

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 110 No. 7

JULY 1990

40p

WARNOCK RECOMMENDATIONS CLEAR FINAL PARLIAMENTARY HURDLE

After six years' delay, the main provisions of the Warnock Report finally became law on 21 June with the passing of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. However, just as the Education Reform Bill of 1988, which started out as an academic package, was extended through its passage through Parliament by religious fundamentalists to include religion in schools and turn it into Christian indoctrination, so the Embryology Bill was extended, largely by the machinations of the same religious faction, to cover abortion, making it yet another opportunity to weaken the 1967 Abortion Act. But on this occasion the ploy did not only fail — it actually left anti-abortionists worse off than before.

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, said that opposition to the liberal outcome of both the abortion and the embryology clauses of the Bill had been largely based on the Christian doctrine of an immortal human soul that must be given its chance of eternal salvation.

"Not content with living their own lives in accordance with this superstitious doctrine," she added, "believers insist on their divine right to impose it on the rest of us. Their propaganda machine is geared to promulgate the absurdity that from the earliest stage, when the embryo is no more than a cluster of undifferentiated cells, it is 'really' a tiny human being, with full human rights.

"This is in the same nonsensical tradition as the wafer of bread that looks and tastes like a wafer of bread 'really' being a living god-man. Such nonsense would be laughable if it did not cause so much human tragedy."

Referring to a reduction in the prevailing 28-week limit for abortion to 24 weeks, Barbara Smoker said this merely reflects medical technological advances since 1967 on premature viability. In the context of an attempt to reduce the time limit to

18 weeks, reduction to 24 weeks is seen as a sound defeat for the "pro-life" lobby.

"More importantly," said Miss Smoker, "the time limit in the case of severe foetal abnormality or of danger to the life of the mother was removed altogether, abortion in such cases being allowed to full term. Insisting that this decision must have got through because many MPs failed to understand what they were voting for, the anti-abortionists forced the vote to be taken with the alternative of retaining the 28-week limit in such cases. But the vote remained the same.

"On the other hand, an attempt by the voices of reason to bring Britain into line with most civilised countries by allowing abortion on demand up to the twelfth week, on the signature of one doctor only, thus eliminating the main cause of delay, failed to get through."

Flagging spirits in the "pro-life" lobby were lifted by the liberals' failure to extend provisions of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. The Rev Ian Paisley climbed into bed with the Whore of Babylon, and all MPs from Northern Ireland, Protestant and Roman Catholic, voted against according women in that religion-riddled backwater the same legal right enjoyed by women in mainland Britain. Every year more than two thousand women travel from Northern Ireland to have a pregnancy terminated in a British clinic. In addition to undergoing the trauma of an abortion, they have to find between £300 and £400 to cover expenses.

Nevertheless the original concerns of the Bill emerged largely on the side of reason and against religious superstition. The existing voluntary guidelines in respect of *in vitro* fertilisation have now been given statutory protection.

(continued on back page)



The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

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

Vol 110 No 7 CONTENTS July 1990

WARNOCK RECOMMENDATIONS CLEAR FINAL PARLIAMENTARY HURDLE ...	97
NEWS AND NOTES	98
The Blight on Ulster; Pope John Paul II; Rome's Reactionary Bully; Child Abuse; the Big Christian Lie; Party Time; Sunday Trade Muddle	
COMMENT ON FOUR	101
Nik Hole	
FAMILY PLANNING — BRAZILIAN STYLE	102
G. N. Deodhekar	
DOING THE GODS A FAVOUR	102
Jane Marshall	
THE FREETHINKER FIRE OF 1886 ...	103
Ellen Winsor	
GOD FINALLY INCARNATE?	104
Daniel O'Hara	
THOSE WONDERFUL SAYINGS	105
R. J. Condon	
BOOK REVIEW	106
Believing Bishops Reviewer: H. J. Blackham	
MISCELLANEOUS	
Seeing Things, 101; Letters, 109; Bishop Queries Visions, 112; Allah's Dictators, 112	

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

G. W. FOTE & COMPANY,
702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL
(Telephone: 071-272 1266)

ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

NEWS

THE BLIGHT ON ULSTER

Professor Finlay Holmes, Moderator of the Irish Presbyterians, has put the cat among the Protestant pigeons by reminding his co-religionists of one of the few honourable episodes in their recent history. He told the 150th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church that Protestants and Catholics fought side by side for Irish independence in the 1798 rebellion. Indeed he might have added that the rising was organised and led by Protestants who were then among the most progressive forces in Europe.

The Rev Ian Paisley declared, quite wrongly, that by stating a home truth Professor Holmes was "giving succour to the IRA" and, quite correctly, that the United Irishman started the '98 rebellion "to separate Ireland from the Crown and turn it into a Republic". Unfortunately they were defeated, and the consequences of that tragic affair are still with us.

There is an important difference between living in the past and being historically aware. For a people who are living in the past, Ulster Protestants are incredibly ignorant of their history. For example, they are at present indulging in an orgy of drum banging and banner waving to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the battle of the Boyne. The story of William III's victory has been considerably embellished. The battle was of little significance to either Ireland or England, both pawns in an European power game with France's ambitious Louis XIV and his allies (among them James II, who was William's adversary at the Boyne) ranged against an anti-French coalition which included the Pope and the Prince of Orange. How many of those taking part in the 300th anniversary celebrations of the Boyne know that when news of William's victory reached Rome, the Pope celebrated by ordering that illuminations be lit and a *Te Deum* sung?

During the 19th century Ireland was stricken by two disasters. One was the blight that destroyed the potato crop; the other was a social blight resulting from an upsurge of Christian fundamentalism. Protestant militants, led by a trio of Paisley-style ranters, Dr Henry Cooke, the Rev Thomas Drew and the Rev Hugh Hanna, set out to promote "the Second Reformation". Their anti-Catholic tirades stirred up tension and hostility which led to riots. The growth of the Orange Order and the evangelical revival of 1859 completed the job of tearing the community asunder. It was all too easy for British imperialists to operate a divide-and-rule policy in an

AND NOTES

atmosphere of religious hatred and fanaticism.

Looking to the future, the Northern Ireland Office has announced that the Government is to increase spending on law and order — excluding the Army and UDR — by £46 million to £684 million next year, and another £96 million to £780 million in 1992-93. This is the reality behind the current display of Orange triumphalism. It is also part of the price being paid for creating what Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, Sir James Craig, arrogantly described as "a Protestant State for a Protestant people".

POPE JOHN PAUL II: ROME'S REACTIONARY BULLY

Bigoted, conservative and Jew-hating, Polish Catholics have always been among Europe's most fanatical adherents to the "one true faith". So it is not surprising that a Pole has turned out to be one of the most reactionary pontiffs of this century. A theocratic bully-boy, Pope John Paul II is fiercely opposed to liberalism, advancing those who toe the papal line with the same forcefulness he banishes anyone who shows the slightest tendency to deviate from the path of unquestioning obedience and orthodoxy.

An indication of the Pope's political and social views can be ascertained by the esteem in which he holds the sinister and secretive Opus Dei ("God's Work"). His posterior had scarcely warmed the papal throne when he was off to pray at the tomb of Josemaria Escriva Del Balaguer, a Spanish priest who founded the organisation. The church makes much of the clerical Fascist's "work among the poor and sick"; in fact Escriva expended much of his energy on creating Opus Dei and bolstering the Franco regime. A number of Franco's Ministers belonged to the organisation.

Opus Dei's influence within the church has grown considerably in recent years. Although distrusted by many, the support of the Pope and his Right-wing henchmen has ensured that its critics are ignored or silenced. The organisation enjoyed a major boost last month when its founder became "Venerable", an initial step in the Beatification process.

In a recent *Sunday Correspondent* article it was said of Pope John Paul II: "He is making life a misery for people all over the world: for starving mothers in shanty-towns, for guilt-ridden homosexuals, for professors of theology who are trying, hard thing, to be honest, for Catholic women who

do not see why their careers and modern lifestyles should be dominated by the crude misogyny of St Augustine.

"Since he is manifestly intelligent, we must conclude that he knows what he is doing."

The writer is not a raving modernist or an anti-Christian secularist, but the High Anglican A. N. Wilson.

CHILD ABUSE: THE BIG CHRISTIAN LIE

The confidence that children are always safe and secure in Christian surroundings is often misplaced. That hard lesson has just been learnt in Aberdeen where a charismatic Church of Scotland minister, described in the Crown Court as "a man of deep Christian conviction", has been imprisoned for eighteen months after admitting to ten charges of "lewd, libidinous and indecent behaviour", involving girls between the ages of eight and thirteen. A family man, married with one daughter, he was actively involved in church work with children, some of whom became his innocent victims. This former policeman turned clergyman was also chaplain to the local fire brigade, prison, lifeboat, football team and theatre.

The alleged breakdown of the family and a falling away from religious observance are cited frequently by moral majority-style crusaders as prime causes of child abuse. But if *The Freethinker* published all the reports received every month of child abuse by priests, Sunday School teachers and committed Christian parents, its entire sixteen pages would be taken up. And of course the most extreme form of cruelty to children is killing them by denial of effective medical treatment because it is not in accordance with their parents' religious principles.

The myth that children's upbringing in a Christian family environment is a guarantee of their welfare and happiness is assiduously promoted by "moral" groups like the Order of Christian Unity, Family and Youth Concern, the Conservative Family Campaign and the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. The ideal family, as envisaged by the godly, is one in which father rules, mother acquiesces, and both exercise proprietorial rights over the children. According to the moralists, unconventional family units in which there is a single parent or a couple who are living together but not "after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony", are undermining our civilisation. If only we returned to the good old days of discipline, conformity and unquestioning obedience, reinforced by inculcation of Christian principles in family life, the argument goes, society's ills would be cured.

However, organisations which uphold "the family" as inviolate are exceedingly mealy-mouthed about

the considerable abuse of children that goes on within families. It is significant that when cases of physical or sexual abuse of children come to court, a large proportion of defendants are the products of "good Christian homes".

Organisations dedicated to "the family" and "Christian values" are usually more concerned over what happens to a cluster of cells than about the rights and wellbeing of real children.

PARTY TIME

One of the few colourful features of parliamentary elections in the last dozen years or so has been the participation of Screaming Lord Sutch and his Monster Raving Loony Party (on no account to be confused with the Afternoon Tea Party or the Let's Have Another Party Party). Invariably their election deposit goes down the plug-hole; a blessing in disguise, perhaps, as a MRLP candidate who manages to save his deposit faces expulsion from the party for not being loony enough.

However, if the tables were not actually turned, they were repositioned at the recent Bootle by-election. The Monster Raving Loony Party polled more than twice the number of votes received by the Social Democratic Party, aka the David Owen Admiration Society. Screaming Lord Sutch magnanimously suggested a merger of the two parties. But Dr Death would not hear of it. Describing the SDP as the first truly democratic political party in British history, he disbanded it without so much as a "kiss my hand" to the rank-and-file membership.

Shortly afterwards the panel on *Midweek* (BBC Radio 4) included Alan Hope, the Monster Raving Loony Party's only town councillor. Asked if he canvassed votes on the doorstep, he retorted: "I'm not that loony!" Alan Hope serves the good people of Ashburton, in Devon, where another scourge of conformity, the freethinking campaigner for a free press, Richard Carlile, was born two hundred years ago come December.

Incidentally, the *Midweek* chairman was John Florance, an occasional contributor to *The Freethinker*.

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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SUNDAY TRADE MUDDLE

Back in the 1920s a firm in High Wycombe published a set of postcards under the title "Persecution Series". Number one carried the following verses:

When Charles the Second reigned as King
Some funny laws he made,
And one of them was that to stop
All kinds of Sunday trade.

When he was dead the people saw
This law was an abuse,
In fact that it was like the King —
Of very little use.

Outmoded and unpopular laws are indeed of very little use to anyone except the lawyers. The legal fraternity is doing very nicely, thank you, out of the present confusion over Sunday trading. Restrictions of the 1950 Shops Act and requirements of the Treaty of Rome have created a mess of Laurel and Hardy dimensions, with some courts dismissing charges of illegal Sunday trading and others convicting on the same evidence.

It is now six years since the Auld Committee recommended that Sunday shopping restrictions be abolished. Surveys have shown that large sections of the public support deregulation. DIY shops, furniture stores and garden centres attract large numbers of customers when they open on Sunday. Why, then, the Government's failure to honour a Conservative manifesto pledge to resolve the question of Sunday trading?

Ministers have boxed themselves into a corner by saying that abolishing restrictions on Sunday trading is not possible until all the parties concerned are in agreement. This means satisfying the retailers, the shopworkers' union, assorted Christian politicians of both Left and Right, the Keep Sunday Special Campaign and that esteemed corpse, the Lord's Day Observance Society. It would be easier to effect a merger of the Licensed Victuallers' Association and the Band of Hope.

Clearly it is pointless to remind religious opponents of Sunday trading that they would not be compelled to darken a shop door on the "day of Joy and Light". It is not enough for them to observe Sunday in accordance with their religious principles. Basically they wish to impose those principles on the nation. If its leaders were totally honest, they would change the name of the Keep Sunday Special Campaign to the Keep Christianity Privileged Crusade.

In Kuwait, Muslim theologians have forbidden the purchasing of oysters. They claim that people who buy oysters are gambling on the chance of finding pearls. Gambling is prohibited by Muslim law.

Comment on Four

Over the past few months religious clashes have frequently appeared in the news. In the light of the recent violence in Israel isn't it time that we asked ourselves — are religions benefitting us?

I believe that for too long, religious establishments have abused their power for personal gain or for the preservation of their outdated rules, at the expense of human happiness. I cannot be sure whether a god exists or not, but what I am sure of is that religion, as it is pursued at present, is of a detrimental effect to humankind.

I was born to a Jewish mother and a Christian father. Neither feels particularly strongly about their religion, and they decided not to push me in either direction. So all religions have been open to me, subject to my interest in them. During scripture lessons at school, I took an extra interest in the Jewish religion due to my parentage. However I found that there was little of interest to me in it.

As a result of being at an Anglican school, I started to explore Christianity but soon had doubts after I felt I was just carrying out a charade. My attempts to believe were fruitless and so I rejected the religion.

I lived in the Gambia for a year, a predominately Muslim country, and I have Muslim friends at school. But this faith seemed to offer more of the same, was more fundamentalist and, in some ways, was worse.

Seeing Things

Bishop John Kirby has appealed to Roman Catholics to stop visiting a rural parish church in County Galway. It is estimated that 50,000 people have travelled from all parts of Ireland to Fahy church in the hope of seeing visions of Our Lady and Padre Pio, the Italian stigmatist.

Twin sisters Sally-Anne and Judy Considine from County Cork — where the "moving statue" of Our Lady boosted local trade for a few months in 1985 — claim that they have seen visions on the church wall. The Misses Considine appear to be keen vision spotters, having already reported sightings in other parts of Ireland.

Bishop Kirby's statement, which was read in all the churches in his diocese, declared that the church had always acted "very cautiously" when dealing with claims about visions and apparitions. "I recommend a sceptical approach to all these recent reports," he added. "Very likely there are natural explanations for the events claimed to have occurred."

The bishop probably spoke more in hope than with conviction. Pious visionaries and mystery-mongers do not readily accept natural explanations.

NIK HOLE

I think that the whole concept of most religions is wrong. I cannot believe that a being able to create a universe for others has such an ego problem that in return for this, it demands that we confess our wrongdoings, beg forgiveness of it and should regularly praise it.

Many of the wars or atrocities in the history of mankind, have been carried out "in the name of God". Some Muslims support murder for criticism of their religions.

The Catholic church still bans contraception, resulting in unwanted children, and possibly assisting the spread of AIDS; and most religions still blatantly fuel sexism in their opposition to women's promotion in these establishments.

No god that creates worlds for others and speaks of the kingdom of heaven or further enlightenment can possibly advocate these things.

So far my experience of religions has not been positive. The only religion that interests me at present is Buddhism — due to its unstructured personal nature. Communal religion is of a detrimental effect to humankind. I believe that if religion is to be practised at all, it should be practised alone, and should be a personal thing.

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Nicolas Walter

BLASPHEMY ANCIENT
& MODERN

A meticulously researched and cogently argued case against an outmoded and discriminatory law. The Freethinker

As Nicolas Walter makes clear in this excellent critical history of blasphemy, extending the blasphemy laws would give all religious beliefs and ideas a privileged status . . . protected from the normal cut and thrust of free intellectual debate. Tribune

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Family Planning—Brazilian Style

G. N. DEODHEKAR

A truly incredible story has come out of Brazil, resulting from its population explosion. Brazil is, of course, a Roman Catholic country, and contraception by artificial means is anathema to the Roman Catholic Church. It has no objection to artificial teeth, eyes, limbs or hair — only to contraception by artificial methods, which happen to be the most effective. No wonder Brazil's population grows by leaps and bounds, especially in the slums.

Brazilians are so completely under the domination of the Catholic Church that the Government is inhibited from adopting a deliberate and energetic policy of population limitation. Even the "revolutionary" theologians who champion the cause of the poor do not seem able to pluck up enough courage to challenge the church on its thoroughly illogical opposition to contraception.

Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's largest city. It has sandy beaches, a harbour, wide roads, colonial and modern buildings, night-clubs and restaurants. It also has, on one of its hills, an enormous statue of Jesus Christ, emphasising the all-pervasive Roman Catholic atmosphere of the city. The slopes of the hills, however, are covered with shanty towns, teeming with hundreds of thousands of people. These slums are hotbeds of violence, drug-pushing and every other crime. They abound in children, many of whom are reduced to scavenging in rubbish dumps for food,

and petty thieving. In their search for drug pushers the police receive no assistance from the slum children, many of whom are themselves are themselves involved in criminal activities.

It is estimated that there are seven million street urchins in Brazil, a large proportion of them in Rio. Traders, hoteliers and many citizens regard them as a menace. As carnival time approaches, pressure to clear the streets of urchins increases. Police squads, it is alleged, have taken to killing the street children. Around ten young bodies are found every week with bullet wounds and handcuff marks. The police blame these killings on drug gangs and former members of the military police acting as vigilantes. A Brazilian author, Gilberto Dimenstein, says "the most astonishing fact is that most people in Brazil quietly support any method of getting rid of these children."

We can be indignant that the police or vigilantes or drug gangs can be involved in the killing of street children and that these murders are approved by ordinary citizens. But the largest measure of indignation should be directed at the Roman Catholic Church which forbids contraception and abortion in the name of "sanctity of life". The population explosion and the social problems it causes are an inevitable result of this illogical and heartless ideology.

Doing the Gods a Favour

JANE MARSHALL

Their calls have not faded away after all. Tighten up the blasphemy law! Extend it to all the major religions in our society! Enforce it rigorously!

The guardians of the faiths know what they want. Thou shalt not abuse, insult or vilify any person's religion, God or prophets! Thou shalt not preach any scurrilous or subversive doctrine! Thou shalt not disseminate any unauthorised version of the spiritual truth! Thou shalt not offend any person's religious sensitivities!

But would they really be doing their gods a favour? Have they sat down and considered how the strict implementation of their demands would affect a pluralist society?

The time of the singing of the fundamentalists would come, and the voice of the bigot would be heard in our land. So many utterances would cause so much offence to so many people that the air would be filled with the cries of the tormented and the courts would be filled with the fulminations of the faithful. The overworking of the word "sacrilegeous"

would be matched only by the overworking of the censors. All religious "territory" would be out of bounds to the public, and all trespassers prosecuted. Religion would only be tolerated if practised in private amongst consenting congregations.

Religions would be mutually heretical. Every sacred text would cause offence to someone or other. The Koran, the Rig Veda, "Away in a Manger", you name it, all would be swept off the shelves. No one, even amongst the faithful, especially amongst the faithful, would dare question, reinterpret or demythologise the mysteries contained in the copies still in circulation. No new insights would be gained. No new doctrines would evolve. Dogma would remain forever in a timewarp.

Books, paintings, films, anything belonging to the world of the imagination would necessarily be suspect. Whether overtly religious or not, they would all be open to question. Sacred or profane? Elaborate metaphor? According to whom. Dispatch it to oblivion! Sensitivities must be protected. (Pity about those charming religious artefacts. Still, all in a good

cause.)

The gods would be tidied away into the neat little moulds of the respective orthodoxies from which they have recently begun to abscond. Their resilience would be weakened, their growth impaired and their voices muted.

Those who want to do the gods a favour should be

campaigning for the *abolition* of the blasphemy law. Then there would not only be the possibility of all hell breaking loose, but all heaven too. The free flow of thoughts and ideas is as necessary to the lifeblood of the believer as to the non-believer. To tamper with the flow would diminish the potentiality of each one of us, believer and non-believer alike.

The *Freethinker* Fire of 1886

ELLEN WINSOR

After emerging from Holloway Goal in 1884, G. W. Foote continued editing *The Freethinker* and he also created a successful publishing business. But in July 1886, the Great Arsonist in the Sky inflicted considerable damage on the Clerkenwell Green building from which Foote conducted his campaign against superstition and priestcraft.

The Freethinker, like much that was best in the free-thought movement of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, began its life at 28 Stonecutter Street, London. This cramped publishing office and bookshop had provided an outlet for free-thought publications as well as being a headquarters for the National Secular Society and a meeting place for radicals.

By 1886 G. W. Foote's brainchild and creation was doing sufficiently well for him to move his printing and publishing business to new and more spacious premises at 14 Clerkenwell Green. Here Foote had his office, but the premises extended to a full five floors and there were facilities for storing published material as well as for William Ramsey's printing plant on the ground floor and in the basement. Both he and Foote had invested in this printing business so that they were not at the mercy of others who could be constrained upon by the authorities to fail to produce particularly "strong" issues of *The Freethinker*. This had already happened once in 1882, although a skeleton substitute copy was issued on that occasion.

The scale of the Clerkenwell Green operation can be partly explained by the fact that Foote's own ambitions always went well beyond *The Freethinker*. Not only did he write much that was published in pamphlet and book form, but he had made and continued to make successive attempts to launch a variety of other journals designed to appeal to a wider audience than that provided for by *The Freethinker*. *Progress* (1883-87) was only the best known of these ventures.

Foote's struggles with *The Freethinker* were never easy. A year's imprisonment for blasphemy had been just the worst of his problems, but at least this had been inflicted on him by an enemy he knew about and could prepare for. The events of the morning of Friday, 23 July 1886, were worse because they

were unexpected.

A fire broke out in one of the floors above Foote's offices and spread rapidly throughout the building. Apparently the firemen arrived quickly and the conflagration lasted only a couple of hours, but the damage was dire. Foote's store of books, pamphlets and unprinted paper was devastated to the extent that hardly anything could be salvaged. The damage from the water used to extinguish the fire was as severe as that from the fire itself. Some tons of printed paper fell through a large hole in one of the floors. The fate of the printing plant was less serious and it was restored to working order. Fortunately, the type which was already set could be removed elsewhere for printing and the journal retained its record of never having missed an issue. This feat remains true 104 years later.

The financial consequences were most serious. Foote owned the publishing stock which was destroyed, and he had invested his savings in it. It guaranteed him a share of his income. Matters were much aggravated by the difficulty which he had had in obtaining insurance cover. Several companies had turned him down due to the provocative nature of his publications, and at the time of the fire he found himself in dispute with his insurer, the City of London Fire Insurance Company. The dispute concerned a much increased premium, and although Foote continued to insist that the policy was fully paid up until the end of the year, it seems that he recovered nothing from this source and never took the matter to law.

The editor of *The Freethinker* resorted to an appeal for financial assistance. The scheme seems to have been moderately successful and involved supporters loaning funds on the understanding that they would receive an annual interest rate of five per cent. Foote promised to reprint as many of the works which had been destroyed as he could and he was as good as his word. However, not all the books were republished. For example, the second volume of Foote's and J. M. Wheeler's *Crimes of Christianity* was not, although it had only appeared for the first time a couple of weeks before the fire. Today, there seem to be no copies in existence.

Despite all, Foote carried on and was clearly unimpressed with the suggestions of divine interven-

tion which were made by his traditional opponents. There was more than a little edge in his "Acid Drops" column a few weeks later when he reported on a fire at the *Christian Commonwealth's* office and wrote: "Kindly Christians who rejoiced over the destruction of the *Freethinker* office and stock by fire as a judgment from above, can now ask themselves why God sent a similar disaster to his own friends."

God Finally Incarnate?

DANIEL O'HARA

The December 1989 issue of *The Freethinker* carried Dr Beverly Halstead of the University of Reading's highly critical review of three books on science and religion by the Reverend Dr John Polkinghorne, FRS, now President of Queen's College, Cambridge. I sent a copy to Dr Polkinghorne, with the following letter.

* * *

Dear Dr Polkinghorne,

I wonder whether you saw Beverly Halstead's review of three of your books. In case you did not, I have pleasure in enclosing a copy.

I am currently re-reading Antony Flew's classic, *God and Philosophy*, which I first read soon after it was published in 1966, about two years before I was myself ordained in the Church of England, thus indicating that the good work it did in my case took some time to accomplish, and that there are indeed formidable psychological obstacles preventing the abandonment of theism.

I think you would find Professor Flew's work an admirable antidote to the "progressive disintegration of the intellect" which Dr Halstead discerns in your recent theological writings.

Daniel O'Hara

* * *

A short time after, I received the following reply:

Dear Mr O'Hara,

Thank you for sending me a copy of *The Freethinker*. I had, in fact, already read Beverly Halstead's review. I thought it crude knockabout stuff with no attempt to engage the argument. (One doesn't expect agreement, but I think one can hope for seriousness.) Antony Flew is a different kettle of fish.

John Polkinghorne

* * *

To this I responded as follows:

Dear Dr Polkinghorne,

I'm sorry you found Beverly Halstead's review "crude knockabout stuff with no attempt to engage the argument". I think the reason sceptics are

generally (and perhaps advisedly) reluctant to "engage the argument" is that they do not accept your premises.

It seems to me that your whole burden is to harmonise science and Christian dogma, having previously assumed the truth of Christianity (which you presumably feel assured of on grounds that you are not prepared to submit to critical scrutiny).

Thus Dr Halstead rightly claims that you "take on board all the amazing prehistoric mythology that Christianity has so proudly preserved for us as a living fossil".

Professor Arthur N. Strahler, formerly of the Geology Department at Columbia University, makes a similar point in a personal communication to me: "Recently I received Polkinghorne's new book, *Science and Creation*, which I began to read with an open mind, but soon became turned off by his long-winded exposition on the inerrancy of the Christian theology. His privy knowledge of God is so detailed that I made the marginal note: 'surely Polkinghorne must be God himself, else how could he possibly know so much about God?' So God has finally appeared incarnate! This will put a full stop to debates over God's existence."

How can you reasonably expect sceptics to "engage the argument" of your theological works when they very reasonably reject the uncritically accepted premises upon which your whole theological enterprise depends?

Perhaps the most significant of these false premises is the notion that matter is mind-dependent, when it now seems perfectly clear that the exact converse is true. It is the uncritical adoption of this false premise which leads you to the preposterous conclusion that "the cosmos is not self-sustaining but is kept in being by a continuous act of will by its Creator".

As a scientist (although I know this is not your special field) you should be aware of the advances in our understanding of evolution (as exemplified by Richard Dawkins' popular book, *The Blind Watchmaker*) which quite clearly demonstrate the redundancy and illegitimacy of all teleological explanations. (Even Darwin knew as much by the time he published *The Origin of Species*.) Without teleology, theology is broken-backed, as Antony Flew, approaching from different angles, so clearly demonstrates.

The question you need to address, therefore, is not "How can I square my scientific knowledge with my religious beliefs?", but "Why do I need religious beliefs in the first place?" Telling answers to this sort of question are likely to be found in the realms of morbid psychology, not in the natural sciences, history, philosophy or theology.

My challenge to you is simply this: re-examine your premises. As you do, you will find that they crumble to dust, and your arguments fall with them.

No matter how craftily contrived the superstructure, if the foundations are rotten, the edifice is worthless! I would have expected every scientist to know this.

Daniel O'Hara

Dr Polkinghorne responded as follows:

Thank you for your letter. One can't do everything at once. If you ever come across a book of mine called *The Way the World Is* you will see how I approach the question of the reasonableness of the Christian faith. I certainly do not hold it "on grounds that I am not prepared to submit to critical

scrutiny". As for mind and matter, that is precisely the topic I try to address in Chapter 5 of *Science and Creation*.

John Polkinghorne

I have not found Dr Polkinghorne's book, *The Way the World Is*, but I did hear and record the six talks he gave under the same general title on BBC Radio 4 during Lent. In these talks, he has not provided any evidence that he is prepared to submit the grounds on which he holds his beliefs. We may therefore quite reasonably reject his specific disclaimer.

Those Wonderful Sayings

R. J. CONDON

One of the more naive arguments for the historical existence of Jesus is derived from the wonderful sayings recorded of him in the Gospels. Nobody but Jesus could have uttered them, therefore he really lived. One gets used to this from Christians, but it is eyebrow-raising to encounter it, as recently happened, in an otherwise unexceptionable *Free-thinker* article. The Evangelists reproduce the words of angels and devils in the same matter-of-fact way as those of Jesus. Did they exist too?

The Gospels are records of beliefs, not history. From beginning to end we are in a fantasy world, where anything can happen and often does. We might, in the manner of David Strauss, pick out the parts which seem reasonable and assume them to be factual, but they would still need verification and that cannot be done.

How could the sayings of Jesus have been preserved until the Gospels were written, a century later for all we know? Was there a shorthand reporter always in attendance? Perhaps their originality was so sublime that those who heard them never forgot them, and passed them on by word of mouth. In fact they were not new, for they had all been said before, and any educated Jew or Greek could have made a collection of them.

Much of the New Testament teaching is in parable form, a method of discourse then common throughout the East. Some of the parables ascribed to Jesus are found in the Talmud, the earlier part of which records the words of notable rabbis of the first century. These would have been unlikely to have borrowed material from the despised upstart sect of Christians. Besides, the rabbis' versions of the parables make better sense and morality than their Gospel counterparts.

Let us take one example, the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. In Matthew chapter 20 an employer pays the same sum to those who work only one hour and those who put in a full day.

When the latter complain the master replies: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" This offends our sense of justice, unlike its Talmudic form: "A king . . . hired many workers, and among them was one who did more work than was needful. What did the king do? He took him and walked about with him. When evening was come, the labourers came to receive their hire, and he gave unto this one the same wage as unto the others. And the labourers murmured and said: 'We have worked the whole day and this man hath worked but two hours, yet he hath given him the same wage together with us.' Then the king said to them: 'This man hath done more in two hours than ye have done during the whole day.'"

The Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew, becomes the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. Matthew has Jesus climbing the mountain to escape the multitude, taking with him the four disciples he then has and preaching to them only. By the end of the Sermon the evangelist has forgotten this and tells us the "people" were astonished at what they heard, as well they might be. Luke has a "great multitude" from the start. One cannot be true; more likely both are fiction.

On examination this discourse, so admired by Christians, turns out to be nothing more than a compilation of stale platitudes. It opens with the Beatitudes, all of which can be found in the Old Testament, the Talmud, or in pagan moralists. Thus, "Blessed be ye poor" is matched by Epictetus: "Any person may live happy in poverty."

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" is taken directly from Psalm 37, while "Blessed are the merciful" echoes Proverbs 11, 17: "The merciful man doeth good to his own soul". Jesus prohibits lusting after women as a new commandment, yet it is in Proverbs 6, 25 and elsewhere.

(continued on page 111)

BOOK

BELIEVING BISHOPS, by Simon Lee and Peter Stanford. Faber and Faber, £11.99

The authors of this book are committed Christians. One is Editor of the *Catholic Herald*; the other is Professor of Jurisprudence at Queen's University, Belfast. This reviewer of their book is a committed unbeliever who categorically rejects all religious categories. The bias on both sides is obvious, but bias stems from studied convictions, and is not mere prejudice. Such a book as this can be instructive to an unbeliever, and make this one think again about some things.

However, "Christian" is a very broad term. Innumerable sects and divisions demonstrate that. This book deals exclusively with Anglicans and Roman Catholics, against the background of succession to Canterbury and Westminster, the first imminent, the second not remote. The book is about bishops, their role today and some of the chaps on the job, because that is where Primate material is looked for. "Christian" is a broad term partly because it involves two broad contrasts, one modern, the other original. The modern one is the contrast between the Western world as it was two thousand years ago and the world as it is today. To be a Christian is virtually to ignore the difference, without being aware of it: to be naive, in the state of ignorance that generally prevailed at that time, despite the sophistication of Greek philosophy. The original contrast is in the ambiguity of the faith and of the Church, whether the Church is in the world for the sake of the world or for the sake of the elect. The "religious life" was once exemplified by anchorites and then by monks, a withdrawal from the world. Protestants shifted their accommodation to the world to the notion of stewardship, a daily accountability to God for their work in the world. The world was both God's creation and cursed by man's disobedience. There was only a remnant of Israel that remained faithful, that is, obedient: the rest were ripe for destruction. These two broad contrasts involve all believers today, concealed by remaining implicit, hardly ever acknowledged and dealt with. I kept finding an embarrassing naivety at the heart of the openness and honesty of these authors.

The blurb ends: "this book provides a unique insight into the relationship between church, state and society". On the whole, it does; by interviewing prominent bishops, critically examining their outlook, style, behaviour, and influence; by discussing Anglican and Roman positions on sensitive issues; and by taking it all in the context of the media, publicity focused on some bishops. In spite of

FREETHINKER

dwindling congregations, a slump in the number and quality of candidates for ordination, and unsustainable rulings by hierarchies on personal conduct, the authors maintain that this is not a secular society. That is their basic assumption. In the context of discussion on blasphemy, they quote the 1980 statistics for religious adherents in the UK: Church of England 9,628,000; Catholic 3,182,000; Methodist 651,139; United Reformed 222,049; Baptist 210,646; Jews 466,000; Muslims 830,000; Hindus 380,000; Sikhs 210,000; Buddhists 121,000. This adds up to something near one-third of the total population.

It is important to distinguish clearly between a secular society and a secular State, for it is not a merely formal distinction. The secular State, with a plural society, is what is fundamental. The Soviet Union, with an enforced collective ideology that includes atheism, is not a secular State — although this is changing. The UK, which includes England with an established Church, has been constitutionally a secular State for some 160 years. India and the USA, societies overwhelmingly more religious than the UK, are constitutionally secular States. Enforcement of a collective ideology is the criterion of distinction, and applies to the State. The extent of religious belief and practice in the society is secondary. This has practical bearings of central importance.

It has become apparent that it is easier to dis-mantle Communism than Christianity — or Islam. Christianity has not been recently in power, with death camps or death squads or torture chambers. It is no use dwelling on that aspect of its history. Popular fear and resentment is not a sensitive nerve in regard to Christianity — unless in Beirut. Reading through the book, I marked nearly every page for comment. I shall try to select salient points which raise major questions, or on which they are wrong, or from which we have something to learn.

The authors begin by identifying Christian faith with the imitation of Christ, what he did and what he was. Christians are also enjoined to treat all others as if they were Christ. The Church and its bishops were instituted to help individuals to live this way. Mother Teresa is given as an example: she begins her day by taking communion at Mass; if she needs that, weaker brethren *a fortiori*. The difficulty in this simplicity is that the person of Jesus is an enigma, a maze of unresolvable questions. In any case, would it be sensible to imitate a character taken as admirable in his context, such as Gandhi, for example, or St Francis? Jesus reiterated the maxim: treat your neighbour, anyone else, as yourself. That raises questions, but is far

REVIEW

simpler and more practicable than model yourself on the model.

With that assumption about Christianity, how do they apply it to their chosen bishops? It is first applied to their conduct in their dioceses, what they do on the ground in relations with their clergy, their parishioners, and the population in general; their pastoral duties as followers of the Good Shepherd. I have long thought the analogy was singularly unfortunate, considering the purpose of the shepherd's care and the destiny of the sheep. The authors themselves make this observation, with the further point that it is remote from experience in a modern urban preaching context; but with no further reflection that this would apply to most that concerns their faith. In another context, which lists some of the things bishops are concerned with, as reported in the press during one week, "the law and morality of Sunday horse-racing" is included, with an exclamation mark. Yet in *Exodus* this is the most reiterated of all the commandments, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy". To have to be faithful to such a legacy, it is impossible to remain consistent and realistic. As late as the 19th century, Ruskin's parents on Sunday turned the pictures face to the wall.

However, the book is mainly concerned with the public image and influence of the bishops today, how they appear to the press and on television and what effect they have on politicians and politics, directly and indirectly, through their influence on the thinking and voting of their flocks. This divides into matters of general Government policy, and their particular concerns about sexual behaviour, genetic manipulation and experiment, blasphemy, and education.

The authors believe Church leaders have been the only effective opposition to Thatcherism. They mention Archbishop Runcie's frustration of Mrs Thatcher's hope of celebrating the Falklands victory in a traditional British manner; the Anglican Report *Faith in the City*; the Bishop of Durham's stigmatisation of current social policies as evil. "In truth, it is the challenges of the Anglican bishops, notably the Bishop of Durham but also the Bishop of Liverpool, which have shaped Thatcherism." They mean that in opposing her policies on principle, they have exposed their underlying principle, and not let them get by as pragmatism or expediency. They have shown them to be perverse.

In their interview with Jenkins of Durham, he told them that a main reason why the Church had to be the spokesman of the poor "had to do with the way in which, in the OT, the poor are seen as a significant discerning point in a sort of prophetic

utterance", which was about justice in a society. One is reminded of Gladstone's political conversion. He was, and remained, a strict High Churchman, but he learned to see in ordinary people the corrective of corruption by power or wealth of those in high places, in Church or State. This was his reason for identifying himself with democracy when the tide was against it. Victims of the Thatcher tide were its judge, through their spokesmen the bishops who grabbed the headlines.

God's gift to the media is the frequent spectacle of an old, celibate Catholic bishop pontificating on sex. Such gifts, it must be said, come thick and fast, like manna from heaven. . . . So the media are able to portray both kinds of bishops as ludicrous figures: Catholic bishops talking about a subject of which they know nothing, Anglican bishops refusing to come down off their fences and say anything which could not be said by a secular tabloid agony aunt. Catholic bishops say "No" to everything, Anglican bishops say, "It all depends on what you feel to be right".

The Editor of the *Catholic Herald* and his colleague, having had their fun, like the Editor of *The Free-thinker*, unlike him, go on to account sympathetically for the views on matters of conscience of the Anglican and Roman churches, which sometimes puzzle them, but which are substantially their own.

On contraception, they mention the Commission set up by Pope John XXIII at the Vatican Council to advise him on family planning. The Commission was enlarged by his successor. Cardinal Heenan, one of its Vice-Presidents, told me, before the Pope made his decision, that their Report would strongly recommend allowance of modern methods of birth control. When, after agonising hesitation, the Pope issued his long awaited encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*, its message of No Change caused consternation — and rebellion. It was a most striking example of the extent to which the Church is ruled by the past. What is incomprehensible in the book is that the authors seem to go on to identify the Pope's reactionary decision with the teaching of the bishops, in spite of their Report in the Commission.

A document of the Vatican Council stated that spouses "must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive towards the Church's teaching which authentically interprets the law in the light of the gospel". What is this "divine law"? Even the theologians on the Commission who supported the existing condemnation of artificial contraception had to admit that they could not show that this was immoral simply on the basis of natural law. They could only defend their position by reference to the authority of past teaching.

On abortion, the Catholic Archbishops of Great

Britain issued a statement in 1980 which put their position explicitly in the general context of their stand on help for the needy and deprived. After listing their concern for race relations, violence, the housing problem, disarmament, the disadvantaged, and minorities, they went on:

These developing human lives may be unborn and silent but they are already our neighbours living in our midst and are part of our human family. They need to be defended. . . . Unborn children in Great Britain are today a legally disadvantaged class; they are weak; they are a minority . . . no law should countenance discrimination by the strong against the weak.

This assimilation of an embryo to citizenship leaves one in despair of argument.

The authors examine the Vatican's instruction in 1987 which stated the Catholic bishops' official line on matters discussed in the Warnock Report of 1984.

The bishops were against embryo experimentation, against various techniques of *in vitro* fertilisation such as surrogacy or artificial insemination by a donor, against contraception and against abortion.

They were puzzled by some of the arguments adduced in support of these negations. They think the bishops should speak in plainer language, and should put the discussion of all these matters in the wider context and conditions of modern family life.

On blasphemy, well before Rushdie's book, the Anglican bishops had published a Report recommending that the existing common law offences be abolished and replaced by a new statutory offence that would protect all religions. By this they would conciliate the ethnic immigrant minorities of a different faith. "They cherish the ethnic and religious minority communities in the UK precisely because such groups hold religious values so dear." The authors don't plead for the withdrawal of Rushdie's book. They do plead for some way of reassuring the Islamic community here that they are valued, and not scorned. Legally, they would like the law against incitement to racial hatred to be extended to include incitement to religious hatred, which is prohibited in Northern Ireland. "We should stress that we believe that Rushdie would have been innocent of any such intent or charge. Our point is that the debate should have been on those terms."

Appearances on TV, interviews, responses to reporters' questions, articles and letters in newspapers, name and fame by publicity, are not considered the most telling form of public influence exerted by prominent bishops. Some have the ear of politicians, and cultivate a personal relationship. Most politicians are believing Christians, willing to listen to theological arguments, as well as prepared

to think of the votes of a religious constituency. They show Cardinal Hume as working in this way, having himself an establishment background. But there are also other ways and other fronts. The most conspicuous recent example was the performance of the Bishop of London in the Lords on the Education Bill. He was determined to reverse the relegation of religion's place in schools. His skill, research information, and stamina in the Lords' debates succeeded in getting Kenneth Baker to reverse his decision to exclude religion from the core curriculum, "while later in the debate the Bishop successfully united the Christian peers spread across Labour, Democratic and Conservative benches with Independents, to defy the Secretary of State and insist on a specifically Christian content in morning assemblies in schools". He also influenced Kenneth Baker by personal persuasion. All the years of patient work in broadening and liberalising the working of the 1944 Act in practice, with the cooperation of organised RE teachers, were ignored and overridden. The result has been totally confusing, and the cause of much resentment in schools. It is an example of arbitrary and ignorant public conduct by a strong-minded churchman. The authors do not see it in that way. Cardinal Hume intervened personally and decisively to get his own way in connection with the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, where he was opposed by the parents, given their chance of choice and power by the Kenneth Baker. This time it was John MacGregor of the DES who had to give way.

On the question of the ordination of women and of women bishops, the authors have no doubt that the demand is unstoppable, and that this will come in Roman Catholic as well as Anglican churches. They are highly critical of Runcie's failure to make a decision and give a lead, since in other Anglican provinces the practice is established.

Having shown in the Anglican and the Roman contexts the conventional ways in which the top appointments are made, they conclude:

But the Holy Spirit is certainly not spoiled for choice. He has his work cut out. Suppose you were choosing a new chief executive for the English operation of a multi-national company, or a new Prime Minister. . . . Then imagine that you disqualified all women, all married men, everyone under the age of fifty and over the age of sixty-five. If you further required that they must have spent their entire lives working on a variety of unrelated jobs, all unpaid (e.g. bishop's secretary, rector of a seminary, chaplain to the armed forces, possibly even a parish priest), then you would expect a small field of candidates. That is the prospect facing the Catholic church in its search for a successor to Cardinal Hume. The head-hunting for the Anglican church's next leader is a little less demanding (non-celibates will be considered), but still difficult.

Their own quest concludes in the last sentence of the book:

A bishop with the prayerful spirituality of Cardinal Hume, the theological insight of the Bishop of Durham, and a combination of the Liverpool bishops' concerns for the voiceless and their ability to be effective voices, such a bishop would be our ideal model.

They deserve full marks for their discerning portrayal of the Bishop of Durham: a devout Christian and churchman, not a crypto-humanist; in theology, a man of learning, highly intelligent and a prophet without honour, not a maverick; in pastoral care, a senior church leader who mixes freely with the people in his diocese, and speaks up for them against a Government responsible for their plight.

It is surprising that they have nothing to say about divorce, in connection with family life. For the Lord Chancellor is considering a Law Commission's proposals for a revision of the law, not to make it more rigorous, but to try to make it more civilised, and take away recriminatory conditions which have exacerbated the pain and conflict.

They say in connection with the Abortion Act of 1957 introduced by David Steel that "if you argue as if the law is the central issue, then when the law is against you, you appear to have lost the moral issue also. It is a much better strategy to emphasise the distinction between the law and morals so that the church can maintain its call to moral rectitude, whatever the law might for its own practical reasons appear to condone." This is a key sentence for the argument between believers and unbelievers. "The moral issue", "morals", "moral rectitude": there is an underlying assumption here that there is a moral high ground which they occupy, above their opponents. They must be pulled down to the low ground of special pleading, shown to be abusing a universal premise by an absolute and arbitrary application. It is monstrous that the "pro-life" lobby should suggest or imply that they are the moral party, and their opponents are *ipso facto* immoral. The reverse is nearer the truth. A truly ethical judgement weighs all the relevant considerations in their bearing on the defined issue. The appropriate abstract moral principle operates in this concrete context. To take a universal moral principle, generally agreed and necessarily abstract, and apply it absolutely without regard to any other consideration, is not an ethical judgement, but a travesty. To assume that this is to take the high moral ground independent of law is a pathetic illusion based on ethical ignorance. We must rub this in when we argue our case in these matters.

H. J. BLACKHAM

LETTERS

"RELIGION" AND "LIFE STANCE"

Kindly allow me to comment on David Tribe's review of Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion, by Paul Kurtz (June). As one would expect, it is graceful and apt. In particular he has correctly diagnosed my response to Kurtz's references to "life stance". But I do not feel that he has quite got to the bottom of this, or the word "religion", and I would therefore like to comment on these contentious matters — in particular because Tribe has rather added to this quite unnecessary confusion.

The confusions over the word "religion" were sorted out effectively in a resolution by the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union at its meeting last summer:

Being concerned about the confusion and contention sometimes caused by the words "religion" and "religious". THIS BOARD wishes to place on record the following points which can be agreed by all Humanists:

(a) Some Humanists use the word "religion" as roughly equivalent to "life stance"; others take it to imply some theistic or non-naturalistic reality.

(b) Those Humanists who use the word "religious" to describe themselves or their organizations do not imply that their Humanism accepts any theistic or non-naturalistic realities.

(c) In the sense of "religion" which implies "accepting a god", Humanism is not a religion; in the sense of "religion" meaning "life stance", Humanism is a religion.

(d) There is disagreement among Humanists about which is the "true" or "appropriate" meaning of the word "religion".

There is therefore no excuse for contention over whether Humanism is a religion or not; the dispute is over words not substance. There is of course important contention over the best Humanist strategy for the use of the word; and there I am firmly on the side of those who use the word in the specific sense which implies a "god" and excludes Humanism.

Incidentally, Kurtz is simply wrong to think that one must deny that Humanism is a religion, if one is to be able to rebut the claim that evolution must not be taught in US schools because it is based on Humanism. And of course in Britain the advancement of Humanism is charitable, and Humanists are making good headway with securing the recognition of Humanism in schools, without claiming that Humanism is a religion.

The other point where clarification might be helpful concerns the relation of "life stance" and "eupraxophy". An analogy with biological taxonomy may help: life stance is at the family level, religion and eupraxophy are at the genus level; Christianity and Humanism are two species under religion and eupraxophy respectively. Here I am (of course!) using "religion" in the sense I would wish — and in this I am in agreement with Kurtz. So one may put the main point another way: a religion is a life stance which includes reference to "god" or some such; a eupraxophy is a life stance which is entirely naturalistic.

One does not "need" the word eupraxophy to "define" Humanism any more than one "needs" the word religion to "define" Christianity.

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

THEOSOPHY AND TRICKERY

It would be good if the General Secretary of the Theosophical Society could, for a while, lower her eyes from Truth with a capital "T" to regard truth with a small "t". Perusing a dictionary might aid her in this more mundane quest.

All notions are by definition "preconceived" once they are expressed, but "prejudice" comes from the Latin meaning "advance judgement". It refers to a judge deciding a case new to him/her without hearing the evidence.

Historical characters are not however new cases, and Jean Overton Fuller's account of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky isn't the first I've read. The conclusion that she was a charlatan was first reached by some contemporaries within the Theosophical movement and the Society for Psychical Research, who weren't predisposed to doubt her. It would have been remarkable if Jean Overton Fuller, writing 100 years after her death, were able to rehabilitate her.

As it turned out, her new biographer clarified the ways HPB did many of her tricks, though not of course recognising them as such. Essentially, they consisted in planting in advance some letters and objects in hidden locations, and producing others in front of witnesses while distracting them with a loud cry and raising one arm in the air. Letters were "precipitated" from Tibet or India when HPB or a confederate was in the area; otherwise they were posted, with lame excuses given about "conserving energy". One or two planted letters had clearly been penned the day before and failed to address questions posed subsequently. Above all, the "Masters" appeared to use the same pen, stationery and literary style, and whoever owned the pen, the other two ingredients were remarkably similar to HPB's.

Every so often it needs to be stressed that "free-thought" isn't a state of perpetual dithering by minds so "open" they are positively vacuous. In ordinary affairs we can and do come to conclusions on the basis of past evidence, while being ready to change our minds if stronger contrary evidence comes along. When claims are made that, by the laws of probability, are intrinsically unlikely and are advanced by a parade of faith rather than facts, we are entitled to reject them until overwhelming supportive evidence is produced.

Jean Overton Fuller didn't produce such evidence, but her attitude to my review was eminently reasonable. She said she had previously gleaned the impression I was an atheist and therefore expected me to be "sceptical" (from the Greek meaning "reflective") about HPB. I accept this assessment.

DAVID TRIBE, Fairlight, NSW, Australia

CONFORMITY

Cardinal Hume's remark that "one has to have a certain respect for the law but a thing can be legal but not moral" is an entirely proper thing to say. It is the basis upon which much successful opposition to authority has been founded. To deny its truth is to underwrite unthinking conformity to the law. Where we disagree with the Cardinal is that we deny that the remark has proper application to the issue he has in mind, because we think that the law in question is, so far as it goes, acceptable to secularists. We are, incidentally, at liberty to wonder whether the good man has read and understood Romans 13, 1-6 (especially in the New English Bible translation to which various British Catholic representatives were party).

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

ANIMAL SLAUGHTER IN BRITAIN

Your leader on the subject of animal slaughter (June) is a timely reminder of an uncomfortable issue most prefer to obliterate from their consciousness.

Nothing accentuates the total lack of logic and selective application of religious tenets as does ritual slaughter. The absurd logic for its introduction has long since been exposed to the satisfaction of all but the unthinking or minds enslaved by dogma. Equally irrational except on grounds of political expediency is the Government's intention merely to tinker with the technicalities of this barbarous practice. This against the recommendation of its appointed advisory council and the expressed views of the Veterinary Association notwithstanding the latter's singular unwillingness to denounce the obvious cruelties of factory farming. A total ban would have been compatible with the professed principles of the present administration and merit a modicum of credibility.

Civilised distaste for this inhuman practice however should not encourage complacency among the meat eating public for conditions in our abattoirs are a national disgrace. Four thousand sentient creatures are slaughtered every minute of a working day in the UK, often in circumstances scarcely distinguishable from ritual slaughter despite the strict procedures prescribed by law. Evidence of this and confirmation that monitoring is totally inadequate exists; doubters should arrange a visit to their local killing point. It is common knowledge that very few abattoirs in Britain satisfy the requirements of other Europeans, indicating that a reversal to the old English "shambles" would not be inappropriate. Indeed the production of so called food animals generally from birth to death is a process inspiring nothing but the deepest shame.

ROBERT BARR, Leicester

Freethinker Fund

The generosity of individual readers and local groups has enabled *The Freethinker* to meet ever increasing costs. We thank all those who have sent donations including the latest list of contributors.

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Those Wonderful Sayings

Turning the other cheek comes from Lamentations 3, 30. Giving one's cloak to he that takes one's coat is similar to the Talmudic: "If any demand thy ass, give him also the saddle". It is extremely unlikely that such a sermon was actually preached, for who in their senses could be expected to obey such injunctions?

The Lord's Prayer is offered to the Jews as something new, yet every clause in it can be found in their prayers. As a whole it appears to be a condensed form of a single prayer, the Kaddish.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 11: "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced", are found almost verbatim in a parable of Cyrus of Persia recorded by Herodotus (1, 141). "For of thorns men do not gather figs" (Luke 6) is similar to Plutarch's "We do not expect the vine to bear figs".

So we could continue, but the foregoing should be sufficient to show that the teaching ascribed to Jesus is neither new nor inspiring. We do not know who put it together, but there is evidence suggesting where it was done. According to the church historian Eusebius, the Gospels and apostolic writings were the work of the Therapeuts, an ascetic Jewish sect, of whom there were many in the Egyptian capital of Alexandria. The Great Library of Alexandria was the university of the ancient world. Most of the books then in existence could have been consulted there, so there would have been no difficulty in digging out material to put into the mouth of Jesus.

The Great Library, says Robert Taylor, was "where lazy monks and wily fanatics first found the benefit of clubbing together to keep the privileges and advantages of learning to themselves, and concocting holy mysteries and inspired legends, to be dealt out as the craft should need for the perpetuation of ignorance and superstition. . ." (The Diogenesis).

"Everything of Christianity is of Egyptian origin," asserts Taylor. With this in mind, here is a final saying to consider: "I have given bread to the hungry man, and water to the thirsty man, and apparel to the naked. . ." Matthew 25? No, The Book of the Dead!

More than 100,000 people have taken part in a demonstration in Algiers. They were protesting against an upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism.

Newspaper reports are always required by The Freethinker. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, The Freethinker, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.

EVENTS

British Humanist Association. Annual Conference at the University of Technology, Loughborough, Leicestershire, 20-22 July. Theme: A World Fit for Humans — Population and Environment. Varied social programme includes "private" showings of the banned video, Visions of Ecstasy. Details from the BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG, telephone 071-937 2341.

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 Group. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrel's Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 6 August, 8 pm. Eugene Levine and Julia Pelling: Report on the BHA Annual Conference.

The Humanist Association of Scotland. Information obtainable from Robin Wood, secretary, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

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

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 071-831 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.

National Secular Society

Sunday, 9 September

ANNUAL OUTING

The Hellfire Caves,
West Wycombe, and
Stowe Gardens

Cost (including entrance fees) £8

Details from the NSS,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL
telephone 071-272 1266

(continued from front page)

The NSS president said that if the wrecking amendments had been successful, "it would have meant an end to the IVS programme in this country, its birthplace. This would also have meant an end not only to the hopes of parenthood for many childless couples, but an end to one of the most promising paths of medical progress. It would have led to an increase in the use of animal experiments to replace that of spare human fertilised eggs, and an increase in inherited disease and disability. And all for the sake of superstition."

It is more than five years since an article by Barbara Smoker on this subject entitled "Eggs Are Not People" was published in *The Freethinker* and reproduced by the NSS as a leaflet for circulation among members of both Houses of Parliament. Just as the secularist movement pioneered the cause of family planning in the 1870s and 80s, *The Freethinker* and the NSS can claim to have taken up this cause before Progress, an organisation founded for the purpose, got off the ground. When it did, we naturally supported it.

Sharon Spiers, director of Tories for the Abortion Act, said the results showed how important it is to have the Government's blessing or tacit support for an amendment to succeed. The Government made it clear they did not want the law extended to Northern Ireland and Conservatives were told to vote against the amendment which was easily lost. Their reasoning was that no political party in Northern Ireland wanted to change the law, it would be appropriate to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to the province.

Sharon Spiers added: "Whilst the Government maintained its neutral stance for the amendments liberalising abortion in the first trimester, both Health Ministers gave a clear lead: they opposed abortion on request but supported the amendment for one doctor's signature only. Both amendments were lost, but the one-signature amendment by only 28 votes. Whilst it is frustrating to have lost such a useful change by so few votes, the result was gratifying given that little campaigning has been undertaken in Parliament for liberalising the law.

"What all the results show is that a good result needs to be worked for. Later this year we will have an excellent law for late abortions. The background to that has been much parliamentary time considering the Houghton Bill in the Lords, and debates in the Commons which have highlighted the need not to have a blanket time limit. Northern Ireland and 'on request' legislation have scarcely featured in debates and have not undergone any serious consideration. To win on these issues, the campaign needs to start now."



Bishop Queries Visions

The Medjugorje industry has experienced a slight blip which will worry the travel agency fraternity who have been raking in the shekels from gullible pilgrims. Last year over a million of them, including a large number from Britain, travelled to the village in Yugoslavia where "Our Lady" appears to six young visionaries who first reported the apparition in 1981.

Now Bishop Pavao Zanic, whose diocese includes Medjugorje, has submitted a dossier to the Vatican in which he pours cold rather than holy water on the visionaries' claims. He asserts that their stories are contradictory and describes scenes of excessive devotion at the shrine as "religious blindness". The bishop has previously dismissed the happenings at Medjugorje as "a case of collective hallucination".

Although the Yugoslavian bishops have been lukewarm in their attitude, nothing can stop the flow of visitors to Medjugorje. Not that the locals want to. Until 1981 their community was an economically depressed backwater. Since then a large church, hotels, restaurants and shops have been built. In less than ten years Medjugorje has become Yugoslavia's biggest tourist money-spinner and a top attraction on the international shrine circuit.

Allah's Dictators

A *fatwa* (religious ruling) has been issued by a large group of Afghan mullahs dictating to women on matters of dress, work, education and behaviour. They are instructed not to wear perfume, jewellery or colourful clothes. According to the mullahs, women should not speak loudly or go to classes in order to gain knowledge, even if the teachers are Muslims.

Islamic fundamentalists have resorted to terrorism in order to force educated Muslim women to stop working, particularly in places where they are likely to meet foreigners. Threatening telephone calls and letters have been received by doctors and teachers. A women's literacy centre in a refugee camp has been attacked.

According to the *fatwa*, men provide all that is needed so it is unnecessary for women to go to work. Clearly the mullahs want Muslim women to be obedient, uneducated household chattels and breeding machines.

The Pope occasionally gets his priorities right. Last month he decreed that his annual procession for "the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ" should start an hour earlier than usual. This was to allow the faithful to get home in time to see the World Cup soccer match.