and reaches conclusions I would not have come to myself, it is for the most part a sensible appraisal of what took place.

Alas, though, the article is spoiled, in my judgement, by the occasional interjection of fist-shaking against God, himself presumably nonexistent to Mr O'Hara. I don't suppose the good Lord too much minds these little tantrums, but they do flaw what might otherwise have been a stimulating critique.

CANON JOHN HESTER

NO HELP FROM JEHOVAH

In his article, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (November), Phillip Adams is correct in relating that the Witnesses were herded into Hitler's death camps during the Holocaust. During their incarceration, they suffered terrible privations. But their (assumed) God never lifted a finger to save them. This disgusting spectacle is held up by diehards among the Witnesses as a shining example of "maintaining integrity". In fact it is a warning against placing implicit faith in invisible deities who, when the chips are down, prove to be of no consequence.

I related the above account to a lady Witness, and her immediate reaction was, "Oh, they'll be all right at the resurrection". There was not a hint of compassion or humanity. What can compensate for the ignoble and useless suffering of ordinary human beings who were deluded by religion?

DAVID YEULETT

BLASPHEMY AND BUDDHISM

Following from your front page article (November) relating to the fundamentalists who seem bent on attacking personal freedom in our society, may I mention another aspect of the problem relating to blasphemy law, Salman Rushdie, etc?

There are many religions which do not hold a belief in a personal god, among them Buddhism. Where is freedom of expression for Buddhists if blasphemy law remains? It is interesting to observe that in Buddhist scriptures the Buddha himself said that anyone "speaking in dispraise" of him should be treated with kindness and tolerance.

This is a multi-religion country now. Many people are turning to Buddhism and other non-theistic religions, or have no religion at all. Blasphemy law is a mockery of the ideal of free speech, and while it exists, freedom to worship or not as one feels inclined does not exist.

GEORGE COOMBS

A QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

I had hoped to deal gently with George Strang. After all, we are both (presumably) freethinkers and so must agree to disagree. My late talented friend, Wee Georgie Wood, about whom I have in the past written extensively and for whose memory, without "sneering", I have great admiration, would have been as miscast playing King Lear as Dustin Hoffman's Shylock. The latter's "American" had little to do with it (I was fortunate enough to see his compatriot's Hamlet at the Haymarket Theatre some years ago and he, John Barrymore, was splendid). The marked reservations I had about the film star's Shylock were caused less by

his speech than by an anaemic "interpretation". It is regrettable that Mr Strang appears to see an *argumentum ad hominem* or *gentrem* where none is intended, presumably because that's how he thinks.

PETER COTES

UNJUSTIFIED CRITICISM

Terry Sanderson (Letters, November) includes me among those who "want to believe the incredible". If he will re-read my letter (September) he will find nothing to justify this, and the only honourable course for him will be to apologise in the columns of *The Freethinker*.

In my letter I pointed out the danger of including everything, including many daft notions, under the umbrella label "alternative medicine".

May I give one example of how orthodox medicine has learned from "the other side"? Up to 50 years ago (and I am old enough to remember), "diet" to doctors meant no more than steamed fish in hospitals. It was Nature Cure magazines like *Health For All* that stressed the importance of diet for healthy people.

KARL HEATH

THE DEATH PENALTY

You quote, as an argument against the death penalty, the obvious fact that the Guildford Four could not have been relieved if the law had prescribed capital punishment at the time. But I suggest that they would never have been convicted in the first place had this been the case. It is always unsafe to convict on the sole evidence of a confession; and the defending counsel would have made quite sure that the jury was aware of this and of the fact that there could be no going back.

You drop the names of Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans. Perhaps someone should remind your readers of the circumstances. There was no question whatever that Bentley was guilty. His offence, though technically murder, was merely one of incitement — a serious offence nevertheless, but one committed today almost daily without penalty by leaders of the Muslim community. (Perhaps they should be reminded of Bentley.) As for Evans, there is little doubt in my mind that he was guilty of killing his child (though to be sure Ludovic Kennedy does not agree). The reason he paid the supreme penalty however was that the judge was of the opinion that he had committed other murders later found to be the work of Christie. He was tried for the child's killing because the police believed they could make that "stick". Had he been tried for the murders he was punished for, he would probably have been acquitted, or at worst imprisoned for killing the child.

You could have added the names of Marwood and Ruth Ellis. The former was unquestionably guilty, but of the lesser offence of killing by accident following an assault — again technically murder. His sentence would probably have been commuted had the victim not been a policeman. Ruth Ellis's personal circumstances should have mitigated the penalty but instead they were such as to set the moralists against her, so she paid the extreme penalty. In contrast to the Guildford Four, there was no question of guilt in three of these four cases, and little in the fourth. What shocked people was that their offences were not such as to merit death. Parliament therefore abolished the death penalty on the rebound. If you want it to stay abolished you will have to make a stronger case than you have. Unless you can do this, there remains a good case for hanging where the murder is particularly vicious and guilt can be established beyond doubt.

GLYN EMERY

Scandal Rocks Church

During the past five years the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has paid out over \$30 million to families of children who have been sexually abused. The victims, mostly boys, were molested by priests and members of religious orders.

Further north in Canada, the Church has been devastated by scandals involving priests, school pupils and altar boys. In less than two years, 18 priests, mostly in Newfoundland, have been charged with serious offences. Students have been withdrawn from Catholic schools and colleges, and in some areas church attendance has fallen dramatically.

Parents were incensed by revelations at a judicial inquiry that the police and Church authorities knew what was happening in schools and at Mount Carmel Orphanage, St John's, Newfoundland. They declined to take action, and even now the Archbishop of Newfoundland is refusing to condemn those priests who have been convicted and sentenced.

One of Newfoundland's most prominent priests, Fr James Hickey, became well known in 1982 when he called for the banning of a satirical radio show, because it was doing "a grave injustice to our religious orders and Catholic Church teaching". Fr Hickey has been in the news again. Convicted of sexually assaulting children over an 18-year period, he is now serving a prison sentence for the offences.

Expensive "Guidance"

Mary Walls, a Northumberland woman whose 11-year-old son Allan was murdered 20 years ago, is now faced with the loss of her home.

When the police failed to find the boy's killer — the case remains unsolved — Mrs Walls turned to clairvoyants and spiritualists for guidance. She travelled all over Britain in her search for a clairvoyant who could tell who murdered her son.

"The majority were able to describe where Allan was, but I knew that already", she says. "What I wanted to know was his murderer".

Clairvoyants do not come cheap. The cost of paying them to visit the murder site, together with her own travelling expenses, reached the point where she had to take in boarders. Now the tax authorities are demanding payment of £50,000 to which £16 interest is being added every day. In order to meet the tax demand, Mrs Walls will have to sell the bungalow in which she had planned to spend her last years.

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.

EVENTS

Berkshire Humanists. Town Hall, Wokingham. Tuesday, 9 January, 8 pm. Nicolas Walter: Blasphemy in Britain.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 7 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Robert Forder: The National Curriculum.

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.

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.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 10 January, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Peter Heales: The Art of Being an Agnostic.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 am; 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 December, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

OBITUARY

E. L. Mann

Ernest Leslie Mann, of Ditchling, Sussex, was born at Banbury in 1900. He was one of five children, two of whom, together with his mother, had died of tuberculosis by the time he had reached the age of 16.

During the 1914-18 War, he served with the Royal Flying Corps. After the war he helped to start the socialist youth organisation known as the Socialist Round Table. Its focus was *The Clarion* socialist weekly to which he was a regular contributor.

Ernest Mann became a teacher, and taught in London schools. He had a deep interest in history, and published a history book for children. In later years he moved to Lewes, in Sussex. There he wrote guide books and accounts of the Battle of Hastings and the Battle of Lewes. He also had a novel and short stories published. His love of writing was inherited from his father who wrote for *The Freethinker*.

There was a secular ceremony when burial took place at Lewes Cemetery.

THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

President: Barbara Smoker

Founded 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Secularism affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement.

It asserts that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress.

Secularism affirms that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication; that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.

Affirming that morality is social in origin and application, Secularism aims at promoting the happiness and well-being of mankind. Secularism demands the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.

It seeks to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace, to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

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(Please use block capitals)

To the Secretary, NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

I accept the Principles of the National Secular Society as shown, and apply to be admitted as a Member. I am over 18 years of age.

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Minimum Annual Subscription: £2
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Literary World Defies Islamic Fanatics

Booksellers in Britain and elsewhere continue to be threatened by fanatical Muslims who are trying to keep Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* out of the shops. This campaign of harassment was condemned in a resolution passed at the 54th International PEN Congress held in Toronto and Montreal. Thomas von Vegesack, chairman of the Writers in Prison Committee, said the organisation fears a growing censorship by Islamic writers. "It is a very dangerous development", he declared.

In Germany, the federal investigation department has reported a number of threats made in connection with publication of the German translation of Rushdie's novel. The department has called for vigilance, and issued a leaflet recommending security measures.

Muslims warned booksellers in the Bavarian town of Ansbach not to stock the book. They threatened attacks on anyone "intending to sell, distribute, publish or support *The Satanic Verses*".

As a gesture of support for Salman Rushdie, organisers of the 41st Frankfurt Book Fair excluded Iranian representation at the event.

In his opening address, Peter Weidhass, director of this year's Fair, called on Ayatollah Rafsanjani to revoke the death sentence on the author of *The Satanic Verses* and his publishers. Mr Weidhass declared: "We would like Iran to be back again at the 42nd Frankfurt Book Fair, but I must state firmly that it cannot participate as long as this murder threat has not been withdrawn".

The International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie organised a meeting to demonstrate support for freedom of expression. Messages were received from a number of eminent writers and the meeting was filmed for German and Austrian television companies. The meeting was delayed because of a bomb threat.

Chancellor Kohl presented the German Book-

sellors' Peace Prize to Vaclav Havel, the Czech dissident who played a key role in establishing a publishing house to publish banned or suppressed works.

In Britain the leader of the Muslim Youth Movement has demanded that *The Satanic Verses* be withdrawn from sale because it is blasphemous. The group has sent a questionnaire to 150 bookshops. There is a hint of menace in two of the questions. Shopkeepers are asked "how far the bombing of bookshops affected your decision whether to stock *The Satanic Verses*?" Another question put to booksellers is whether they "attach more importance to the safety of their staff and customers or continuation of the sale of *The Satanic Verses*?"

A representative of the Booksellers' Association said they strongly advised members "not to reveal confidential information about their business practices or their stock".

Bloody Religion

Assumption Day is celebrated with much fervour by pious villagers throughout Italy. But every seventh year it is a bloody affair in Guardia Sanframondi. This year thousands of pilgrims assembled in the village 40 miles from Naples to watch a procession that includes the *batteni* (beaters).

When the Mass ended, men dressed in white robes started to beat their chests with corks in which were embedded 33 nails representing each year of Christ's life. The ritual dates back to the 15th century when a statue of the Virgin Mary was found by a local peasant. Tradition has it that a blind man touched the statue and recovered his sight. He claimed that the baby in Mary's arms was holding a cork with nails, and advised the faithful to beat themselves with a similar object.

Over 500 men took part in this year's procession. In their left hands they carried a crucifix and a picture of the Virgin Mary. They beat themselves until blood was flowing, an edifying spectacle that caused onlookers to pass out.

Another bloody ritual took place about the same time in Nabatiyeh. At a ceremony during the feast of Ashoura, a group of Muslim men had their heads cut by clerics using razor blades.

"No Religion"

cent and people with no religion about 25 per cent.

"One thing that is now clear from all such surveys is that only about half the population of this country ever voluntarily attend any religious ceremony at all, and that about half of the rest have no religious belief at all.

"It really is about time that these millions of people were taken seriously in politics, law, the media, the education system, and so on. One interesting point is that there are about ten times as many unbelievers as followers of all the non-Christian religions put together.

"Unbelievers of this land, unite! You have nothing to lose but your psychological chains!"

The Church Universal and Triumphant in Corwin Springs, Montana, USA, is preparing to fight the devil and his red hordes. When police visited the church they found large quantities of ammunition, including armour-piercing guns and mortars. A spokesman for the church said the arms had been acquired "because astrological signs said there would be a Soviet invasion of Montana".