

The Freethinker

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EMBRYOLOGY BILL: "PRO-LIFE" DIRTY TRICKS CAMPAIGN ABORTED

One of the most unscrupulous campaigns mounted in recent times by the Christian churches and their front organisations came a cropper in the House of Commons when MPs voted on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

Spearheading the highly organised and well financed operation, Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants resorted to gross deception and callous shock tactics. One of the more unsavoury stunts pulled by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) was sending to all 650 MPs pink plastic models of 20-week foetuses, many of which were unpacked by shocked female secretaries. Anti-abortionist Ann Widdecombe (Conservative, Maidstone), agreed that this had caused considerable distress. "The reaction shows how effective the stunt has been," she added. But another Conservative, Tim Devlin (Stockton South), told the House: "These models, which are quite grotesque, have been opened by our secretaries and research assistants, most of whom are female and some of whom have suffered miscarriages."

Peter Thurman (Conservative, Bolton North East), accused SPUC of trying to conceal the outcome of a poll they had organised. It suggested that 58 per cent of the public supported embryo research along the lines proposed in the Bill.

Sir Bernard Braine (Conservative, Castle Point), chairman of the all-party parliamentary group of "Pro-Life" MPs, was jeered from all sides when he compared embryo research with "the descent of medicine in Nazi Germany". This theme was taken up by Pat Duffy (Labour, Attercliffe), a Roman Catholic who will not be standing at the next General Election. He invited supporters of the Bill to explain why embryo research was outlawed in a number of European countries.

"That says more about politicians in those coun-

tries than about the scientists," replied Robert Key (Conservative, Salisbury). "It speaks volumes about the ignorance and timidity of politicians, and it does not stop the scientists from benefiting from research done in this country and around the world."

Dafydd Wigley (Plaid Cymru, Caernarfon), had the strongest reason of all for supporting continued research. His two sons died within a period of three months in 1985 because of severe genetic disability. He asked the House: "Do we as a parliament have the right to tell those who could benefit from this sort of research 'no, you are not entitled to that benefit'?"

Members were not restricted by party loyalties — other than to SPUC and the Roman Catholic Church — and in a free vote decided by 364 votes to 193 that research on embryos up to fourteen days after creation should be allowed under the control of a statutory body to be set up.

Still smarting from that blow, SPUCites faced another disappointment at the end of a debate on the upper time limit for abortions. Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Health, said he favoured its reduction from 28 weeks into pregnancy to 24 weeks.

Jo Richardson (Labour, Barking), who speaks for the Opposition on women's issues, said it was crazy of the Government to attach a clause on abortion to a debate on embryology. She described the move as "an attempt to buy off those who bring in restrictive abortion Bills every year."

Capital punishment supporter Ann Widdecombe opened for the "Pro-Life" anti-abortionists. She expressed concern for "a living mortal in the womb" and urged MPs to vote for an eighteen-week limit.

David Alton, a vociferous opponent of abortion, described it as "the modern heresy."

(continued on back page)

The Freethinker

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NEWS

GOD'S SAVAGES

Sceptics usually find the antics of fringe Christian groups highly entertaining. But there are some very nasty elements, often of American origin, on the religious scene at the present time. Few *Freethinker* readers will have heard of the rather sinister Foundation for Christian Reconstruction. It seeks to promote "a Christian renaissance or reconstruction on biblical foundations", and is committed to "the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, i.e. the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as originally given".

It requires patience and a strong stomach to plough through *Judgement and Reconstruction*, one of the Foundation's mind-numbingly turgid publications. Considerable importance is placed on the absolute authority of biblical law, and in one issue (June 1988) the Christian community is admonished for failing "to teach and apply God's law". A section headed "Biblical Law and Criminality" makes very clear how the Foundation for Christian Reconstruction would apply the rule of God's law if by any disastrous mischance it ever became a power in the land.

Judgement and Reconstruction upholds barbaric Old Testament laws, including one which decrees stoning to death of sons who will not obey their parents. It quotes with approval Deuteronomy 21: 18-21: "If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of the city at the gateway of his home town. And they shall say to the elders of his city, 'this son of ours is rebellious and stubborn, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard'. Then all the men in the city shall stone him to death".

Judgement and Reconstruction asserts that humanists who describe this law as barbaric are misguided and hypocritical. It declares: "The purpose of biblical law with respect to such crime, unlike modern methods, is not to treat offenders, but to remove them from society. The goal of such criminal law in the Bible is to rid society of evil and thereby restore godly order. The scriptures do not acknowledge the right to life of a criminal class; and in ridding society of criminals the biblical legislation does not merely remove them from society by imprisonment, but rids society of them permanently by enforcing capital punishment. . .

"Were this law to be enacted now, a major

AND NOTES

proportion of criminal delinquency would be eradicated. . . This law is far from barbaric". Furthermore, if the criminal is executed instead of being rehabilitated, society would not be "saddled with the expense of rehabilitating him".

Another Foundation publication, *Commentary*, August 1988, includes an item on AIDS, which it regards as an expression of God's judgement and wrath. It considers the question: "Given the fact that the innocent are also suffering, how can AIDS be a judgement?" According to *Commentary*, "there is a real sense in which it is not true to say that the innocent suffer, for no one is innocent. . . Sin is the condition into which all men are born (Psalms 51:5) and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6.23)".

Quoting Exodus 20:5 ("I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children . . . on the third and fourth generations"), *Commentary* concludes: "The fact that there are now children being born with AIDS is therefore not inconsistent with the biblical concept of judgement".

The current issue of *Judgement and Reconstruction* consists of a long article entitled "The Doctrine of Creation: a Foundational Truth". The author, Dr A. J. Monty White, states that the evolutionary account of origins is totally different to that in Genesis. "We read quite clearly in Genesis that God created Adam and Eve," he writes. "The creation of the first human pair was instantaneous. Adam was not an apeish brute who eventually evolved into a human being: he was a gentleman, and his wife, Eve, was a lady. Furthermore, their home was in a garden, not a jungle."

Christian Reconstructionists evince megalomania characteristic of medieval popes. Dr Monty White declares that "the nations are to be made obedient to the Christian faith . . . this means that every aspect of life throughout the world is to be brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ: individuals, families, businesses, education, government, science, the arts, philosophy, agriculture, law, economics, medicine, psychology and every other sphere of human activity. Nothing must be left out. Christ must reign, until he has put all enemies under his feet."

The Foundation for Christian Reconstruction is about the most obnoxious group of Christians to crawl out from under a stone. There is not a trace of compassion or sympathy in its pronouncements. And its only connection with charitable feeling is registration as a religious charity, number 327537.

"SEEDS OF FAITH"

What follows has not been plagiarized from a Monty Python sketch.

Hundreds of devout Muslims have been turning up at a terrace house in Leicester to gaze in reverent awe at a miraculous object. After removing their shoes as a mark of respect, they are ushered into Mr and Mrs Fassam's front room to behold — an aubergine.

The Islamic faithful do not as a rule add to the gaiety of nations. But sceptics and infidels have been enjoying a good giggle over the case of the miraculous aubergine. It appears that when Mrs Fassam sliced the wholesome vegetable, she noticed that the seeds were arranged in the unusual pattern of an Arabic inscription, Yah-Allah, which means Allah is everywhere.

"It's a miracle," she declared. And as a clincher, her husband added that their non-Muslim insurance man agreed. (Insurance men tend to see future business in the most unlikely places.)

One pilgrim, Mr Fakit Mayet, said the aubergine was very precious because through it Allah had shown that he is the creator of the world. "But," he added with understandable puzzlement, "I don't understand why he chose an aubergine."

A local Islamic leader explained: "As far as Muslims are concerned, they can find Allah in all the objects on earth." In *all* objects? It may prove indelicate to speculate further.

MORE MIRACLES

It is indisputable that serious psychological harm can be inflicted on the fearful and vulnerable by faith-healing miracle mongers. Some of our Lancashire readers will have seen the advertisement for a Miracle Healing Crusade conducted by self-styled "Renowned Healing Evangelist", the Rev Melvyn Banks, not a name that comes immediately to mind.

The leaflet asserts that sufferers have been "marvellously healed" of osteoarthritis, multiple sclerosis, blindness, deafness, asthma, schizophrenia, nervous disorders, cancers, diabetes, glaucoma and shingles (presumably by the same God who creates germs, viruses and tumors). "The blind have seen . . . the deaf have heard . . . the lame and crippled have walked after prayer" — it is amazing that the Government have not invited the "Renowned Healing Evangelist" to run the National Health Service.

The Runcorn crusade ended with a "Thanksgiving, Praise, Healing and Renewal Service" at an establishment known as The Salt Cellar. The venue was appropriately named. The Rev Melvyn Banks's "miracle healing" claims should be taken with a very large pinch of salt.

Boost for Opponents of Blasphemy Law

The High Court's rejection of an appeal by Abdal Chudhury of the Muslim Action Front over the writing and publication of *The Satanic Verses* has been welcomed in literary, anti-censorship and free-thought circles. Mr Chudhury was appealing against a ruling by Sir David Hopkin, the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, that author Salman Rushdie and publishers Viking Penguin could not be charged with blasphemy.

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, said the judgement was the best we could have hoped for.

"In ruling that the common law offence of blasphemy does not cover religions other than Christianity, the judges made it clear that they considered the law outmoded, unworkable and anomalous. The grievance of the Muslim petitioners that their religion does not enjoy the same legal protection as Christianity is understandable, but the only feasible solution is, as their Lordships suggested, to abolish or suspend the law, not extend it.

"Unfortunately, their Lordships did not think they had the power to change the law, however bad it might be, and they therefore handed this responsibility over to Parliament, though it was the judges, not Parliament, that framed the law in the first place."

The NSS president said she was not hopeful that in the present political climate the Government would allow Parliamentary time for a Bill to abolish blasphemy law.

"And I am even less hopeful of a future Labour Government in this respect," she added.

"So many members of that Party unreasonably equate opposition to non-Christian fundamentalist religious demands with 'racism'.

"Even the Archbishop of Canterbury, who, a few months ago, was opposing abolition of blasphemy law and advocating an extension of it, now says he has changed his mind on this. What an indictment of Parliament if it shows itself more religious than the Primate of the Established Church!"

ARTICLE 19 International Centre on Censorship issued a statement declaring that the High Court ruling is commendable as far as it goes. The statement welcomed "the recognition that the United Kingdom today is a multi-cultural and thus a multi-religion society. This fact alone presents a very strong argument for the abolition of the crime of blasphemy. It is only in this way that the law can give equal protection to all religions, and at the same time recognise the universally accepted principles of freedom of opinion and expression."

Mary Hayward, honorary secretary of the Campaign Against Censorship, said they were very

pleased with the High Court decision.

"We think this is another signal to Parliament that blasphemy law should be abolished.

"Even if Salman Rushdie's Islamic critics prosecuted him they would not win. Taken as a whole, *The Satanic Verses* is not blasphemous."

Mark Le Fanu, general secretary of The Society of Authors, said that the Court decision confirms that the present law of blasphemy is anachronistic and discriminatory.

"The Society of Authors is anxious that the law should be repealed by statute as soon as possible. If the Government is not prepared to act, we hope that a Bill will be introduced in the House of Lords and that it will receive widespread support."

Walter J. Jeffrey, general secretary of The Writers' Guild of Great Britain, said the organisation was glad that the High Court ruled against the action brought against Salman Rushdie on the basis that blasphemy law applied to the Christian religion only.

"It would be inappropriate and indeed unworkable to have an extension of the blasphemy law in a society which has basically a secular approach to these matters. I should say, nevertheless, the Guild has always believed that every individual should have the right to worship and practise whatever religion he or she chooses. However, we also believe it is proper in our society that there should be full freedom of expression for writers."

Jane Wynne Willson, chairperson of the British Humanist Association, welcomed the High Court's "very clear rejection" of the attempt to extend the offence of blasphemy.

"We note with satisfaction that Lord Justice Watkins referred favourably to the Law Commission's majority opinion that the offence should be abolished. However, we feel that the present position is highly unsatisfactory and unfair, with special privilege accorded to Christianity.

"Humanists have always advocated the abolition of blasphemy law. It is interesting to find that we now have pillars of the Establishment, such as *The Times* and the Archbishop of Canterbury, as bedfellows."

David Pollock, chairman of the Rationalist Press Association, described the Court's decision as "the only sensible one possible". It is high time that Parliament abolished the blasphemy law and all other remaining legal discrimination in favour of the Christian religion.

"Meanwhile, it is worth reflecting that in the bloodthirsty behaviour of the militant wing of Islam we see mirrored the conduct of the Christian churches in earlier centuries when they established still-lingering privileges."

The Case of Robert Ferguson

ELLEN WINSOR

The *Freethinker* is 109 years old this month. Launched in 1881 as an avowedly anti-Christian monthly, it soon attracted sufficient support to become a weekly publication. Circulation depended partly on volunteers who sold it at indoor and open-air meetings. But some news-agents stocked *The Freethinker* in defiance of the authorities and the bigotry of their conventional customers.

The Freethinker was never intended to be just a vehicle for academic debate on theological matters by unbelievers. Its purpose was to ridicule absurd ideas and to undermine the status of those in society who gained from their acceptance. Consequently it has always "sailed close to the wind" and risked provoking the wrath of those it offended. The most celebrated victim of such anger was George William Foote, the journal's founder and editor for the first 34 years of its existence, who served a year's imprisonment for his work. However, there were others whose cases are poorly documented. One such was Robert Ferguson, a Glasgow radical and news-agent.

By 1885 Ferguson was an old man who had been associated with the Owenite socialists and the secularists for many years. Newspaper reports disagree as to his precise age at the time, varying between 76 and 80. His shop in Ingram Street handled around 200 copies of *The Freethinker* each week. In November 1885 he was visited by two police detectives who purchased some back numbers. They made no secret of the purpose of their visit, and the next day Ferguson received a summons to appear in court. He found himself prosecuted under the Glasgow Police Act of 1866 which stated: "Every person who offers for sale or distribution, or who sells, distributes, or publicly exhibits, any profane, indecent or obscene book, paper, print, photograph, drawing, painting or representation" shall be liable "to a penalty of forty shillings, or alternatively, without penalty, to imprisonment for fourteen days".

The particular charge against Robert Ferguson related to two issues of *The Freethinker*, 25 October and 1 November 1885. Cartoons ridiculing two passages from the Bible, along with Bramwell Booth and General Booth of the Salvation Army, were held to be "profane".

Ferguson first appeared at the Central Police Court on Saturday, 14 November, although his counsel was unable to be present. As a result, the defence asked that the case be postponed. The stipendiary magistrate granted this request on condition that Ferguson sold no copies of *The Freethinker* in the meantime. He agreed to this reluctantly and only under the threat that his stock would be seized. On the following Wednesday he appeared in court again and his

lawyer, one Angus Campbell, argued for the defendant along the lines that the newspapers were blasphemous, rather than profane, therefore the case should be tried in a higher court. He also argued that the prosecution could only be self-defeating by giving publicity to *The Freethinker*. What is more, the defendant was only the vendor of the paper and could in no way be held responsible for its contents.

Campbell can hardly have endeared himself to local freethinkers by personally distancing himself from the affair and making it clear that he regarded *The Freethinker* as "repugnant". Before passing sentence, the magistrate asked the defendant whether he intended to sell any more copies of *The Freethinker*. Robert Ferguson refused to give an undertaking that he would not, and was sentenced to the maximum fourteen days imprisonment.

Angus Campbell began appeal proceedings and on the following day travelled to Edinburgh to apply for an interim order of release pending the appeal. This was granted, and Ferguson was released the next day on a ten-pound bail, having spent two nights in Glasgow Gaol. Judging by comments made by Foote in *The Freethinker* he had not been treated too kindly. Despite suffering from a chest ailment, the prison clothing had been insufficient to protect the veteran from cold.

Press reports on whether or not Robert Ferguson continued to sell *The Freethinker* during the period he was awaiting trial are confused; for a time, at least, it seems he did not. Foote excused him on the grounds that he was too old to undergo an unnecessary period of imprisonment. Glasgow Secular Society carried on the sales, and also established a Ferguson Defence Fund to defray legal expenses.

If the purpose of the Glasgow police was to intimidate vendors of *The Freethinker*, it seems they may have had some success. Foote argued that one of the main expenses of the case was a decline in sales, albeit temporary. Substance is given to this claim by the various schemes devised for ensuring that copies reached readers. Interestingly, Ferguson's prosecution gave Foote the opportunity to again justify his policy of publishing "warm" cartoons like those which had earned him a term of imprisonment in 1883-4. He declared: "People read the Bible, and do not read it — that is, they see the meaning vaguely through a mist of reverence, and do not realise it is in their minds. Our illustrations help them to realise it. Bible wonders take form; they are visualised; and orthodox readers ask themselves whether after all such absurdities could ever have happened."

The appeal was slow in coming to court and *Freethinker* comments suggested that the judiciary were

perplexed that the case had ever been raised. Eventually it was heard on 2 February 1886 in the High Court of the Judiciary, Edinburgh. The Lord Justices made clear their reluctance to allow any further public discussion and the whole matter was dropped. Foote claimed victory on Robert Ferguson's behalf, although he understood that the judiciary had decided that religion had more to lose than to gain from the case. The outcome was a kind of "allowed" victory to freethought. Although the law could have been used against Ferguson, it was decided that this would have undesirable results in terms of public opinion. Nevertheless, Foote's hope that there was little danger of any future blasphemy proceedings has proved to be a false one.

The defence fund remained open until June when sufficient money had been raised to meet all expenses. Among the methods used to raise funds was the sale of Robert Ferguson's photograph in which he is pictured holding copies of the issues of *The Free-thinker* for which he was prosecuted.

The victory was celebrated by the National Secular Society holding its 1886 annual conference in Glasgow. The proceedings included a short ceremony during which Robert Ferguson was presented with a "purse" and a portrait of himself. Apparently the purse was decided upon due to his financial circumstances. His speech of acceptance was both brief and moving: "This is the proudest moment of my life. I'd better sit down now, I'm not fit to say any more."

Always an Atheist

In a recent BBC Daytime Live programme, Kathy Staff, who plays Nora Batty in *Last of the Summer Wine*, said with manifest sincerity that she could not imagine how anyone could live without a religious faith. May I, aged 73 and a lifelong atheist, assure her, I hope with equal sincerity, that not only is it possible, but that my life has been better, more fulfilled, more meaningful and happier because it has been free from religion?

I still possess my father's membership card of the National Secular Society, dated 1910, six years before I was born. My parents never restricted my contact with religion, although I do not remember anything about religion in my pre-school years. Religion began when, in September 1922, I entered the infant class at Rosemary Lane School, Lincoln, the teacher being Mrs Topham. At first it was all about a baby. We sang "Away in a Manger" before Christmas. After Christmas, in Class 3 with Miss Gilliatt, we sang "There is a Green Hill". I liked the music but did not understand the words, except for Green Hill, which sounded nice. Strangely, in less than two terms, we had commemorated both the birth and death of Jesus. Like most children I accepted it as part of school life — "ours not to reason why". If I had known what "crucified" meant I would have been horrified, and why we should sing "He died to save us all" would have been incomprehensible. It still is.

In later life I have understood the significance of leading children to Christianity through the baby Jesus. No other major religion hinges upon so intense, dramatic and personal a story, a crucial source of strength without which Christianity would not exist. Yet I am amazed that intelligent adults today cannot see the incongruities of Time and Space, the incongruity of meshing a God who embraces all Space and Time with a story, no matter

KARL HEATH

how dramatic, which is confined to little more than thirty earth years in a restricted area. Nearly two thousand years ago, when the Gospels were written, it was more understandable. Cosmology, apart from Aristarchus of Samos, was geocentric parochialism. The earth was a very large object at the centre of the universe, with smaller, less important objects, such as sun, moon, planets and stars, revolving around it. It was not unreasonable to suppose that God would focus His attention upon the centre of His Creation and have His only baby there. But in modern times it seems rather odd that the Universal Creator, Lord of Space and Time, God of the Galaxies, should choose a tiny planet, around a ten-a-penny G-type sun, in a rather sparsely populated spiral arm of a galaxy which, itself, is only one of millions, and there to produce a tiny biped in His own image. And this in a backward province of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire at the time had many writers but Jesus writes nothing, except once (St John's Gospel, Ch 8, v 6-8), where, when confronted on the Mount of Olives with the woman taken in adultery, He wrote, we know not what, with His finger on the ground. The memorable words "He that is without sin, etc" were spoken. We know that He could read (Luke Ch 4, v 16-20) when he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth and chose a most admirable text (Isaiah Ch 61, v 1) appropriate in recent prison trouble.

And then there is the incongruity of time. Did Jesus exist before He was born? The Athanasian Creed, the part of Anglican Morning Prayer which seeks to explain the Trinity, says that Jesus was "begotten before the worlds", the divine part of Him existing before the universe. If Almighty, All-Wise, God the Father embodying the Son, created Time, then Past, Present and Future are all one to Him. He must therefore have known for ever that He was going to have a baby, at a certain date by

our reckoning, and, also, He must have known what was going to happen to that child as an adult some thirty-three years later. The Gospels suggest that Jesus knew. The assumption is that God the Father had a purpose — to save us all. Have we been saved? Is the modern world morally better than the pre-Christian world of Confucius, Buddha, Plato and Aristotle? God the Father Almighty had the power to save us in any way He might choose. Why, therefore, should He choose the notion of nailing His Son to a post?

But suppose, contrary to all theological logic, that God the Father did not know in advance what was going to happen to His Son; suppose that His gift to us of Free Will deprived Him of foreknowledge. In this equally improbable scenario God the Father resembles a football manager who sends out a substitute after half-time to save the match. But if the outcome was unpredictable how could Salvation depend upon the Crucifixion and the Resurrection? Pilate might have plucked up courage to release the man in whom he saw no fault. The Passover crowd might have shouted "Jesus" instead of "Barabbas".

The whole fantasy is embroidered with capital letters — Almighty, Father, Virgin, Immaculate Conception, Incarnation, Nativity, Infant Jesus, Christ Child, Messiah, Saviour, Lord, Redeemer, Son of God, Son of Man, Lamb of God, Blood of the Lamb, Crucifixion, Cross, Calvary, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, Redemption, Atonement, Salvation. Capital letters make drama, but not sense. And why did we need saving, including those Blessed listed in the Beatitudes? The incredible answer is Original Sin. We are all born, said St Augustine, *inter faeces et urinam*, cursed with Adam's sin, which many people assume means that he and Eve found out what to do with their genitals. This savage doctrine has caused untold misery, loading upon the innocent the burden of vague sin and guilt complexes. As an atheist I know when I have done wrong, know what the wrong was, and know that the fault has been mine, not Adam's.

When I cannot credit all this rigmarole I am accused of lack of faith, and justification by faith is the only means of Salvation. Hope and Love I see as virtues, but not Faith. If Faith means belief then it must be backed by evidence, not unthinking, servile and blind. If Faith means trust in a person then it depends upon knowledge and experience of that person. It is not enough to rely upon the Gospels and St Paul. I am inclined to believe in the historical Jesus, as a human person, not divine. Some non-believers deny the existence of Jesus altogether, but they cannot deny his reported sayings, some of which are praiseworthy. On the Ockham's Razor principle it seems simpler, and more probable, that someone uttered these sayings and that the Gospellers

reported them rather than inventing them. So I regard Jesus as a trouble-maker who enraged the Jewish establishment and embarrassed the Roman civil servant, Pilate. I would have been on the side of Jesus the man, without accepting his theology.

Conventional religious wisdom has often chosen to regard atheists as hedonistic and selfish, terrified of death, lacking moral standards, living a meaningless life in a blind brute universe, lacking faith and rejecting salvation. The first comment is self-contradictory. In the end selfishness and happiness are incompatible. There is nothing wrong with pursuing happiness, but the hedonist who fails to see that his happiness depends upon the happiness of others will end up selfish, lonely and miserable.

It would indeed be convenient if we could resolve all our moral problems by reference to a gigantic, eternal, external measuring rod called God. If we could all agree about the measuring rod; if God addressed us all collectively and simultaneously so that there could be no doubt about His will. If, if and if. In practice God's Will has always been some human being's version of it, sometimes a Paisley, sometimes a Swaggart or a Bakker, and sometimes an Ayatollah. Furthermore, a morality based upon promise of heavenly reward or threats of damnation is essentially a flawed morality. Some fundamentalists will say that all the answers are in the Good Book. But the Bible, too, is not God's Word but an anthology compiled by men. The Septuagint scholars who compiled the Greek Old Testament are supposed, miraculously, to have all produced the same translation, but even they included some Books and excluded others as Pseudepigrapha. Six centuries later the compilation of the New Testament was characterised by fierce squabbles in the context of Roman Imperial politics and Church politics, about which tracts to include as canonical and which to exclude as apocryphal. Atheists must accept full responsibility for their conduct, without promise of reward or fear of punishment, doing good because it is right and on the basis of a morality derived from human social experience.

Terrified of death? This myth caused slanderous priests to declare that Thomas Paine recanted in fear on his death-bed. I regard death with more resentment than equanimity but am less obsessed with the subject than many of my acquaintance.

No meaning in my life? Heading for personal oblivion in a blind brute universe? The only purposes I know are human purposes. I do not know of any *purpose* in the universe. Neither does anyone else, apart from those invented or imagined. We must accept the universe as we find it. Meaning is the meaning we put into our lives. Not being of a slave mentality I would not care to be part of a Superior Being's purpose; neither in God's Farmyard, nor His

Ephraim Chambers

Ephraim Chambers, who died on 15 May 1740, compiled his *Cyclopaedia* "for the people". It inspired Diderot and the *philosophes* to produce the great *L'Encyclopédie*. Although an avowed freethinker, Chambers was buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

Zoo, nor His Experimental Laboratory, nor let out, occasionally, on a short lead called Free Will so that we can get into mischief and be punished.

How did the universe get here? Science has no answer, and religion is mistaken if it thinks that it can explain one mystery by postulating a greater mystery to account for it. The Creationists, far from solving the mystery of the universe, are left with two mysteries instead of one, with no recognised means of investigating the second. The religious say "In the Beginning". Everything, they say, must have a beginning, except God. On the contrary, I have never encountered anything which has an absolute beginning; everything we call a "thing" is also an "event in space-time" and a current phase in something which has gone before. Furthermore, the Christians follow "In the Beginning" with "World without End". If there is to be an infinite future then the beginning, if there ever was one, will recede into an infinite past. I cannot understand the logic of those who can accept an eternal God and an eternal future and yet reject an eternal past. For myself, acknowledging that there are questions for which human beings will never find the answers, and are physically incapable of finding the answers because of limited powers of perception, despite Big Bangs and Primeval Atoms, I prefer to accept a universe which has existed for ever, in some form or other, or, more accurately, ever-changing.

The majority of British citizens are neither atheists nor believers, but plain irreligious, the "think there must be something there" school, making use of the churches for conventional ceremonies, but not regarding the "something there" as having much relevance to their lives. Paradoxically, atheists and the genuinely religious have more in common, trying to establish a human position in relation to the universe, society and morals. Nevertheless, it is annoying, patronising and even offensive to an atheist when religious people say: "You are really a good Christian". I wonder if they realise that they are being self-congratulatory. Can they really believe that the atheist is going to squirm with pleasure and self-satisfaction? "Why be moral? Why try, if all you have to look forward to is eternal personal oblivion?" My answer is "Kilroy was here". We have not encountered any conscious matter anywhere else in the Universe. Maybe it exists. Maybe we will find it. Maybe it will find us. We have been foolish and evil, and continue to be, but, without being too self-centred, I believe we can claim some achievement. I would like humanity to make its mark and leave a record of which we can be proud. The religious may say "How feeble!" But we are feeble, and strong as well. A little humility is more worthy than transcendental posturing, claiming to be the image of God, aspiring to immortality and basking in the reflected glory of a God which some of us invented.

Ephraim Chambers, who died 250 years ago, produced his pioneer *Cyclopaedia, or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Science* in 1728. Apprenticed to a London map-maker, he had been put in the way of acquiring knowledge. He visited France, and translated French scientific treatises. In his Preface to the *Cyclopaedia*, he explained his classification of knowledge. He was entire author of the two volumes, not editor, but drew on established authorities. The standard of information earned him election to the Royal Society in 1729. By 1746, there had been five editions of the work, brought up to date. A French translation of the *Cyclopaedia* inspired the *philosophes* to undertake *L'Encyclopédie*, edited at first by Diderot and D'Alembert in 1751, and brought to a conclusion in 17 volumes fourteen years later by the incredible frustrated editorial labours of Diderot singlehanded. Nothing better exemplifies the common Anglo-French culture and easy two-way intercourse at that time. Chambers was as committed a freethinker himself as the *philosophes* who contributed to the mature offspring of his own work.

L'Encyclopédie has been described as the centre of a history of ideas in the 18th century. It was composed to turn contemporaries against the spirit, beliefs, and institutions of the past; to bring about an intellectual revolution in France. In different ways and in different degrees, the work influenced ideas throughout Europe. Diderot contributed a very long article, "Encyclopédie", which he began by saying that it was evident that the immense ground to be covered could not be the work of a single author, as Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* had been. Nor could it be the work of an academy or scholarly society. The *ad hoc* team needed for *L'Encyclopédie* had to share a general outlook, and the aims and ideals of the purpose in hand, and they were bound together in loyalty and mutual respect; so that the work was an informed common endeavour, not a disparate collection of articles.

Because of its influence, *L'Encyclopédie* was fiercely attacked; and from opposite points of view. The freethinking content, indirectly evident as it had to be to escape outright suppression by the authorities, was plain enough to provoke response from Christians. As late as 1932, Carl Becker found it worth while to demolish "The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-century Philosophers" in a famously witty

and the Enlightenment

H. J. BLACKHAM

satirical examination of Diderot and his colleagues. This was a series of lectures at Yale, reprinted at least ten times. He set out to show that far from modernising the outlook of their contemporaries, as the *philosophes* had set out to do, they had remained in the medieval world and provided their generation with Augustine's City of God rebuilt with new-found materials: "the underlying conceptions of the eighteenth century were still, allowance made for certain alterations in the bias, essentially the same as those of the thirteenth century". The argument is that in the Middle Ages what men learned from experience was only what was reconcilable with the faith they held. In the 18th century, men did the same, but the faith was different. He lists essential articles of that faith: "(1) man is not natively depraved; (2) the end of life is life itself, the good life on earth, instead of the beatific life after death; (3) man is capable, guided solely by the light of reason and experience, of perfecting the good life on earth; (4) the first and essential condition of the good life on earth is the freeing of men's minds from the bonds of ignorance and superstition, and their bodies from the arbitrary oppression of the constituted social authorities." They created man in their own image. Summary dealing on these lines gave plenty of room for play to someone with other preconceptions.

An earlier critic with different preconceptions was Georges Sorel in *Les Illusions du Progrès*, 1908. He looks at the work of the *philosophes* from a near-Marxist point of view, and makes his target their preoccupation with the vulgarisation of knowledge, rather than with the extension of it by research. He treats *l'Encyclopédie* as entertainment for the bourgeoisie, described by Mme de Pompadour as a magazine of useful items of information, leaving everyone having leafed through its pages to think himself the most knowledgeable man in the kingdom. At a time of great transformations, it had been a strange and mistaken undertaking. At such a level of generality, it had in effect formed for administrators and managers in government and industry a collective idea of a homogeneous mobile society with which they had to deal. The idea of reformers of the time was to administer the State in such a way as to ameliorate the lot of the class that was most numerous and poorest — paternalistic government. In sum, the *philosophes* addressed their propaganda to an assumed general public. They had no idea of the workers with a separate interest inevitably in conflict with that of their employers. The whole scope of encyclopedias he judged chimerical in realistic political terms.

On the positive side, *l'Encyclopédie* has received ample justice in our own time from principal

scholars. Ernst Cassirer, in the first chapter of his *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 1951, wrote:

The lust for knowledge which theological dogmatism had outlawed and branded as intellectual pride, is now called a necessary quality of the soul as such and restored to its original rights. The defence, reinforcement, and consolidation of this way of thinking is the cardinal aim of eighteenth century culture; and in this mode of thinking, not in the mere acquisition and extension of specific information, the century sees its major task. This fundamental tendency can also be traced unambiguously in the *Encyclopedia*, which became the arsenal of all such information. Diderot himself states that its purpose is not only to supply a certain body of knowledge but also to bring about a change in the mode of thinking.

Peter Gay repeatedly emphasises this purpose of *l'Encyclopédie* in *The Party of Humanity*, 1954. He ends his detailed refutation of Carl Becker: "Carl Becker's critique of the *philosophes*, like Samuel Johnson's critique of Shakespeare, had every virtue save one, the virtue of being right."

There were fundamental assumptions on which the *philosophes* relied which made them vulnerable to attack. For instance, Locke's theory of the mind as a blank sheet on which sense experience inscribed all the ideas we have. Or the implication of the social contract idea, that there is a natural man with native rights independent of the society which has formed him. Or Condorcet's assurance that a well-informed educated man was enabled by that to stand confidently on his feet, hold his own, and manage his life, in acquired independence. Knowledge is not enough to give you actual independence in a situation of economic dependency. There was legitimate room for Becker and Sorel. However, these were mistakes that were corrected in the course of the nineteenth century. The irreplaceable virtue of the Enlightenment, in spite of errors and omissions, is that it passed a verdict on the past and with detachment sifted achievements from failures, new possibilities from evils and follies, and called Europe and the world to improve on what had been proved, and to aim at that which could and ought to be attained.

There is no present without a past, never a fresh start. The immediate past has a past of its own, and one age grows out of another, since the dawn of history. A five-fold division articulates the course of European history. There are origins in antiquity, gathered in the Roman Empire; there are the Middle Ages, after the fall of Rome; in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, States are established and science is advanced; from the French Revolution to the end of WWII, there is preparation and catastrophe; our own time has delivered a new heaven and a new earth, but not in the welcome shape dreamed of.

THE SAVOUR OF SALT: A HENRY SALT ANTHOLOGY.
 Edited by George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick.
 Centaur Press, £12.95

I first came across the works of Henry Salt nineteen years ago when I decided to look into the Irish phase of Charles Bradlaugh's early life. In Ireland Bradlaugh had met and befriended the poet James Thomson ("B.V."), author of *The City of Dreadful Night* (which Bradlaugh published in England in 1874). So I went to South Place Ethical Society's library and borrowed Salt's interesting biography of Thomson (first published in 1889).

In 1977 I had the good fortune to acquire, from an Australian friend, a copy of *Songs of Freedom* (ca. 1895), an anthology of poems chosen and edited (but not written) by Salt. I realised from this that Salt had a great feel for poetry and an abiding passion for justice and liberty. Most of Salt's original publications are now scarce, but his *Animals' Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (1892) was reprinted in Britain in 1980 by the Centaur Press, publisher of the present collection of Salt's prose and verse.

Henry Stephens Shakespear Salt (1851-1939) came from a well-to-do background and, after a "good" (conventional) school and university education, became an assistant master at Eton. In 1884, however, he "dropped out" of a system he no longer believed in, adopted a simple lifestyle, and devoted the rest of his life to campaigning for causes. He became a vegetarian and, in his own words, a "rationalist, socialist, pacifist and humanitarian". In 1891 he founded the Humanitarian League to act as a platform for his various efforts. He was an unrepentant eccentric and, when described by a hostile journalist as "a compendium of the cranks", Salt replied: "He apparently meant that I advocated not this or that humane reform, but all of them. That is just what I desire to do."

Salt's passion and persistence were leavened by a generous sense of humour; and, for a pacifist, he showed a shrewd grasp of tactics. His friends were many, and included Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Edward Carpenter, G. W. Foote, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Hardy, W. M. Hyndman, George Meredith, F. W. Newman, William Morris and George Bernard Shaw.

Salt believed — and the world is catching up with him — that "in our complex modern society, all great issues of justice or injustice are crossed and intermingled, so that no one cruelty can be singled out as the source of all other cruelties, nor can any one reform be fully realised apart from the rest." Most people, however, do not have the talent, time and energy to campaign on a broad range of issues. Not

so Henry Salt: he decided to try reforming what he saw as a "brutalitarian" society. He campaigned against flogging in the Royal Navy; haunted his *alma mater* over the hunting of hares by the Eton Beagles; and tackled bureaucrats and politicians — including the Prime Minister — in a campaign for the abolition of the Royal Buckhounds, confident in the knowledge that the old Queen herself disapproved of stag hunting. Salt inveighed against warmongering rhetoric, "murderous millinery" (the vogue for egret feathers), the fur trade, vivisection, and some of the barbarous practices at the London Zoo. (Even in his eighties he was briefly threatened with a libel action by the RSPCA.) He also became a pioneering conservationist, pleading for legal protection of rare wild flowers and against commercial destruction of Britain's mountain scenery.

When roused, Salt had a splendid turn of phrase. (He reminds me a bit of the Rev Stewart Headlam.) "It used to be said," Salt wrote, "that 'whoever slept upon Snowdon would wake inspired'. The inspiration which to-day awaits those who wake upon Y Wyddfa is the site of a rubbish-heap surmounted by a pot-house, with the usual appurtenances of civilisation — post-office, railway station, refreshment-rooms, cigar-ends, urinals, hordes of trippers. . . If there is still any 'beauty born of murmuring sound' among the dwellers on Snowdon, it must be born of the slow-panting locomotive, or of the gurgling of whiskies in the hotel. And the view? In clear weather, we are told, it embraces the coast of Ireland. I have seen it embrace a line of 'washing' hung out to dry on the edge of the Glaslyn precipice. This is what the Welsh 'nonconformist conscience' has made of its holy hill." Later on he commented wryly: "While we are willing to spend vast sums on grabbing other people's territory, we have not, of course, a penny to spare for the preservation of our own."

Salt was a prolific writer of letters, articles and books. Few of his books made much money but, although this puzzled the income-tax officials in 1930, it did not seem to worry Salt unduly. He is perhaps best known for *Animals' Rights* (already mentioned), but he also wrote on literary figures such as De Quincey, Richard Jeffries, Tennyson and, of course, Shelley and Thoreau. The Rationalist Press Association published his *Treasures of Lucretius* (1912) and *Our Vanishing Wildflowers* (1928), as well as the revised edition (1914) of *The Life of James Thomson* ("B.V."). Salt himself has been the subject of Stephen Winsten's *Salt and His Circle* (1951), and George Hendrick, who wrote *Henry Salt: Humanitarian Reformer and Man of Letters* (1977), is co-editor of the present anthology.

REVIEWS

Salt did not, of course, invent the concept that animals should have rights. The idea goes back at least to the late eighteenth century — to Jeremy Bentham and John Lawrence — and its origins can be traced back to classical figures such as Pythagoras and Porphyry. But Salt was one of the first people to write and agitate widely on behalf of animals' rights and saw himself, no doubt, as following in the tradition of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Salt's views on religion were, as one would expect, synthetic and holistic rather than analytical and exclusive. Rationalism, he maintained, "is void and without value unless it carries with it that sense of kinship and brotherhood which the world so grievously lacks to-day. Full freedom of thought is essential for human progress, because otherwise the old superstitions stand in the way; but it is not in itself all that is needed, and as long as cruelty and injustice are rampant it is small consolation to be told that our religious beliefs *may* be made rational. They *must* give practical proof of their rationality." The reference to extending the moral law to animals in the aims of the National Secular Society is very likely a legacy of the friendship of Foote and Salt.

"In spite of all the barriers and divisions that prejudice and superstition have heaped up between the human and non-human," Salt wrote in 1921, "we may take it as certain that, in the long run, as we treat our fellow-beings, 'the animals', so shall we treat our fellow-men."

I have two minor quibbles about *The Savour of Salt*. I would like to have seen included some detailed comment of Salt's — if available — on the First World War and the rise of fascism; and it is a pity that the photograph which appears on the back dust cover could not have been bound into the book as a plate.

George and Willene Hendrick have done a fine job in selecting examples of Salt's poetry, prose and letters to illustrate his earnest, thoughtful, polemical and humorous nature. I am sure that the author of *Cum Grano* ("With a Pinch") would have approved of the title given to this anthology. The Centaur Press also deserves an accolade for the excellent printing and tasteful presentation of the text.

I warmly commend *The Savour of Salt* to free-thinkers, vegetarians and environmentalists everywhere. (I may even bring it to the attention of a few Tory-voting, shotgun-toting friends of the gallows, the birch and The Bomb!) The world urgently needs a lot more cranks of the calibre of Henry Salt.

NIGEL SINNOTT

CHURCH AND STATE: UNEASY ALLIANCES, by Stewart Lamont. The Bodley Head, £12.95

Described by the publisher's blurb as "Scotland's leading writer and broadcaster on religious affairs", Stewart Lamont is both an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland and a professional journalist. He has produced here a curious and uneven work, which purports to be a case for the disestablishment of the Church of England, and for the setting up of a National Religious Council "to defend the Christian heritage of Britain" against "powerful secular and pluralist forces". In fact the author only gets around to arguing this case in his final brief chapter. Much of the rest of the book is occupied with a survey of church and state relations around the world, with lengthy chapters on Africa, North and South America, Russia and Europe. In the last mentioned, Ireland gets four pages, whereas France gets less than half a page. In most cases, the treatment is so sketchy as to be valueless — one wonders what the author was really trying to achieve.

The more extended chapters chart the author's visits to countries in Latin America and the United States, while the discussion of the situation in Southern Africa is based mainly on his reading of books, conference reports and newspaper articles. There is no mention of Canada, Australia or New Zealand, which might have provided better models for comparison with the situation pertaining in the various parts of the United Kingdom.

Although the author apparently visited "Carapicuíba, a dense suburb of São Paulo", he sees no incongruity in the claim that in that suburb "400,000 people are concentrated into 35,000 square metres". Now maths is not my strongest suit, but on my reckoning that makes about 11½ people per square metre, or rather more than one per square foot. Size for size, battery hens have far more room than that!

It would take more space than this book is worth to detail the many errors of fact and dubious and undigested statistics it contains, not to mention sloppy proof-reading. But the sloppiest thing about the book is the author's thinking. Here is an example: "From a European rationalist standpoint, African Christianity is intellectually unsophisticated and simplistic in its approach to the Bible, (but) . . . this ignores entirely the spiritual strength of the African churches which provides them with a perfectly valid foundation." It is surely the case that the moral power and authority that (some of) the African churches command is entirely proportional to their commitment to the cause of human equality and social justice, and nothing whatever to do with an unsophisticated approach to the Bible. Indeed, those African Church leaders whom most people could

name — Boesak, Chicane, and Tutu among them — have a much more liberal and sophisticated attitude to the Bible than the average Southern and Mid-Western American clergyman. Sophistication is not the preserve of the European or the American. And, of course, hidden in his odd statement is the classic gratuitous slur on rationalism, and the equally gratuitous insinuation that “spiritual” (ie, supernatural) qualities are important.

There are certainly strong reasons for the dis-establishment of the Church of England, but for the most part these are not the reasons that have occurred to or would command themselves to Stewart Lamont. I would therefore not recommend his book to those interested in church-state relations, but it may be instructive to those intrigued by the convolutions and contortions the Christian believer has to perform when addressing such questions.

DANIEL O'HARA

PAMPHLET

PRISONS AND PENAL REFORM: SOME NEW THOUGHTS ON COPING WITH SOCIETY'S OFFENDERS, by Tessa Blackstone. Chatto and Windus, £2.99

Counterblasts, a series of pamphlets on current issues, already includes among their writers Fay Weldon, Paul Foot, Ruth Rendell, Colin Ward and Mary Warnock, so the reader is led to expect something of substance. Number 11 lives up to expectations. It should be in the hands of every elector, every judge who puts young mothers into prison and every Conservative or Labour Party member who mistakes “the big stick” for the magic wand of law and order. In the wake of the recent riots in so many of our prisons it is likely that the Clapham Omnibus is even more full of people who air their views on crime and punishment, but now, possibly in desperation, who might listen to other voices for a change.

Crime and punishment are matters of concern if only because the cost is so enormous. This simple fact has brought a startling convergence of ideas between the traditional “progressive” Left and the traditional “reactionary” Right about how to reduce costs. The sad fact is that politicians of all colours have so closely identified political progress with their own ambition that they dare not tackle directly the inevitable atavism of a class-divided society that creates an education system in its own image.

The Master of Birkbeck has deftly condensed into a readable and cogent paper the squalor that characterises not only the physical state of most prisons, the brutality of the relationships in them, but the cynicism of the “thinking” that incarcerates the petty thief, the simple-minded, the deranged and

the illiterate along with the drug pusher, the schizophrenic fantasist and the depressive for up to twenty-three hours a day in cells built for one in Victorian days, but now made to hold three. Here they eat, sleep, defecate and otherwise occupy themselves as best they may without benefit of education, counselling, training or rehabilitation for life after prison. Her opening words are: “Britain's prisons are institutions of which we should be ashamed.”

The pamphlet covers the period of Thatcherism. The first half exposes the failure of the vaunted policy on law and order, despite a rise from £2 to £6.6 billion in spending on staff and buildings. Gimmicks like the “short, sharp shock”, the Neighbourhood Watch and electronic tagging schemes are not supported by the professional bodies who have to operate them. Privatisation, where it has been tried, as at The Immigration Centre near Heathrow Airport, costs the Home Office “roughly three times what it would in a Prison Department establishment”. The prison population continues to rise because sentences are longer, because custodial sentences are more often given, because the delay in getting cases to court is longer so that the proportion of prisoners on remand has risen from nine to twenty-three per cent of the prison population. The racism that disfigures society shows itself in the disproportionate fourteen per cent of men and twenty-three per cent of women in prison who are black. Prison staffs, on the evidence of work done for the Home Office, are notoriously racist. Working-class crime more often receives conviction and imprisonment than middle-class crime which is more often warned or fined.

In the final section the pamphlet suggests possible lines for reform, of which closer adherence to the 1976 Bail Act and the acceleration of bringing cases to trial could operate forthwith. Magistrates have to be disabused of their conviction that bail is a privilege rather than a right except in cases of violence. A major step would be to formulate a coherent system of sentencing with a wide range of alternatives to prison. Young people under eighteen, mothers of dependent children and the mentally ill should certainly not be imprisoned. We need a Ministry of Justice to coordinate courts and prisons, along with a professional judiciary on the lines of the French system, with systematic extension of experience going with promotion. Above all the raising of morale for medium and long-term prisoners through programmes of education, training and rehabilitation that will change their attitudes to detention, especially if combined with a progressive system of parole. Many examples on the Continent point the way and they have proportionately fewer than half the numbers in jail.

What a brief pamphlet like this cannot do, except in passing, is to look at the relationships between the

volume and types of crime, and the social structures and prevailing values in the society at the time. "Those who go to prison are not a random section of the population. They are overwhelmingly young and male. They come mainly from . . . the urban poor", a finding that accords with research in psychiatry and sociology over the past century. Some of us who have spent a lifetime in state education and have had some experience on the Bench tend to form the conclusion that crime is necessary to maintain the structures and objectives of our society. Those who seek to educate the mass of our children in democratic values are having to work against the grain. Their task is as exhausting and depressing as that of Sisyphus.

John Dewey summarised his conception of education in the words "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Anything less is ignoble: acted upon it will destroy our democracy." But then Dewey was our greatest modern pragmatic philosopher and one who revealed most clearly the nature of community and democracy. We, on the other hand, are burdened with an elected dictatorship that has plumbed depths of greed, cynicism and insensitivity not hitherto reached in this century.

MICHAEL DUANE

CINEMA

JESUS OF MONTREAL

It is not often we get films from Canada, but Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*, although lumbered with a most off-putting title as far as readers of this journal are concerned, is a production that any country could be proud of. Set in present-day French-speaking Montreal, the film begins with a young out-of-work actor being asked by a priest to re-write the traditional Passion Play, making it less stilted and prosaic, and more relevant to today's needs and audiences. It was at this point that the ears of this born-again atheist pricked up!

Gathering around him some fellow-actors, he begins to study both the Gospels and other texts concerning the "historical" Jesus, and slowly but surely certain parallels start to emerge between his mission and the one we have been taught was Jesu's. When the play is finally staged, the impact is tremendous. Audiences are moved and pleasantly surprised at the way a familiar and "beloved" text has been radicalised and made meaningful to contemporary life. Of course the Church and its representatives recoil in shock and horror. Demanding that the play be stopped, the actors defy the ban and proceed with public support, and when the authorities call in the police, the New Testament

parallel runs its course.

To reveal more here would perhaps spoil the clever and thoroughly secular denouement. I am convinced that, having made fools of themselves over the totally non-blasphemous *The Last Temptation of Christ*, religionists decided to lay-off *Jesus of Montreal*. And in any case, they couldn't call it blasphemous just because it is without any shadow of doubt, one of the most subversive films ever made. Like the genuine, but well-mannered anarchism of Luis Bunuel, Arcand's film has a deadly sting in its scorpion's tail as it cunningly juxtaposes the Biblical narrative with the contemporary manifestation, and is in effect a series of parables which conceal a deeper truth. Above all, but not flinching from all aspects of contemporary life (the film's "18" certificate is probably justified unlike the one given to *The Last Temptation of Christ*), it totally deconstructs the infantile dependence that the Christian religion puts on the cruel and barbaric torture of a fellow human being.

I must admit that I had no great motivation to see this film initially, and only watched it as part of my job so that I'd be briefed if the God Squads took up a position against its exhibition. But it was silly of me to have allowed my own prejudices to have operated in this way because of its title. On every level (not least of all technical quality) the film succeeds, and its intelligent, witty, profound and meaningful script is fascinating from start to finish. Most pertinently, being a truly subversive masterpiece, it will plant seeds in the minds of the credulous and superstitious, which won't go away in time, but, rather, nag and worry. And for that alone, Denys Arcand deserves our congratulations and thanks.

DAVID GODIN

Nicolas Walter

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LETTERS

"GENUINE CHRISTIANITY"

Tim Lenton's letter (March) begs many questions and ultimately tells us more about Tim Lenton than Christianity. We are advised to look at Jesus, look at the lives of those "whom God has changed" and read *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis. Why C. S. Lewis? Is he any more of an authority on what is genuine Christianity than, say, Don Cupitt or Teilhard de Chardin?

Making the very big assumption that the gospels are a reliable account of what Christ did and said, what have we got? Jesus the "greatest hell-fire preacher of them all" (I quote from a recent church notice in my local paper); Jesus meek and mild; Jesus the revolutionary challenging the established order; Jesus whose kingdom is not of this world. Jesus may be compelling and different for some. Others find Zoroaster, Buddha or Mohammed compelling and different.

Arguments from religious experience prove nothing. While the reality of such experiences is not in question, their cause and interpretation most certainly is. They are not exclusive to Christianity and could be attributed to something called god, to some psychological mechanism or anything else you wish. I have met many who would appear to have been "changed by God", and many of them I would say have been changed for the worse.

Whether Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or Free Presbyterians, their love of God is matched only by their tendency to denounce each other as deviants from genuine Christianity. There is no point in pretending that only "minor theological differences" separate the myriad sects of Christianity. RAY McDOWELL, Larne, County Antrim. N. Ireland

THE EVANS MURDER

I do not wish to prolong this correspondence beyond what it will stand, but I would have thought it obvious that the reason that Christie killed Evans's baby was because there was no other way to dispose of it without awkward questions being asked as to the whereabouts and well-being of its mother.

There is a mass of evidence to show that Evans adored the baby and had no idea it was dead until confronted with its clothing on arrival at Notting Hill Police Station.

LUDOVIC KENNEDY, Avebury

The following emergency resolution, submitted on behalf of the National Secular Society, was passed by the annual general meeting of the National Council for Civil Liberties, held in London on 21 April. "Now that the High Court has given judgement (on 9 April) that the common law offence of blasphemy does not cover religions other than Christianity, and, for the sake of parity, even the Archbishop of Canterbury is now advocating abolition of the law rather than an extension of it, this annual general meeting calls upon HM Government to allow parliamentary time for a Bill (such as the one introduced last year by Tony Benn, MP), to abolish or suspend this outmoded and anomalous law of special censorship."

NSS Annual Dinner

Guests from many parts of the country and representing a wide range of organisations attended the annual dinner of the National Secular Society in London on 21 April. Barbara Smoker, the Society's president, was in the chair.

Writer and journalist Mervyn Jones proposed the toast of the guest of honour, Michael Foot, MP, a friend for over 35 years. He described the veteran politician as a radical socialist and a democrat who has never changed his principles.

"Part of the essence of being a radical," said Mr Jones, "is to subject your opinions to question and reflection, and always be ready to listen to others and revalue your own ideas as new ones come along. When having a disagreement, Michael Foot puts forward his sincere opinion but is always open to a good argument. His clarity of thought has always impressed me and his integrity is what we appreciate."

In his response, Michael Foot drew attention to the Bishop of Durham's reply to a *Sunday Telegraph* interviewer who asked him what happened to us when we die. "I haven't a clue," the Bishop replied.

"That is very true," said Michael Foot, "and I admire him for saying it, on Easter Sunday too! Montaigne made almost the same reply to the same question over 400 years ago. He was, I feel, the greatest representative of humanism."

Michael Foot spoke of other great writers and philosophers who had influenced him. Some of them got into trouble because of their writings. Now we are seeing outbreaks of violence and hostility over Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*.

"When these events emerged in our country, the first person I thought of was Montaigne who lived when religious wars amounted to a fever. We are now moving towards a release from the Cold War. The chances that the world will survive are more encouraging than they have been for some time. But we are also witnessing an upsurge of religious fundamentalism that poses a threat to civilisation."

Michael Foot commended the work of the National Secular Society and similar organisations at a time of growing religious extremism.

Nicolas Walter, before proposing the toast of the National Secular Society, offered fraternal greetings from the Rationalist Press Association, of which he is the managing director.

He mentioned that 1990 marked different centenaries for both organisations, the resignation of Charles Bradlaugh as president of the NSS, and the formation of the Propaganda Press Committee, the forerunner of the RPA. But he emphasised that there had been much more significant events during the past year, in which there had been more changes in more parts of the world than at any time since 1945.

"We have seen the death of Marxism, as a secular faith covering much of the world; but we now see the old faiths of fanatical religion and fanatical nationalism rising in its place in many parts of the world."

He also emphasised that significant changes were taking place in this country, and that there seemed to be a definite prospect of a change of Government in the near future.

"In this situation," he added, "the humanist movement should be trying to press our particular ideas on the parties which are likely to replace the Conservatives. I wish that the Labour and the Liberal and Democratic parties would adopt some of them — the abolition of the blasphemy law, the repeal of the Sunday laws, the repeal of the religious parts of the Education Reform Act, and the public financing of religious schools."

Nicolas Walter ended by welcoming the separate existence of the National Secular Society and its associated paper, *The Freethinker*, as a forum in which lively dissent within the humanist movement could be freely expressed. In proposing the toast he wished it well for another year.

The editor of *The Freethinker* responded on behalf of the NSS.

Freethinker Fund

This is the 109th birthday issue of *The Freethinker*. This milestone has been reached because of readers' loyal and generous support since 1881. Appreciation is expressed to all who have sent donations to the Fund. The latest list of contributors is given below.

Anonymous, R. A. Cobb, F. Evans and T. Whitton, £1 each; A. P. Allen, G. Blakey, G. Coombes and F. V. Ellmore, £2 each; J. G. Meaden, £2.50; D. Bressan and G. B. Stowell, £4.40 each; Anonymous, B. Able, R. A. Billen, G. F. Clarke, J. P. Coward, M. P. Dobson, S. R. Farrelly, M. J. Fuller, P. J. Gamgee, R. J. E. Goldsmith, D. A. Hartley, G. Jamieson, C. Lovett, T. Morrison, A. Nunn, G. Reece, A. M. Smart and H. J. Taylor, £5 each; E. C. Hughes, £7.60; S. M. Jasiwall, £13; R. J. Schilsky, £15; Anonymous, £18; R. J. Condon, £20; B. Aubrey and D. Eaton, £25 each; J. Manley, £50.

Total for March: £286.90.

Iraq has scrapped all punishment for men who kill close female relatives for committing adultery. Husbands who kill the male lovers involved would also be automatically pardoned.

The Savour of Salt: a Henry Salt Anthology, reviewed on page 74, is obtainable, price £12.95, from The Centaur Press, Fontwell, Sussex, BN18 0TA.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 3 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Graham Roberts: The Changing Face of the Soviet Union.

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 3 June, 11 am. Barbara Smoker: Impressions of Indian Society.

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 5 June, 8 pm. Glinette and John Woods: Responsibilities of Humanist Parents.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Education Centre, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 22 May, 7.30 pm. D. Bromham, Director of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department, St James's Hospital: The Ethics of Embryo Research.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 31 May, 8 pm. Tony Milne: Cosmic Weather — Ice Age or Greenhouse Effect.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 June, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Wendy Sturgess: The Samaritans.

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.

(continued from front page)

Teresa Gorman (Conservative, Billericay), then delivered a scathing attack on Christianity which many in her party will regard as heresy. Mrs Gorman, a formidable Right-winger, told the House that she had sat through most of the debates on abortion. "Although superficially we are talking about medicine, science, and when, where and whether we should stop abortion, emotions and deep passions bubble up from underneath.

"What motivates those who persist in trying to amend a woman's right in these affairs is theology. They make no bones about it. They persistently refer to their Christianity, their Christian values and their Christian views. That is the motive which subsumes what the so-called pro-life group is up to.

"Those motives form one of the deepest, most misogynous strands in human society. For centuries theologians have equated sex with sin and celibacy with grace. They have regarded women as little more than flowerpots in which future generations of children, preferably boy children, are reared. . .

"Christianity has always speculated in clinical and almost obsessive detail about sex, from Adam and Eve to the gynaecology of the Virgin Birth, which could be tolerated only by an elaborate mythology which eliminated the sexual act from procreation."

Mrs Gorman said that the advance of science in providing safe contraception and termination for women, together with the decriminalisation of abortion, produced this furious reaction from the opponents of women's sexuality.

"We see the screaming, spitting harridans of both sexes outside the clinics where women go for termination, trying to prevent them from going in to exercise their legal right.

"Many people continue that deeply misogynous tendency which existed in the early church. They love to deal in sordid detail with the concept of abortion and how it happens. Yesterday they tried to shock us by sending plastic models through the post. The concept of a woman having the right to control her sexuality, let alone enjoy it, is anathema to them. . .

"We know that the Catholic Church wants to deny contraception and termination. We see the appalling consequences of that in the south of Ireland. We even see the strength of the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland where British women in part of the British Isles have to come to this country for a termination."

At this point Seamus Mallon, the Member for Newry and Armagh, reminded Mrs Gorman that all the churches in Ireland, not just the Roman Catholic, are united in opposition to abortion. "Two wrongs do not make a right," she retorted.

The vote which reduced the upper age limit from

28 weeks to 24 was the hollowest of victories for the anti-abortion lobby. Realising they had blown it. SPUCites were furious and bitterly disappointed. Out-debated in the chamber, their insensitive stunts had back-fired, and unwelcome publicity resulting from the trial of Father James Morrow and his "pavement counselling" thugs had not helped. Putting on a brave face, a SPUC representative declared that their campaign will continue. But it is generally accepted that the parliamentary debate on abortion is over for the remainder of the century.

Priest Found Guilty

Father James Morrow, a Roman Catholic priest who leads the fanatical Operation Rescue anti-abortion group, was given a three-month suspended prison sentence at Birmingham Crown Court last month. He was found guilty of assaulting Tracy Allsopp, manageress of the city's Calthorpe abortion clinic. Barry Norman, a Canadian, and Tasmin Geach, of Cambridge, were also found guilty of assaulting Mrs Allsopp who was ten weeks pregnant when she was attacked.

Mrs Allsopp told the court that when a group of anti-abortion demonstrators invaded the clinic grounds, she tried to force her way through them to assist a patient being dragged screaming along the driveway. They turned on her and she was knocked to the ground and hit by Norman.

Judge Richard Cole told the priest and his accomplices it was ironic that in trying to stop abortion they assaulted a young woman who was ten weeks pregnant. He added: "It is a mercy she did not lose her child as a result of the terror she must have suffered."

They were each ordered to pay £250 costs and £100 to Mrs Allsopp.

AIDS "Divine" Disease

AIDS is a divine judgement, according to a booklet published in Hebrew and English by the Council for the Holiness of the People of Israel. It is endorsed by a group of strictly orthodox London rabbis.

Readers are informed that "a Divine hand is at work in the sudden appearance of deadly diseases which arise from the most repugnant of sexual behaviour".

The booklet warns against ever present sexual temptation, and advises men to avoid being alone with non-Jewish women. Examples are given of "dangerous situations" at work, when visiting clients, or staying in hotels.

It is pointed out that the traditional punishment for sexual intercourse with a non-Jewish woman is "kores". This means denial of eternal life, or even premature death.