

The Freethinker

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LEGAL AID FOR ISLAMIC COURTROOM CAMPAIGN TO EXTEND BLASPHEMY LAW

There have been further developments in the current blasphemy cases of *The Satanic Verses* and *Visions of Ecstasy*.

It will be remembered that a year ago Muslim organisations were refused summons to prosecute the author and publisher of *The Satanic Verses* but later won a judicial review of this decision. The case was heard before three judges in the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court from 26 February and judgement was reserved on 1 March.

The would-be prosecutor of Salman Rushdie and Penguin Books, Abdal Hussain Choudhury (acting on behalf of the British Muslim Action Front), has obtained legal aid and spent most of the hearing also applying for divine aid through prayer. (It will be interesting to see whether his prayers are as effective as those of Mary Whitehouse in the *Gay News* trial in 1977.) He was represented by Ali Azhar, who gave a poor presentation of a poor case — that the English common law of blasphemy covers Islam because Islam is so close to Judaism and Christianity, the Koran is so close to the Judeo-Christian Bible, and Muhammad is the culmination of the line of Semitic prophets going from Adam and Abraham to John and Jesus, and that *The Satanic Verses* should be prosecuted under this law — and also under the law of sedition — because it blasphemes against Islam and because its publication has caused widespread outrage, public disorder in this and other countries, and breaches of diplomatic relations between this and other countries.

Salman Rushdie was represented by Geoffrey Robertson, the well-known freedom of expression barrister, who gave a powerful exposition of the blasphemy law in the light of its application during the past 300 years, concluding that the consensus of all the cases and authorities is that the current law covers only Christianity. Penguin Books were repre-

mented by Anthony Lester, the well-known human rights barrister, who gave a powerful exposition of the blasphemy law in the context of the European Convention on Human Rights, concluding that there is similar consensus that freedom of religion does not include freedom from criticism and is not infringed by the discriminatory features of the English blasphemy law. Both Robertson and Lester deplored the archaic and anomalous nature of this law, but insisted that it could be changed only by Parliament and not by the courts. They also emphasised the many difficulties and dangers that would be caused if the law were extended to cover other religions than Christianity. And they emphasised that all the trouble in the case had been caused not by the publication of the book but by the campaign against it.

The hearing was a depressing experience. There were a few moments of light relief, as when the lawyers for Salman Rushdie and Penguin Books provided copies of the Koran for the judges with the apology that it was the Penguin Classics edition, or when the judges later confused the Koran with *The Satanic Verses*. And it was good to be reminded of the blasphemy cases of the past, including those involving *The Freethinker* and the National Secular Society, and to see copies of Nicolas Walter's *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern* being consulted by the lawyers and reporters.

It will also be remembered that last year the video film *Visions of Ecstasy* was refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification on the ground that it was blasphemous and the director and producer appealed to the Video Appeals Committee. The appeal was heard and dismissed in December 1989, but the text of the decision has only recently become available.

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

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NEWS

A HOPELESS MISSION

The Bishop of Whitby had words of encouragement for freethinkers when he "commissioned" a group of Mission 90 leaders in Yorkshire last month. Speaking at All Saints' Church, Kirbymoorside, the Rt Rev Gordon Bates told the gallant band that they would be doing the Lord's work in an area that is "mainly heathen territory and basically non-Christian. You and I live in a post-Christian country in which secular humanism is the creed by which most people live their lives."

The Bishop's realism is commendable, but it raises a number of questions. For instance, why in a post-Christian country should his church continue to be "by law Established"? Why should the immensely wealthy Church of England, together with thousands of religious groups and institutions, be subsidised by the "mainly heathen" public? Why should BBC studios serve as part-time churches and interesting travel programmes be ruined by being transformed into *Songs of Praise*?

Despite legally required religious indoctrination in post-Christian Britain's schools, the Bishop of Whitby admits that "the vast majority of young people growing up in this country — most of them second and third generation heathens — will never have a chance to experience the true glory of the Christian faith". The Bishop is talking through his mitre. Young lives will not be enriched by the "true glory" of a faith that inspired its adherents to persecute fellow-Christians, embark upon wars and crusades, foster hatred of Jews, burn witches and heretics, impede the growth of scientific knowledge and oppose social reform.

Mission 90 is the evangelicals' latest dodge in an increasingly desperate attempt to revive religious fervour. Their endeavours are unlikely to be fruitful. Two recent *Feedback* programmes on BBC Radio 4 featured readers' letters on the question of religious broadcasting. They expressed not just passive indifference but the outright hostility towards religion that is now prevalent in British society.

One listener described organised religion as "demeaning to the human spirit and the cause of great misery all over the world". Another wrote to say that "atheism should have as much air time as any of the smaller sects". A third asserted that programmes were biased in favour of Christianity and suggested: "A better balance would be kept if there were more programmes about atheism and agnosticism."

Jessie Boyd (Cwnbran) complained that "the voice

S AND NOTES

of the rationalist is suppressed". Gary Gimson (Colchester) asked: "Is the BBC a Christian enclave? Please let us have some anti-religious programmes to give some sort of balance." P. G. Griffiths (Camberley) said religious programmes were fairy tales. He added: "My own conversion to atheism was every bit as revelatory as any conversion to Christianity." Writing as "a lifelong atheist", Mrs Glennie (London) described the BBC's partisan approach to religion as "infuriating and unjustified".

It was gratifying to note that *Feedback* listeners used the forthright language of the unbeliever on the Clapham Omnibus. Most described themselves as atheist or agnostic. But when such terms appear in *The Freethinker* or a National Secular Society pamphlet, genteel noses are turned up by those who prefer high-flown verbiage to plain English.

APARTHEID IN THE PEW

With Nelson Mandela free at last, the scores of prisoners still being held in South African jails must not be forgotten. Nor should the leading role played by the Christian churches — particularly the Dutch Reformed Church — in buttressing the apartheid system.

Professor Johan Heyns, Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, recently declared that as a Christian he believed in miracles. He claimed that a miracle is happening in South Africa with white people "undergoing a spiritual transformation which will equip them for the dramatic changes to come".

A miracle is defined as an event that is inexplicable by natural law and therefore ascribed to divine or supernatural action. There is nothing supernatural about what is going on in South Africa today. It is natural that the large majority of citizens who, because of their skin colour, have for generations been deprived of basic rights and subjected to a reign of terror by the police and army, are now fighting back. It was not divine intervention, but a decision by the African National Congress to embark on an armed struggle that has compelled the white minority to seriously consider their present position and future prospects in a democratic South Africa.

Professor Heyns admitted candidly in a recent interview that apartheid originated in the Dutch Reformed Church as far back as the 1850s, when white members insisted that they should worship separately from non-whites. Nearly a century later the National Party proposed legal separation of the races. The Dutch Reformed Church, in Professor

Heyns's words, "immediately supported apartheid and, what is more, blessed it by devising a theology of apartheid. The church asked the National Party when it came to power in 1948 for complete territorial segregation of the races and for a prohibition on mixed marriages, which was exactly what we got."

All honour to those South African Christians who have defied the State and their churches in the long struggle to destroy an evil system. But Christians are adept at distorting history. It should not be overlooked that the majority of white Christians have backed the South African Government all along. The Dutch Reformed Church was not the only one to devise for apartheid a theological and ethical justification.

"A BIT BLOODY-MINDED"

A financial crisis that has forced the Royal Shakespeare Company to close its two London theatres for four months from November this year has been extensively reported in the national press. Less well publicised, however, was that the company could have lost £30,000 because of a ban on religious grounds of performances at its Stratford-upon-Avon theatres. The district council's health and environment committee refused a licence to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the Swan Theatre to open on Good Friday.

The committee's high-handed action was strongly criticised by the chairman of the local hoteliers' and caterers' organisation. In a letter to the council, he pointed out that Easter was the beginning of the tourist season and a very busy weekend for traders.

Councillor John Findon, chairman of the committee, defended the ban. Few would disagree with his admission that members "might be considered to be a bit bloody-minded in telling people what to do on Good Friday".

However, following protests and an appeal by the RSC, the committee recovered its wits and granted a licence. Performances will now take place at both theatres on Good Friday.

It is intolerable that although theatres can open on Sunday — one of the reforms achieved in the benighted 'Sixties — performances at Stratford-upon-Avon can be prohibited on another Christian "holy day". And when planning its season, the internationally acclaimed Royal Shakespeare Company should not be restricted by the religious susceptibilities of tinpot backwoodsmen at the Town Hall.

Mahmoud el Khodari, leader of an Islamic fundamentalist group, has been jailed by an Egyptian court. He said: "Our group is fighting vice by breaking up weddings where alcohol is served and where belly dancers perform."

Comment on Four

LOUISE O'CONNOR

Christianity, it seems, is enjoying a revival in Eastern Europe, as Communism crumbles. To some people, no doubt, this is a matter of rejoicing, but not for me. To me, Christianity is an extremely depressing religion, and the Bible, upon which this creed is based, is a very unpleasant book. From Genesis through to Revelations, it is a catalogue of doom and gloom, bloodshed and anger and murder and intolerance.

From the moment that Adam and Eve are evicted from the Garden of Eden, we can clearly see that God has it in for the human race, and for women in particular. Eve is most unfairly held to be more to blame for the Fall than Adam, and this is the flimsy excuse for the appalling treatment of women through the Bible. In Deuteronomy, we are told that women are to be stoned to death for adultery, for not being virgins on their wedding night, or for being victims of rape. Women, in fact, are considered to be committing a sin simply by existing at all.

Not that men have an easy time of it either. God is busy smiting them as well, visiting dire punishments on anyone who displeases him, and he is very easily displeased. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," he thunders, and he instructs his followers to slaughter all "blasphemers", that is anyone who believes in any other god or goddess. Massive slaughters of whole nations were performed in the name of the "one true God". God commanded his followers to spare neither men, women, nor even children, but to murder anyone who followed a different religious faith. And that, as far as I can see, is the only crime committed by the unfortunates who were slain in their thousands, that of worshipping other goddesses and gods.

Do things get any better in the New Testament? No, they do not. Jesus has an entirely undeserved reputation, even among non-Christians, for being a kind and loving man. On the contrary, he takes after his father. He tells his followers that anyone who doesn't believe in him will be doomed to eternal hellfire. At the day of judgement, the sheep will be divided from the goats, and the poor old goats will burn in hell forever. So much for "gentle Jesus".

And there is the justification of all the persecution of "heretics" that has gone on for the last two thousand years. Untold millions of people have been imprisoned, tortured and killed in the name of this "god of love". For many centuries, anyone who followed a different religion was called a "heretic" and was fair game for the blood-thirsty Christian hordes. Christianity has been spread through the world, often with extreme brutality. The Bible has been used to justify the repression of women, of homosexuals, and of anyone who doesn't agree with

the Christian view of the universe.

In this country, Christianity has slowly been losing its power to terrorise people. I am deeply grateful that I do not live in a country where Christianity is enjoying a revival, and my sympathy goes out to those who do.

Published by kind permission of Louise O'Connor and Channel Four Television.

Freethinker Fund

Once again the Fund has got off to a good start. Consistent financial support and a determined effort to increase circulation of *The Freethinker* is needed to ensure its survival. The paper is needed as much as ever in the battle against religious superstition and privilege.

The first list of contributors in 1990 is given below. We thank them and all who support *The Freethinker* in any way.

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Total for January: £524.55.

The Roman Catholic Church is about to issue a new universal catechism which declares: "God is not a man, nor is God a woman. God is God." Now we know.

Ireland: the Way Ahead

DICK SPICER

The church-ridden Republic of Ireland remains an outpost of religious obscurantism, with progressive social reforms being bitterly resisted by the Roman Catholic Church. But reformers are becoming organised and striking back at the reactionary elements. Dick Spicer, secretary of the Campaign to Separate Church and State, is playing a leading role in the struggle against religious domination of Irish society.

In the past decade, Ireland has seen a retrenchment of reactionary Catholicism south of the Border. Two referendum victories for the religious Right restated the enshrinement of Catholic doctrine as the law of the land. Abortion under any circumstances is outlawed, as is divorce, while the education system is run by the churches on denominational lines and funded by the taxpayer. The prevailing assumption by Irish liberals that social and economic change would inevitably liberalise society as a whole has been shown to be false. The Vatican-led church mounted a determined counter-offensive.

Ironically, it is from the ashes of the defeats of the Eighties that hopes for the coming decade now spring. Faced with the realisation that change was not inevitably in the direction of secularisation, those of a liberal persuasion have now got down to the nuts and bolts of challenging the Church for every inch of ground throughout society. The failure of the "grand slam" strategy of fighting major issues by referendum, has concentrated attention on a multitude of questions which affect everyday life in health and education.

It is through fighting on such ground that a more resilient and democratic culture is now being developed. In the matter of divorce, for instance, the legislature has finally passed a Private Member's bill making provision for legal separation in the event of marriage breakdown. This is a tremendous step forward in solving some of the problems of property, custody and maintenance which afflict Irish people in such circumstances. Although somewhat restricted and expensive at this stage, it nevertheless marks a starting point in recognition of the problem, and we can now seek to expand its provisions. It was precisely the confusion attendant on the financial consequences which did most to frighten people from supporting divorce in the referendum. When this is resolved, pressure for the right to remarry by large numbers of now legally separated people is likely to be considerable.

In the case of abortion, a similar fight has taken place for the right to make available information about facilities in the United Kingdom. The number of women travelling from Ireland to Britain for an abortion has not been affected by the outcome of a referendum; indeed it has slightly increased in cir-

cumstances where abortion became an openly debated topic for the first time.

Pregnancy counsellors have now taken their banning to the European Court as suppression of the right to information. The younger generation of students, while not advocating abortion as such, have defied the courts and published abortion clinic telephone numbers in the guides. Their right to publish has also been referred to Europe.

Denominationalism of the education system is also being challenged. Groups of parents have come together and started Ireland's first multi-denominational schools since the days of British rule. The schools cater for pupils of all faiths and none. The waiting lists are colossal; so are the costs of starting such schools, which means that they are opening only at the rate of about two a year. But this is real progress nonetheless; there are now seven such schools with many more in the early stages.

The Campaign to Separate Church and State has been formed to tackle the inbuilt discrimination in a system where health and education are largely under denominational religious control. The CSCS has been successful in focusing international attention on these matters, and instrumental in forcing the State to assume responsibility for the use of millions of pounds of public money which is pumped into religious institutions. Review bodies have been established to look into areas of discrimination.

Thus within a context of Catholic majority rule, things are changing in the direction of some consideration for individual and minority rights. This has come largely through the growing influence of European standards of democratic practice, and the realisation that there is a danger in growing numbers of people living at odds with church-based civil law. Those concerned with offering an island-based solution to the problems of Northern Ireland are on occasion demonstrating concern with the nature of the southern State. So we may see in the years ahead the emergence of a more solidly based democratic coalition of interests which will set about dismantling the blatantly Catholic aspects of social and political structures. This will be an important step towards the secularisation of our laws.

Such a development is not inevitable by any means. We have learnt that much at least in the last decade. The steady flow of young, dynamic emigrants saps the forces for change here, and a high unemployment rate concentrates people's minds on more mundane matters of economic survival. Nevertheless there is room for guarded optimism in the new willingness to understand what makes a theocratic State tick, and change is occurring on a wide enough front to stiffen liberal and secularist morale for the struggles ahead.

The National Secular Society Almanack, 1870-1904

The vitality and momentum of the secularist and freethought movement during the last quarter of the 19th century is amply demonstrated by the wide range of publications available to the committed follower. They included the National Secular Society Almanack which first appeared in 1870. In 1893 it was renamed the Secular Almanack, and during its last two years (1903-4) was known as The Secular Annual.

In its early years, The National Secular Society Almanack consisted of between 50 and 60 pages. It sold at sixpence a copy. By the end of the century it was reduced by half in size and cost.

The original publisher was Austin & Co, followed by Charles Watts at 17 Johnsons Court, London. When Bradlaugh and Annie Besant broke with Watts over the Knowlton birth control pamphlet, publication was transferred in 1877 to the Freethought Publishing Company at 28 Stonecutter Street. Robert Forder was publisher from 1890 until 1901, when it transferred to the Freethought Publishing Company Ltd. Editors and joint editors included Austin Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, Charles Watts, Annie Besant, G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler.

A study of these outspoken little booklets not only takes the reader back to the great issues concerning the radical of the 19th century, but also illustrates the changes which occurred in the secularist movement as the broad political outlook and campaigns of Charles Bradlaugh gave way to the narrower freethought concerns of G. W. Foote.

The Oxford Dictionary defines an almanack as "... a book of tables, containing a calendar of months and days with ... anniversaries, besides other useful information ...". The NSS Almanack always began with a calendar for the forthcoming year with anniversaries indicated for each and every day. For example, for 25 December 1899 freethinkers are asked to remember that this is a pagan festival and that Julien Offray de Lamettrie, whose materialist writings led to his expulsion from France and Holland, was born on this day in 1709.

Much other information was included besides. The freethinkers' concern with self-education and improvement is demonstrated by the inclusion of short articles advising readers on a range of issues ranging broadly from elocution (1876) to medicine (1872). "Cuts and wounds — if the blood is dark, and flows regularly, you may manage it, but if it is bright scarlet, and spurts out in jets, send at once for the doctor." Advice on the treatment of smallpox is a sober reminder of a disease now eradicated.

Information was also included for reference purposes. This includes much relevant to the NSS

ELLEN WINSOR

member. In the 1878 issue, lists of the rules, branches and officers of the Society are included together with a catalogue of books and pamphlets available from the Freethought Publishing Company. Nevertheless, such parochial concerns are balanced with news of the current postage rates, "ready reckoner" tables and statistics on the "Government, Population, Religion, Area, Income, Expenditure and Debt of the Various Countries of the World" compiled by Charles Bradlaugh. If all this sounds a bit dull, things are lightened by the inclusion of such elements as "Familiar Quotations" (1875) or poems such as Thomas Curtis's "Songs for Liberals" (1876):

We want no counsel from the Priest,
No Bishop's crook or gown,
No sanctimonious righteousness,
No curse or godly frown.

We want no Bibles in the school,
No creeds or doctrines there,
We want no Superstition's tool
The children's minds to scare.

We want our paradise on earth —
Not saints but honest men,
Whose lives shall need no second birth,
Or Saviour rudely slain.

And having these, the work shall grow;
Each effort shall set free
A thinking man, whose voice shall go
To vote for Liberty.

The inclusion of addresses for the naming of children and the burial of the dead in 1884, both written by Annie Besant, demonstrates how freethinkers often sought alternatives to church services.

Each issue included an article or articles reviewing the National Secular Society's work in the years past and looking to the future. Although such utterances are couched in optimistic terms, it is noticeable that while in 1891 Robert Forder could point to a whole range of fronts on which progress had been achieved in the previous 20 years, by 1899 G. W. Foote was writing of "a wave of reaction passing over the whole of Europe" and was appealing "to all Freethinkers to rally round their old flag".

Many issues, particularly in the first 20 years of the Almanack's publication, included articles of a historical and biographical nature. Hence in 1883 we find two pages on the "Sentence on Galileo by the Holy Office and His Recantation", and in 1878 George Standring writing on Robert Taylor and his prison sentences for blasphemy in 1828 and 1831. Nineteenth-century freethinkers recognised how important it was that they recorded their own history

and achievements.

One consistent feature of the Almanacks was their concern with the international nature of freethought. Not only are articles devoted to the progress of freethought in other lands, but details are given of foreign freethought societies and the work of the International Federation of Freethinkers.

What has been written so far should not be taken to suggest that the NSS Almanack remained unchanged during its years of publication. This was not the case. Up until 1890 the Almanack reflected the broad range of issues which Bradlaugh and the NSS were concerned with. Hence details are given of the office holders and addresses of various "sister" organisations such as "The Malthusian League" and "The Land Law Reform League". There are also outspoken republican articles, e.g. "The Civil List of Queen Victoria and George I" (1873) and "The Cost of the Royal Family" (1878). Ajax (the pen-name of Annie Besant) had much to say on the barriers to women's progress in 1876, and in 1877 held forth on the role of trade unions in an article "Ought Wage-Winners to be in Favour of Strikes

or of Arbitration?" While these are clearly predictable concerns for the 19th-century radical, Arthur Trevelyan's tirade on the evils of vaccination (1875) together with advertisements for the London Society for the Abolition of Compulsory Vaccination (1884) come as more of a surprise.

After 1890 the tone of things changed and the articles which are included are more narrowly atheist in their concern and carry titles similar to those appearing week in and week out in *The Freethinker*.

By 1904 sales of the Almanack had declined to a point at which its future publication was abandoned. In part this can be attributed to the decline which afflicted all freethought organisations and publications at the time. However, one might also theorise that the main role of the Almanack had been to provide a directory of information and articles of interest to radicals concerned with a variety of causes. As the National Secular Society's concerns became narrower, and this was reflected in what was printed in the Almanack, it failed to provide a service distinct from that of *The Freethinker* and therefore became redundant.

Godly and Godless

PETER COTES

The dramas on television are on the whole "not much cop"; the telly series of plays are marginally worse. Acting, photography, editing and direction, are all too often uninspired, showing signs of the conveyor belt that one might have expected when television was in its infancy. It is less justifiable nowadays when nothing in the drama department goes out "live" — as it once did. Today large sums are often spent in making television movies; recorded, edited and directed as though for the big screen rather than the small box in the corner of the living room, all sorts of fictionalised rubbish pours forth from at least one channel during night and day. The "soaps" are for the most part garbage, varying only in their extremes of badness. The exception to this rule is usually when Dennis Potter, the small screen's major dramatist who specifically writes for television, is being represented. With such scripts of his as *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Singing Detective*, television drama was encouraged to take a giant step forward. There were others, "one offs", but it was with *The Singing Detective* finally, that the playwright achieved major status.

At last television drama came of age. And there the case rested, with at least a general consensus of informed opinion acknowledging a fact of life; that the "Idiots' Lantern" ("the one-eyed monster", as it was once dubbed by television playwright, Allan Prior) had at last become an art form in the right hands.

We waited in vain for a higher standard from the

drama departments of the various channels, but apart from Potter at his best, whose subjects, skilfully crafted, had an appeal to the heart as well as the mind, the rest was silence; except for the continued routine fare of mechanical laughter inserted into countless comedy series that weren't funny, and mawkish sentimentality into dramas that weren't serious. Satirical sometimes, but not very often. And in any case little genuine satire is to be found, outside Clive James hosting a chat show, and the highly talented John Sessions, who appears unable to trim his speech to suit a pop audience, but is all the better for that and speaking up when the mood seizes him. As it so often does. There are no "sacred cows" in his backyard, and if Sessions wishes to use the word "evil" he doesn't call it "mistaken". I hope this artist will take it as a compliment if I say that I suspect him to be a freethinker. His considerable versatility is not utilised enough in television drama, as opposed to chat shows and interviews. We need him and the very few like him who express their healthy opinions openly and damn the consequences.

There is a reticence about criticising religion on the small screen. Only when investigative programmes like *This Week* and *World in Action* decide to oppose "born again" evangelical sects like those surrounding Reagan when at the White House (or millionaire publicity gurus in the Deep South broadcasting their messages and appeals for yet more shekels to swell their overcrowded coffers) can we fully grasp the power of the telly in communicating

the religious "message" to the superstitious, world-wide. If our standard of television is still marginally better than that to be found elsewhere, we have good reason to recall the warning that "there's one born every minute". And if the fools are all part of the army of the superstitious, then they are more often than not recruiting officers of a Higher Power than is known to mere mortals like ourselves.

Such random thoughts occurred to me recently whilst viewing a new television drama that *The Times* newspaper had described as "Bible bashing" in a caption under a photograph of a scene from the play in question, the oddly titled *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. An advance "blurb" concentrated on the play's feminist slant, as well as its largely female cast and production team; concluding from these facts that such a production — written by a woman — "should go some way towards stifling the criticism about the lack of opportunity for women in television". True. For the plot touched on the lack of love so often found in the Religion of Love.

Going straight for the jugular, the play touched on all aspects of superstition. At the same time, firmly, tenderly as well as tastefully, it tackled an association between two teenage girls. Thus compounding the offence, incorporating three separate taboos in one: "unnatural" sex, adolescent love (in the nude) and religion. Of these three "crimes" I suspect it was really religion most of all that drew such implied warnings on the advance publicity, that what viewers were to be shown was *dangerous material not to be taken at one sitting*. It was, in fact, serialised in three separate parts and clearly not intended to be swallowed whole but to be digested over a period of three weeks. Each episode was scheduled to run less than an hour, and the mixture taken in one gulp would have lasted rather less than three hours. It was played more than finely by Geraldine McEwan as the straight-laced, crazily afflicted mother, and by Emily Aston as her little daughter. Above reproach, too, were the star-crossed older lovers who dared to embrace a love that cannot speak its name.

All this drew from the Rev Eldin Corsie, of the Elim Pentecostal Church, such strictures, amongst others, as "repulsive to those who hold a biblical and evangelical view of homosexuality and lesbianism". Other complaints were numerous, many bemoaning the belief that "such a piece mocks full Gospel worship and degrades the ministry of deliverance", Amen. It was free of all the "watered down" telly-religion treatment that we usually receive. But that process was to be resurrected later.

It so happened that in the week which saw the final act of Jeanette Winterson's splendid adaptation we also saw *The Man From the Pru*, which was neither imaginative nor factual, although we were

led to believe it was both. Why cannot directors and scriptwriters who mangle true-life stories of the courts (passing them off as authentic after considerable time-lapses that usually preclude characters still being alive who might otherwise sue for libel) do their homework? In any catalogue of crime the Wallace Case, on which the TV play was based, surely remains one of the best known, most discussed, criminal trials of the twentieth century, concerning as it does a mild insurance salesman, whose base was Liverpool in 1931. William Herbert Wallace was accused of murdering his quiet chapel-going wife, Julia. Few interpretations of character were to be found in this "representation". As one critic has written: "We can, after all, read the yellowing newspaper accounts as well as Roger Smith (the script-writer) can".

Even better, we can still read the definitive book on the case and trial — with the tribulations that followed in their wake — *The Killing of Julia Wallace*, Jonathan Goodman's stunning account of the whole murky business.

In its pages of intensive research and study will be found Religion rearing its head; an aspect of the relationship between the "marrieds" that in the telly play (reputed to have been made at a cost of several million pounds), was barely touched upon. Perhaps in a rather better researched version in future — for it is surely a debate that will go on for ever — space will be found to account for the admission made about himself by the Prisoner at the Bar?

In the true story, Wallace was found guilty of murder but finally acquitted. The man from the Pru died, lonely and deserted, two years later, of cancer. Whatever else the union may have been, it was certainly not a marriage of like minds. The murdered woman was said to have attended *regularly* the morning service at Holy Trinity Church, Liverpool, whilst her husband, from the manner of but one of his diary entries in Mr Goodman's book, may well have been a *Freethinker* reader, so "free" were his views: "*I am indifferent to the dogmas and rituals of Churches and Chapels. If there is a hereafter, the man without any so-called religious beliefs (and a non-church attender, but who lives a decent life, and who abstains from telling lies, or cheating or acts of meanness, and who honestly tries to do good) has as much chance of getting there as a professed Christian who attends his place of worship regularly.*"

I seem to recall that in the 1930s the National Secular Society branch and readership of this paper were said to have been particularly strong in Liverpool, with such stalwarts as the highly respected Nivens and Carmichaels — medical families, both — springing to mind. Who knows, perhaps the free-thinking William Herbert Wallace was one of their number?

"Operation Bully"

STEPHEN MORETON

Members of an organisation known as Rescue have been harassing women as they arrive at abortion clinics. Led by Father James Morrow, a Roman Catholic priest, and reinforced by two dozen Americans, the anti-abortion campaigners have used tactics described by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service as "scandalous and sickening".

"Rescue as often as you can. Go to jail as often as you can." So wrote Randall A. Terry, godfather of "Operation Rescue", as he resided in Fulton County Jail, Atlanta, last October. What put him there is what "pro-lifers" like to call "direct action" — picketing abortion clinics and attempting to prevent patients gaining entry.

This is the latest tactic in the never-ending battle between religious bigotry and a woman's right to choose. The mainstream American "pro-life" organisations were too soft for the fanatics so "Operation Rescue" was spawned to take "direct action" to physically intervene and save "children" from being "murdered" in abortion clinics.

Operation Rescue and its British off-shoot, Rescue, say they are committed to non-violence, but their non-violent activities have earned them the nickname "Operation Bully". Their idea of non-violence does not seem to exclude jostling, spitting, pushing, intimidation and vandalism. Thrusting gruesome colour pictures of aborted fetuses in the faces of women seeking abortions and calling them murderers goes under the name "pavement counselling". Needless to say, "Rescuers" spend a lot of their time in prison.

This harassment agency has now established a branch in Britain. Led by that long-standing anti-abortion zealot, Father James Morrow of Humanae Vitae House, Braemar, Aberdeenshire, Britain's Rescue has already picketed clinics in Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds, London and elsewhere. They considered the Birmingham "Rescue" as "particularly successful, with seven girls seen to turn away". Their court appearance for this incident is on 9 May. This should not bother Father Morrow. Writing from Strangeways Prison in Manchester last July, he made his attitude quite clear: "Queen and Parliament do not have the authority they claim, and the abortion laws are null and void. Civil authority, even when immediately derived from democratic procedures, stems ultimately from God, author of man." His recent fine of £250 plus £50 costs for public order offences at a picket in Stockport is unlikely to deter him.

Clearly he considers himself above the law, but not God's law. It is therefore relevant to see what God's law says about abortion. Exodus 21: 22 says that the

punishment for causing a miscarriage is a fine. If the mother also dies the punishment is death. In other words, a foetus is worth a few shekels, a woman is worth much more. Numbers 5: 11-31 recommends trying to induce an abortion as a test for adultery. Someone ought to tell Father Morrow.

Father Morrow, who has eleven brothers and sisters, has been conducting his own offensive little campaign against abortion for some years now from his base at Braemar. This is a small set-up of anti-abortion fanatics, much of whose literature consists of pious exhortations to pray for the unborn, letters from Morrow and various American anti-abortionists describing their "struggle", and constant reminders of how hard-up for cash they are. Recently he announced his intention to resign as parish priest so that he can concentrate on his activities with Rescue.

The harm these people do can hardly be understated. It must be bad enough for women going to abortion clinics, but insulting and bullying them when they get there can only add to their distress. According to Father Morrow, embryos and fetuses are children and abortion is murder. He has no qualms about filling the minds of women with this cruel nonsense and seems not to care that he is tormenting with needless guilt impressionable women who have had abortions. Father Morrow certainly knows he is doing this. At a public debate in 1986, Dr J. A. Raeburn, of Edinburgh's Western General Hospital, pointed out the damaging effects on women of what Morrow tells them. The priest replied that if this was so, "I have done a lot of damage in my time".

Lately Father Morrow has bemoaned the decline of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. He believes this has been brought about by "the poison of contraception". But he has not lost heart in the battle against abortion. Rescue intends to go European, and last September struck at the San Camillo Hospital in Rome.

The "pro-lifers" are frustrated by the failure of mainstream anti-abortion groups. "Operation Rescue" is an act of desperation but it remains to be seen how long the organisation will last. Imposition of prison sentences in the United States has discouraged many supporters, though Randall Terry has pledged to continue martyring himself regardless. As their efforts continue to fail and abortions are still being performed, "Operation Rescue" tactics may become more desperate still. We can expect to hear more in the coming months as the fanatical bullies fight their rearguard battle against a woman's right to choose.

The Vatican has given the Association of Alcoholic Priests permission to use grape juice rather than wine at Holy Communion.

BLASPHEMY ANCIENT & MODERN, by Nicolas Walter.
Rationalist Press Association, £3.95

Blasphemy will be always with us — or at least for so long as there is religion to blaspheme. For any religious belief worth holding will be strongly held, and anyone whose beliefs are so held will be liable to be offended by those who do not share or understand that strength of feeling. Since that which causes a person to feel offended may be presumed to be offensive, blasphemy is potentially present wherever there is religion. This statement of course begs many questions, not least whether the subjective sense of being offended is an adequate indication of the presence of offensive material. Or whether there can be some kind of “objective” test by which to judge its presence. In this respect blasphemy falls into a category, into which other forms of social behaviour such as certain aspects of sexual harassment may also fall, where the feelings of the victim may weigh more heavily than the intentions of the person whose behaviour is the subject of complaint and where “objective” evidence may not be easy to discover or define. The problem is, what, in these circumstances, should one do about it?

Nicolas Walter is quite clear in this admirable survey of the Western — and in particular the British — experience of blasphemy, written from the point of view of that group whose feelings on religious matters have most frequently been insulted with impunity, and who have most frequently been accused and punished in the past for insulting the religious: namely, atheists, freethinkers, secularists, rationalists, unbelievers. His answer is, that the only safe thing is to do nothing. If religion is truth and its god all-powerful, then the words of a mere mortal will do no harm; if religion is false or harmful, it should hide behind no immunities from criticism. Free thought, free speech are the watchwords of the libertarian tradition which Nicolas Walter represents. The irritations and upsets which such freedoms might cause are a small price to pay for the maintenance of this golden prize of liberty.

The first three chapters sketch the biblical background to Classical and Judaeo-Christian thinking on blasphemy: the fact that for a Jew, even to write the name of Yaweh is to blaspheme; that Christianity is rooted in the blasphemous claim of Jesus that he was the Son of God, for which offence he was crucified; that Socrates also died for the crime of insulting the gods and thereby undermining the youth of Athens. Then follows a section on the use of erotic language in both the Bible and in medieval Christianity. Whether this was actually blasphemy is

unclear and its inclusion in the present work is really to make a case against the later treatment as blasphemy of erotic poetry involving the body of God. In the Middle Ages, Christians also wrestled with the problems both of heresies within itself and of its relations with the other two great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam. In such circumstances, blasphemies were hard to avoid, the most celebrated example being Dante's description of the Prophet Mohammed in the Ninth Pit of the Eighth Circle of Hell in the *Inferno*.

These preliminary skirmishings over, Nicolas Walter proceeds to look in more detail at the experience of blasphemy in Britain from medieval heresy to the emergence of blasphemy as an offence against both Common and Statute Law in the seventeenth century, and thence on to prosecutions of Thomas Paine and others in the 1790s, the struggles of the “blasphemous and seditious press” in the 1820s, the birth of what became Secularism in the prosecutions of the early 1840s, and the climax of Secularism in the 1880s when G. W. Foote's case was but the most celebrated in a new wave of prosecutions against freedom of opinion publicly expressed. What is clear in this period, and especially between the 1790s and the 1880s, is the close connection between blasphemy and political security. Since the law of the land was presumed for its effectiveness to rest upon belief in the sanctions of religion, to undermine those sanctions was held to be an offence parallel to and worse than sedition. The last kick from this phase of prosecutions came in 1921-2 with the prosecution of J. W. Gott of Bradford — the last man (so far) to suffer imprisonment following a conviction for blasphemy in England.

Though it is not the purpose of this book to provide a legal history of blasphemy prosecutions, it might be useful to pause and extract from its pages what appear to be the key elements in defining the law of blasphemy around 1922. The first key statement was that made at Foote's trial by Lord Chief Justice Coleridge in 1883:

indecent and offensive attacks on Christianity or the Scriptures or sacred objects or persons, calculated to outrage the feelings of the general body of the community, do constitute the offence of blasphemy.

The second statement came from the House of Lords in the Bowman Case in 1917 in which it was stated in a civil case that the blasphemy law applied only to matter which had a

tendency to endanger the peace then and there, to deprave public morality generally, to shake the fabric of society and to be a cause of civil strife (and which

REVIEW

contained) such an element of vilification, ridicule or irreverence, as would be likely to exasperate the feelings of others and so lead to a breach of the peace.

Although occasional threats of prosecution were made after this date, by the 1960s informed legal opinion held that the laws of blasphemy were dead, and indeed the statute law was swept away in the reforms of 1969. By this date the Common Law had not been applied in England for nearly half a century and in Scotland there had been no successful prosecution since 1844.

What has happened in the past two decades will be well-known to most observers whose tolerant complacency has been rudely shattered. In an increasingly permissive society in which the power of the obscenity laws has been whittled away, the common law on blasphemous libels again appeared attractive to those wishing to control and censor publications on religious matters. It was the then Archbishop of Canterbury who opened the can of worms when referring to an alleged plan by the Dane, Jens Jorgen Thorsen, to make a film about the sex-life of Christ in 1976. Later that same year, Mrs Mary Whitehouse began a private prosecution of *Gay News* and its editor for a poem by James Kirkup which spoke of the homosexual love of a Roman soldier for the dying body of Christ on the cross. Not only was this prosecution successful and upheld on appeal, but in the conduct of the case the definition of blasphemy was narrowed by the exclusion of intent — Coleridge's "calculated to outrage" of 1883.

The significance of this story, and the reason for this re-written and extended version of a pamphlet originally published after the *Gay News* case, is that the Christian revival of blasphemy prosecutions in England has now given rise in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society to a demand for the law to be extended to other faiths. If the law had been abolished when freethinkers and other liberals had demanded it, both the equal treatment of all faiths and the liberty of expression would have been guaranteed. Now the one principle is at loggerheads with the other and for Christians to discover the virtues of a belated conversion to the principles of liberty and free speech looks like hypocrisy to those who are merely asking for that which Christians have hitherto guarded jealously as an essential protection of their own faith.

Nicolas Walter concludes his survey with an interesting discussion of the options open to us in the predictable crisis which the *Satanic Verses* affair has precipitated. He rejects the option of leaving the law as it is, in the hope that one day it will go away, or of codifying it in statute so as at least to

clarify it. He also rejects the argument of those many liberals who wish to see the law extended to all religions — there are the problems of defining what "religions" should be protected; and whether freethinkers could be protected or whether, as Charles Bradlaugh discovered of the oath in 1880, irreligion would not be given parity with religion. He might have added the problems that a new law would have to be created for Scotland which is in the happy position of in effect having no law of blasphemy; and the whole question of judging whether a publication is offensive when the jury on a case has no means of knowing what is or is not offensive to those of another and unfamiliar culture. Thirdly, he rejects the streamlining of the law to extend it to all religions and to restrict its extensive and arbitrary range of potential applications since 1977, on the grounds that one might as well repeal such a law as it would be highly unlikely ever to lead to a successful prosecution. He also considers and rejects tacking religious clauses on to the Race Relations provisions of the Public Order Act, on the grounds that such a provision has not helped much in Northern Ireland.

Critics may feel that the grounds for rejecting these last two are less strong than for others; and that, in the present situation, modification might be the more diplomatic course than repeal. But that is not Nicolas Walter's purpose. Maybe he is right. The rear cover of the book shows the cartoon, "Moses getting a back view", for which Foote was prosecuted and imprisoned for a year in 1883. It now appears neither blasphemous nor funny. Liberty of thought, expression and publication is the more abiding and is to be defended above the merits of whatever has for the moment given offence to those of strong opinions and tender feelings. Those who are convinced of this argument will buy this book; those who are not, should buy it.

EDWARD ROYLE

Nicolas Walter

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LETTERS

A DEFENCE OF CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Sadly, the article on Christian Science (**Christian Science Fails the Final Test**, February) seriously misrepresented the basis and ethos of this faith. As for Christian Science healing through prayer, some 300 insurance companies in the United States would hardly offer the same financial cover for Christian Science care and treatment as for medical care and treatment, with no special conditions, in the absence of convincing evidence of its effectiveness.

The article referred to a study of longevity in two groups of Christian Scientist and non-Christian Scientist graduates in America. It is only fair to your readers to point out that the conclusions of this study were extremely questionable in view of the mistaken assumptions underlying them. A small variation in those assumptions would have led to exactly the opposite conclusions.

I believe that only one direct actuarial comparison on longevity between Christian Scientists and others has ever been made — one by an American insurance company. This comparison showed Christian Scientists living slightly longer than average.

GRAHAM PHAUP, District Manager, Christian Science Committees on Publication for Great Britain and Ireland, London W8

A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

I can understand your correspondents' disappointment that I did not go into what I feel is genuine Christianity. However, I was asked to comment on the contents of *The Freethinker*, and not to present a Christian argument.

My adjective "genuine" was not applied to the belief of individual Christians, as Eric Stockton seems to think, but to Christianity itself. Whether individuals are honest in their beliefs is not something I would want to pass judgement on.

Christianity is in any case not a question of belief in the sense of agreeing to certain statements. If you ask me what genuine Christianity is, I would say: Look at Jesus. If you see in him, as Martin O'Brien does, "an arch-exponent of appalling superstitious nonsense", then that is an end of it. I personally see in him something so compelling and so different that it changes my life. I do not believe that you can see in Jesus, as portrayed by the Bible, anything other than a madman or someone who is telling the whole truth. As far as I am concerned, madmen do not behave like that.

Mr O'Brien's medical question assumes that man is evolving. As I do not believe this is so, it does not require an answer, other than to say that in some areas we know more now than we did two thousand years ago, and in some we know less. We cannot always tell which is which. There are many different causes of illness, a large number of which are obscure. I can't think of any particular reason to disbelieve in devils, except that they are out of fashion. To believe in God without believing in the Devil does not make a great deal of sense.

I would not argue much with Robert Sinclair's bare statements about Christianity, although no doubt we would soon differ if we started to examine them: I believe the Bible does deal quite profoundly with the fact of evil, though no doubt not to Mr Sinclair's satisfaction. To answer his final question is like asking me to consider the implications of two and two suddenly making five.

I am not a Christian because I hold a particular

ethical or logical position, and certainly not because I am good (a common misunderstanding of the word "Christian"). I am a Christian because God has actually had an effect on me and restored the relationship with him that I and everyone else was created for; because I have discovered both through observation and personal experience that the Holy Spirit acts in a supernatural way; and because I have found that what God says and does is true, totally reliable and based entirely on the deepest kind of love.

If you want to get close to genuine Christianity, read **Mere Christianity**, by C. S. Lewis. Alternatively, find a group of people whom God has changed. It is not difficult. You will discover that their common love of God overrides the minor theological differences that seem to worry your readers so much.

TIM LENTON, Norwich

THE EVANS CASE

With reference to David Yallop's article in the January issue, I was interested in Professor Emery's observation that there was little doubt in his mind that Timothy Evans was guilty of killing his child. As far as I know the Professor and Lord Hailsham are the only two people in England who still believe this. Does Professor Emery also think that Evans killed his wife? If he does, it means that in this one small house in London (10 Rillington Place) the only two male occupants were both strangling women in exactly the same way without either knowing what the other was doing. Does the Professor think this likely? There was no evidence of collusion and no possible motive for Evans killing his child whom he clearly adored.

LUDOVIC KENNEDY, Avebury

A PHILOSOPHY FOR LIVING

Some Christians object to the commercialisation of Christmas. Humanists may well object to the commercialisation of Humanist funerals. Advertising in the national press has trebled in the last few months. It is now suggested, I am informed, that the bereaved should receive follow-up letters, three months after the funeral, soliciting donations. For sheer, crude, grasping insensitivity, this takes some beating. Am I alone in feeling concern at this trend?

There is a wider issue. Why are the leaders of British Humanism so obsessed with death? Over ten years ago I suggested that they suffered from a "Thanatos Complex". (Thanatos was the legendary Greek personification of Death, brother of Sleep and son of Night.) There is no sign of recovery. Funerals and euthanasia still dominate. "Human", "Humanity", "Humanism" are all-embracing terms which deserve more than a narrow programme. They call for emphasis upon the living rather than the dead, concern for injustice, oppression and neglect. I recommend the programme of action outlined in Corliss Lamont's **Philosophy of Humanism**, a book in which I have failed to discover any reference to funerals, although the author has written a pamphlet on the subject.

KARL HEATH, Coventry

"FUNERAL BUSINESS"

As one of the humanists prepared to conduct non-religious funeral ceremonies, I should like to make the following points.

I would prefer these ceremonies to be conducted by the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths. Until this can be achieved I am prepared to officiate. Nevertheless I don't want to be part of a "funeral business", nor do I want to keep records and write reports.

GEORGE VALE, Burgess Hill

UNNECESSARY DIVERSION

As someone who is committed to Humanism — not secular humanism, ethical humanism, religious humanism, secularism, freethought or rationalism — but Humanism with a capital H as a valid alternative to religious belief, I am becoming increasingly depressed by the bitchery, petty jealousy, personal pique and downright rudeness which surfaces from time to time in the so-called Humanist movement.

I am also depressed by the endless wrangles about such matters as "life-stance", voluntary euthanasia, funerals and their cost, the future of Conway Hall, to mention but a few. It seems to me that there are those in our midst who relish polemic, seize every opportunity to cause disruption and ill-feeling and make confrontations between Christians seem positively benign.

The result of all this is to divert us from the essential task we should be engaged in: promoting Humanism by every means at our disposal — via the media, schools, meetings, ceremonies or whatever. This squabbling among ourselves also makes us a laughing stock in the eyes of religionists and the public at large.

So when are we going to grow up and stop repeatedly shooting ourselves in the foot?

GEORGE BROADHEAD, Kenilworth

MISINFORMATION

The January *Freethinker* reached me in Hyderabad, on my way to the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada for its Golden Jubilee celebration at the beginning of February, and I feel I must correct some statements in your report about it. One of the sons of Gora (founder of the Centre) is named Lavanam — a personal name meaning (in Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages) "salt", because he was born at the time of Gandhi's protest campaign against the salt tax. Your calling him "Mr Lavanham" turns it into a Western surname, apparently derived from an English place-name! You also refer to the large, important trading town and major railway junction of Vijayawada as an "Indian village". In fact, the Atheist Centre occupies a small section of the Vijayawada suburb of Patamata.

In the same issue was a letter correcting the figures given in an interview with Maeve Denby about the British Humanist Association and non-religious funerals, published in *The Independent* of 21 November last. Now, in your February issue (just to hand) I see there are two letters objecting to the suggestion that this misinformation had been given to the reporter concerned by Maeve Denby. The first letter (from Jane Wynne Willson) carefully avoids attributing blame, but the second one (from Nigel Collins) jumps to the conclusion that Maeve Denby was "misquoted or misunderstood" and, without evidence, puts the blame on *The Independent* interviewer, Phil Reeves, a journalist of repute. Perhaps Mr Collins was unaware that these magnified figures appeared not only in *The Independent* but also in a similar interview with another reputable journalist.

It is, of course, theoretically possible that it was sheer journalistic incompetence that caused the figures given for the membership of the BHA, the number of funerals organised weekly by the BHA, and the number of funerals at which Mrs Denby has herself officiated, all to be exaggerated by a factor of more than twenty. It remains theoretically possible, even though exactly the same errors appeared in separate articles by two different journalists — just as it is theoretically possible that the universe stands on the back of a huge elephant. However, on the principle of Ockham's Razor,

I have to dismiss such complex hypotheses as highly improbable, even though I cannot disprove them and am at a loss to explain Mrs Denby's apparent quirk in multiplying every statistic by a figure between 20 and 24.

BARBARA SMOKER, London SE6

SAYING FAREWELL HONESTLY

Whilst my cousin Daniel O'Hara's tribute to my father was appreciated by his widow and family, I must correct some minor inaccuracies contained in the tribute and expose some misapprehensions in the critique section of the article.

It is true that my father enlisted in the army at the age of 16 when pretending to be 18 years old. This event did not take place, however, until 1919 after the cessation of the Great World War hostilities and his service in Burma during the 1939/45 war was in the rank of Company Sergeant Major.

It is not true, however, that his church attendance was limited to funerary witness as his participation in the christenings of his four grandchildren and several weddings testify.

I have no quarrel with Daniel over his lack of religious belief, indeed as he knows I would be the first to defend his right to the views he holds, and I am at one with him in his condemnation of the undertaking profession who do not generally offer secular alternatives; but the use of my father's funeral, and what is a very thoughtful tribute, as a vehicle to expound such views was not appreciated by his widow and family who regard it as untimely and inappropriate. My father's understanding of such affairs was agnostic rather than atheist and the inference that my father is "tainted by association" is resented.

What Daniel could not have known is that my father specifically requested a no frills C of E funeral service. As to the service itself I have canvassed the views of most of those who attended (excluding my granddaughter, who at 18 months, could not be expected to formulate views on very much) and the consensus was that it was a perfectly appropriate method of passage fully in line with my father's views and according to his testamentary wishes.

Finally the use of the term 'Dicky' was not misplaced familiarity since this was how he was styled in the Weymouth area in which he lived for almost 30 years. Again Daniel can be forgiven for his ignorance on this point no doubt due to time and distance.

I am sure now that the record has been righted, Daniel will come to accept that in this instance the farewells were honestly bid.

B. M. DICKENSON, Bath

Daniel O'Hara replies: I much regret the inaccuracies pointed out by my cousin in my article in the January *Freethinker*, and any offence given to him or members of his family. I do not think it would be appropriate for me to respond publicly to all the points he makes, and I am writing to him personally about these. I would, however, for the record state publicly that there was absolutely no intention on my part to suggest that my uncle was in any way 'tainted by association' by any real or imagined deficiencies in the form or content of the funeral service. I regard him as a man of outstanding integrity beyond compromise by anything done, said or written after his death. Had I not so regarded him, the dissonance between his real qualities and the banalities of the ASB funeral service would not have affected me as it did.

Sunday Laws Reflect a Bygone Age

A High Court judge's decision may trigger off a spate of prosecutions in relation to Sunday trading. Judge Allen rejected an appeal by Payless, Texas Home Care and Do It All against fines totalling £21,000 which were imposed last year for Sunday opening. Sabbatarians are now likely to pressurise local authorities to take legal action against other traders.

Judge Allen said that Sunday is a day for "relaxation, socialising and, for a significant part of the population, worship". This ignores the fact that a significant number of religious believers do not observe Sunday as the Sabbath and an even more significant proportion of the population attend church only for weddings and funerals which are generally held on a weekday. Roman Catholics, who probably constitute the largest section of church-goers, happily visit shops, clubs and public houses on Sunday.

When the people of Wales were given the right to choose by poll, they opted for Sunday opening of public houses. All over Britain, Sunday sporting and cultural events enjoy wide support.

Richard Boaden, director of the Shopping House Reform Council, says that the current legal restrictions on Sunday shopping reflect the needs and habits of a different age. He points out that in 1936, when the restrictions were imposed, only a small percentage of the work-force were women. Now 63 per cent of married women go out to work and 38 per cent of the population buy something in a shop on Sunday. Every Sunday two million videos are rented out.

The restrictions on Sunday shopping in England and Wales do not apply in Scotland. The shop-workers' union has successfully negotiated agreements with multiple retailers who open on Sunday. And independent surveys conducted by national polling organisations in England and Wales show there is an overwhelming demand by working people for the right to shop on Sunday.

The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers has joined forces with the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, a coalition of religious groups opposed to reform. Its propaganda is slick, and by taking up "family" issues the Campaign has a much wider appeal than the strictly Protestant Lord's Day Observance Society. These are organisations which in the past have shown little concern about the poor conditions under which shop assistants work. Rather than joining up with evangelicals to block a reform that has wide backing, USDAW should be concentrating on the recruitment of new members. The vast majority of shop workers are at present non-union.

On the question of workers' rights, including the right to refuse Sunday work, the Shopping Hours

Reform Council argues that this can best be achieved through legislation. It has already drawn up a code of practice with leading retailers which could be part of the contract of employment. Like members of the public who want Sunday opening but not at the expense of shop workers, the SHRC insists that no one should be compelled to work on Sunday.

The SHRC is putting forward a limited hours option. This would mean that large stores could open for six hours on Sunday while small shops could open without restriction.

With around five million people already working on Sunday and wide public support for change, it is only a matter of time before a law dating back over 50 years is reformed.

OBITUARY

Dr F. Gray

Although he was 94, Frank Gray's sudden death surprised his many friends. A founder member of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, he attended monthly meetings almost to the end.

H. J. Blackham writes: I first knew Frank Gray more than two generations ago, when he was in his mid-thirties. At that time he was in general practice, and a strong-minded father of two boys who were allowed on sacred principle to do what they pleased, which gave amusement to some and annoyance to many. He used regularly to attend the meetings of the Ethical Church, and I provoked an abrasive encounter when I spoke once on the upbringing of children, on the lines of Locke's Thoughts on the subject, than which nothing is more rational, nor more moderately and persuasively expressed. At that time, to venture one word against total permissiveness to one of that persuasion was like arguing with a Marxist. Today there are other such areas, different only in content.

With this decisive cast of mind, he was clear-cut in his views and highly argumentative, but not generally arrogant. So that he found the congenial weekly social gathering of the Friday Club to hear and discuss a lecture by an invited speaker. Invariably, he was there; invariably, he was on his feet soon after the lecture was open to discussion, holding his pipe whilst he articulated in successive thrusts what the speaker had provoked him to say. Whatever the subject, there would be something that engaged him.

His second wife died within minutes of being stung by a wasp. There was nothing he could do about it. By that time he was on the staff of the British Medical Association, where he remained till retirement. He was also medical correspondent of the

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 1 April, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Barbara Smoker: Euthanasia, Voluntary and Non-Voluntary Euthanasia.

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

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

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 3 April, 8 pm. Annual General Meeting.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Monday, 12 March, 7.30 pm. Granville Williams: Will Broadcasting Follow Fleet Street Into the Gutter?

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 29 March, 8 pm. Desmond Hogan: An Irish Writer in Lewisham.

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone (0603) 427843.

Scottish Humanist Council. Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 28 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Guest speaker: Nettie Klein, Secretary of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, telephone (0563) 26710.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Public meetings, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Wednesday, 14 March, Jim Herrick: Humanism — a Personal View. Wednesday, 11 April, Diana Rookledge: Third World Women on the March.

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 House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

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.

Daily Telegraph. This sphere of activity suited him well, and he was able in these pursuits to carry on long after formal retirement. He was living in West Sussex, and regularly attended meetings of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, at which he recovered something of the pattern of the years before the war. In the last few years I have had an annual visit from him, driven this way by his wife on a touring holiday. He was the same inveterate pipe-smoker, expressing himself energetically in gusty sentences. He had married for the third time an ex-nurse who had become an increasingly active deacon in the Church of England. The situation rather intrigued him. He was certainly well looked after, and enjoyed life with a lively mind to the sudden end.

Mr P. Jacot

Paul Jacot, who has died after a long illness at the age of 83, spent the war years in southern France. He hid underground fighters and British parachutists, and was awarded a medal by the Polish resistance movement for his courageous work, particularly during 1943-44.

After the war Paul Jacot came to live in Sussex where he farmed. Despite pressure from his farming neighbours, he refused to allow the local hunt to cross his land. He worked in a voluntary capacity for a number of organisations and until his last illness was a member of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Tunbridge Wells Crematorium.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include
MICHAEL FOOT, MP
MERVYN JONES
BARBARA SMOKER
NICOLAS WALTER

The Bonnington Hotel, London
(Southampton Row,
near Holborn Underground)

Saturday, 21 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £16. Vegetarians catered for
(advance notice essential)

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

Christian Bigots Blight Scottish Life

Religious bigotry is alive and thriving in Bonny Scotland where just over a year ago the Lord Chancellor of Britain was "tried" by the Free Presbyterian Church's theological Mafia for attending the funerals of two Roman Catholic colleagues.

Now a six-year-old boy has been refused permission to play in a band because he is a Roman Catholic. Donald Campbell was told that he could join Greenock Accordion Band only if he became a member of the Church of Scotland. Band leader Mrs Jacqueline Johnstone said: "I agree that people will be shocked, but it has been the rule for 30 years. Unless Catholics give up their religion and become Church of Scotland, we can't take them."

Donald's father, who is a Protestant, denounced the band as a bunch of bigots. He said: "Even if my son was a Protestant, I wouldn't allow him to join a band where membership does not depend on your ability to play but simply on your religion."

Further north in Aberdeenshire, another Roman Catholic has been snubbed — by his parish priest.

When David Geddes approached the altar rails at St. Andrew's Church, Braemar, he was refused communion by Fr James Morrow, the "pro-life" fanatic and leader of the aggressive Operation Rescue group (see article on page 41). Mr Geddes's "sin" is that contraceptives are on sale in his shop. He will continue to stock them "as a service for others who are not of the same religion as myself". Defending his refusal to administer the sacrament, Fr Morrow said: "All contraception is wrong."

(continued from front page)

The details are not surprising, but it is encouraging to learn that the decision was not unanimous. The majority of the five-member panel agreed with the Board that "the video is blasphemous", because its "indecent" depiction of the imagined sexual fantasies of Teresa of Avila about the crucified body of Jesus "would outrage the feelings of Christians, who would reasonably look upon it as being contemptuous of the divinity of Christ" and "a reasonable and properly directed jury would be likely to convict" in a trial. The minority disagreed and, although they had "no doubt that many people would find the video to be extremely distasteful", they "would have allowed the appeal because in their view it is unlikely that a reasonable and properly directed jury would convict".

There the matter rests, though the director and producer may decide to appeal to the European Court on the ground that their freedom of expression has been infringed by this narrow application of the video licensing law.

The priest has been "relieved" of his parish duties by the Bishop of Aberdeen, and will now concentrate on anti-abortion activity. The aim of his group is "to close down every abortion clinic in this country".

Diane Munday, public relations officer of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, described Fr Morrow as "an arrogant fool who would have approved of the burning of witches, and delighted in the work of the Spanish Inquisition".

Can Pray—Won't Pay

Because of a loophole in legislation, wealthy religious outfits already enjoying the advantages of charity status will not have to pay the poll tax. Followers of cults like the Children of God, Unification Church (the Moonies) and Krishna Consciousness stand to save thousands of pounds through tax exemption.

Environment Minister David Hunt confirmed in a written parliamentary answer that full-time members of cults could apply for exemption. By claiming that they have renounced private property — although they may not have had any in the first place — and are living in religious establishments, they will be in the same category as Christian monks and nuns for poll tax purposes. All they have to do is claim that their main occupation is prayer, contemplation, the relief of suffering or education.

One of the main beneficiaries will be the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Disciples live in seven centres around Britain, the best known of which is Bhaktivedanta Manor in Hertfordshire. The property was handed over to the Society by former Beatle, George Harrison.

It is estimated that over 500 cults, many of Eastern or American origin, are registered as charities in Britain. While denouncing the evils of materialism, they create business empires. Their philosophy is usually a brew of Right-wing politics and religious fundamentalism. Some have been embroiled in financial and sexual scandal, but despite being strongly criticised by courts, still attract followers and remain on the register of religious charities.

Richard Wirthlin, the public relations expert who masterminded Ronald Reagan's two presidential victories, has been recruited by the Conservative Party to get Mrs Thatcher back to 10 Downing Street for a fourth term. A Mormon and father of eight, he heads a public relations firm with hundreds of employees, a third of them of his religious faith. Before being recruited by the Reagan camp, Wirthlin was a Mormon missionary in Switzerland.