

The Freethinker

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HOSPITAL CHAPLAINS DEMAND THEIR POUND OF FLESH

Anglican clergymen in Lancashire are up in arms because of a Health Authority's refusal to fund a full-time chaplain at the Victoria Hospital, Blackpool. The Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde Health Authority will not allocate the extra money — between £5,000 and £6,000 a year — to provide an Anglican chaplain at the hospital.

Gerald Wildish, general manager of the Blackpool hospital, said the administration board decided that "any increase in the chaplaincy has a low priority in relation to our shortfall of nurses and physiotherapists".

Nevertheless, despite a cash shortage resulting from Government policies, the Authority has offered to pay for twenty hours a week of a clergyman's time. Yet there is no statutory requirement for any hospital to employ a chaplain in any capacity. Only Anglicans are paid for out of Health Authority funds; other churches pay their chaplains' fees.

Canon Tony Ainsley, Vicar of St Stephen's, Blackpool, who has just resigned his part-time chaplaincy, has protested strongly against the Health Authority's refusal to employ a full-time chaplain at the Victoria Hospital. He made the extraordinary claim that "chaplains are, in fact, health officers, employees of the Health Service, subject to the same disciplines as other employees".

Canon Ainsley is very annoyed because the Health Authority had the temerity to ask the diocese for a contribution to the cost of a chaplain. "That would establish a precedent which would affect the entire Health Service," he declared.

"The principle at stake is whether the Health Service Act intends chaplains to be part of the Health Service."

Another part-time chaplain, Canon Burns, Vicar of Fulwood, Preston, added his voice to the demand that chaplains should be recognised as part of the

hospital work force. "In my view, the Victoria Hospital needs two full-timers, not one," he said.

"What can be more important than spiritual health? The trouble is that in a more secular society it isn't easy to persuade people of that."

Canon Burns was absolutely right when he said that "money is so tight in the NHS". An example of how the sick are faring under the penny-pinching Government of Margaret ("the National Health Service is safe in our hands") Thatcher comes from the Royal Marsden Hospital, London. Patients coming to the famous cancer hospital are now being told to bring their own bandages. Ten per cent fewer patients will be treated, wards taken out of commission and an operating theatre closed.

A spokesman for the Royal Marsden commented: "We all hate doing this. The cuts are a result of Department of Health instructions."

With the Health Service seriously under-funded it is scandalous that Health Authorities should voluntarily pay out large sums every year to Anglican chaplains. There is much blowing of trumpets about "meeting the spiritual needs of patients and staff", "providing pastoral care", etc. (Little is said about annoyance caused through unwanted visits by chaplains and freelance missionaries, who wander into hospital wards.) Special facilities can be extended to clergy visiting in response to a patient's request. But there is no justification for paying public money for this service. And surely staff members who wish to attend a church service or seek pastoral care can do so in their own time.

As church attendance and religious commitment decline, the clergy will increase their efforts to inflict Christian propaganda on captive audiences like hospital patients. They should not receive financial encouragement to do so.

The Freethinker

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NEWS

DECADENT EVANGELISM

Proclamations like "Jesus is Alive!" and "Come Back to God!" are as the call of the wild to evangelical Christians. So of course there is considerable excitement over the latest gimmick, a project known as the Decade of Evangelism. But alas, even at this early stage there are signs of dissention in the ranks of those who believe in the same God and read the same Bible. Nothing new about that, and if past experience is any guide, the Decade of Evangelism will peter out leaving the British people still determinedly indifferent to religious claims.

Throughout the century there have been numerous crusades and attempts at religious revival by the Protestant faithful, while for many years at least one Roman Catholic organisation has been praying non-stop for the conversion of England. And what is the result of all this God-bothering? England has been converted to North Sea gas, the STD telephone system and decimal coinage, but not to Christianity. Around one-third of British people are not religious. Many of those listed as believers reject fundamental teachings like the Genesis account of creation, the Virgin Birth and life after death. The mainstream churches are hopelessly divided on issues like the ordination of women. Ironically, one of the few Christian communities that is flourishing in a muddled kind of way are the West Indians whose forbears were bought and sold as slaves, a trade that was defended (and sometimes practised) by Christian organisations and justified by biblical edict.

Evangelism means spreading the Gospel with the aim of converting people to Christianity. The fact that it is necessary to devote a whole decade to this noble cause rather contradicts the constant assertion by Christians (when it suits their purpose) that Britain is a Christian country. When questions are asked why there are compulsory religious lessons and worship of a "wholly or mainly broadly Christian character" in State schools, or why the BBC devotes vast resources to broadcasting Christian propaganda (seldom allowing the right of reply), or why there is an Established church, the answer comes parrot fashion: "Because this is a Christian country".

What is the Gospel message that will be imparted during the Decade of Evangelism? It asserts that the universe is the handiwork of a creator who made it in six days; also that he created Adam and installed him in the Garden of Eden; that Eve, who was something of an afterthought, tempted Adam and brought about "The Fall". Because of this, God

S AND NOTES

became man in the form of his own son, was crucified, arose from the dead and now reigns in heaven until the day of judgement. All this rigmarole in order that "the world through him might be saved".

Those setting great store by the Decade of Evangelism are doomed to disappointment. The Christian message is irrelevant to this decade and to the next century. There is growing awareness of the churches' historical record. Christians are lumbered with dogmas and beliefs that are contrary to scientific knowledge. They cling to a moral code that is superstition's last defence in its battle against rationalism.

Christianity is, in a word, incredible.

NEW HUMANIST, NEW LOOK

The latest issue of *New Humanist* comes with a new design and an extremely varied range of articles and reviews. (Rationalist Press Association, £1.50.)

Nicolas Walter's "Rationally Speaking" column includes an interesting piece on the centenary of the Propagandist Press Committee. The PPC later became the Rationalist Press Association.

Contents include biographical notes on Brigid Brophy and Lord Houghton, two of the RPA's Honorary Associates. An editorial is devoted to the Broadcasting Bill and there are extracts from a recent "Feedback" programme when listeners had their say about the treatment of non-religious beliefs on BBC Radio. There are articles on cults and sects (Antony Flew), Lamb and Hazlitt (Ronald Fletcher), media treatment of homosexuals (Terry Sanderson) and food and the environment (David Tribe). Vaclav Havel is interviewed by Dutch humanists.

David Pollock contributes an article on "Humanism and Worship in Schools" in which he puts the case for participation in a Standing Advisory Conference on Religious Education (SACRE). He says that in the present situation "there is no room for the 'unholier than thou' purism of a few Humanists who reject any attempt to ameliorate matters under the present deplorable law". The "unholier than thou" stricture has previously been directed at those smitten by "the essential sterility of secularism", not capital H Humanists. It is to be hoped that high expectations engendered by rubbing shoulders with the great and the godly at SACRE meetings will not turn out to be a case of all gong and no dinner.

"BLESS ME, DADDY"

It is not only Protestant televangelists' missionary work between the sheets that is causing consternation amongst American Christians. Roman Catholics have also been shaken by the "sins of the fathers" that are coming to light.

There is alarming evidence for Holy Mother Church that a large number of her allegedly celibate sons have become fathers — and not only the dog-collared kind. The result of a study carried out over a 25-year period by a priest, now a psychotherapist and university lecturer, was presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association last month. It claims that one-third of American priests flout the Church's celibacy law. Twenty per cent are sexually active with women and thirteen per cent with men. Many have fathered children and some encourage their partners to have an abortion.

We publish (by kind permission) a *Daily Star* "thought for the day" on these fascinating revelations.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"What is your sin, my child?"

"I have carried out a survey which shows that one-third of all Roman Catholic priests are not celibate."

"Your sins are forgiven you, my child. Say three Hail Marys and get up and make the breakfast."

Freethinker Fund

Glasgow Humanist Society is one of the local groups which sends a donation to the Fund every year. We thank *Freethinker* supporters there, together with those listed below.

K. R. Wootton, £1.40; Anonymous and L. Wright, £1.50 each; D. R. Buckingham, C. Jones, T. Scott, C. R. Walton and P. D. Ward, £2 each; C. A. G. Bearpark, £2.40; Anonymous, M. A. Betts and P. Proctor, £3 each; D. Christmas and S. Collis, £3; D. A. Hartley, £4; Anonymous, I. Barr, R. Bell, J. W. Carter, N. V. Cluett, J. Cresswell, J. M. Crowley, H. N. Feather, A. Glaister, R. Hopkins, K. Hudson, C. J. MacDonald, P. Payne, E. A. Whelan, C. Williams and R. G. Wood, £5 each; E. L. Deacon, M. Hill, P. Somers and O. Thompson, £10 each; R. L. Dubow, £15; N. Everett, £20; Glasgow Humanist Society, £50; Anonymous, £100.

Brendan O'Friel, Governor of Strangeways Prison in Manchester, has been promoted to be an assistant director of the prison service. Following the recent 25-day siege at Strangeways, Mr O'Friel called a press conference where he announced that Satan was behind the outbreak of rioting and destruction.

The Scandal of the Scrolls

R. J. CONDON

It is now more than forty years since a bundle of decaying parchment scrolls were discovered in a cave near the Dead Sea. The find aroused worldwide interest and even excitement when the material was identified as almost certainly belonging to the library of the Essene community at Qumran, whose monastery lay near the cave. Scholars are generally agreed that the Dead Sea scrolls were written in the second or third centuries BC, and contain among other things the earliest known texts of some of the Old Testament books.

The euphoria was short-lived. A curtain of silence descended and the most important archaeological find ever made is virtually forgotten. Now a leading academic has accused the tiny clique of scholars entrusted with the task of deciphering the scrolls of unjustifiable delay in publishing them. Professor Geza Vermes, a reader in Jewish studies at Oxford University, calls this "the academic scandal of the century" and demands that the whole of the scroll material be made available world-wide.

Other caves at Qumran have yielded material which has been published. Still to come is that from the richest of the finds, made in the fourth cave. It is not difficult to think of a possible reason for the delay. A handful of the scrolls that did get published showed many parallels between Essene beliefs and Christianity. Indeed, it was said they would make obsolete every book on Jewish and Christian origins ever written. Not all of the higher clergy are as naive as the Rt Rev George Carey, Archbishop-elect of Canterbury, who believes that God reanimated a stone-cold corpse and sent it soaring into space. We can be sure that many would have seen the scrolls as a time-bomb that could have blown their creed sky-high. There can, of course, be no possibility of the gospel story being verified.

Let us take a look at the set-up. A team of eight scholars, four of them priests, were given exclusive custody of the scrolls. Most have since retired or died, only three still being active. One has published nothing in thirteen years; several have died without producing anything at all. It would be very convenient for the religious establishment if this situation were to continue until the Dead Sea scrolls fade from memory. There must be many young and middle-aged people who have never even heard of them.

Professor Vermes feels a whole generation of experts has been denied the opportunity of working on the scrolls. The material belongs to everybody, but is treated as personal property.

Professor Robert Eisenman agrees. The Californian professor of religious studies spent a year in Jerusalem hoping to see the closely guarded scrolls, and failed. He says of the obsessive secrecy:

"I don't think it's innocent". Professor Vermes doesn't go as far as that; he believes the scroll team, or what remain of them, have lost their enthusiasm but are unwilling to relinquish the material. Why they should adopt a dog-in-the-manger attitude is far from clear.

One of the team did declare recently that there is nothing sensational in the unpublished texts. Professor Vermes comments: "No one person can declare there is nothing of interest. Very often something of fundamental significance can remain hidden until someone realises." He doesn't think these scrolls will seriously challenge Christian belief, but adds: "Obviously, I don't know. . ."

The late John Allegro was one of the scholars working on the scrolls. In his book *The Dead Sea Scrolls* he tells how he tried to counter the "regrettable delay" in publishing the texts by making public those documents entrusted to his care. He notes (1963) that other researchers have deplored the fact that "there is still a partial boycott of the Dead Sea scrolls on the part of New Testament scholars".

Allegro's summing up is worth quoting: "The main contribution of the Dead Sea scrolls to modern thought has been to remind us how ignorant we still are about the events and opinions of sectarian Judaism at the turn of the era". The scrolls, he goes on, have "brought some illumination where before was almost total darkness". They have "dispelled a number of false assumptions and opened the way to the reception of new ideas, or perhaps the rehabilitation of ideas prematurely abandoned because they did not suit our preconceptions.

"Clearing away the deadwood is the first condition of intellectual progress; but whether this generation has courage or vision to grasp the opportunities of reassessment offered by these miraculous discoveries in the Judaean wilderness remains to be seen."

A generation later, we know the answer.

Religion has caused the death of Muppets creator Jim Henson. A Christian Scientist, he refused medical treatment for pneumonia believing that prayer would lead to his recovery. Henson, who was 53, was eventually admitted to a New York Hospital but too late to save his life.

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.

Old Men Remember

COLIN McCALL

A veteran secularist recalls missed opportunities and warns against current moves in Parliament and elsewhere to placate the religious. Colin McCall is a former editor of *The Freethinker*. He was general secretary of the National Secular Society from 1955 until 1963.

If only...

As one grows older and as the governmental machine grinds ever more ominously on, one can't help looking back. Not just for nostalgic reasons — that would be pointless and indulgent — but to learn lessons for the future: to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated.

Allow me, then, to recount the first of two recollections.

If only the Blasphemy Laws had been abolished. When I first joined the movement there was a society for their abolition and, as readers know, there have been attempts from time to time to get rid of them. But no. Practising Christians may be few but they still carry weight, especially, it seems, among MPs anxious not to upset their C of E and RC electors.

As it is, the laws not only add power to the elbow of Mrs Whitehouse and her like, but to those of other faiths. Why, if Christianity is legally protected from attack shouldn't Islam enjoy similar protection?

Indeed, it isn't only the Muslims themselves who argue for an extension of blasphemy to save Allah from criticism by Salman Rushdie *et al* but, again, MPs who want to please religious (in this case Islamic) voters. Other MPs argue similarly out of well-meaning, though misplaced sympathy and legitimate concern over racism.

Clearly the case against *The Satanic Verses* would be more easily answered by the Home Secretary were he not the custodian of the laws protecting the religion by law established, if minimally observed. It is no defence to say blasphemy prosecutions are rare. Not all Christians have yet reached the "responsible" view of Sir William Harcourt who, when refusing to prosecute G. W. Foote in 1882, said:

"It has been the view for a great many years of all persons responsible in these matters, that more harm than advantage is produced to public morals by Government prosecutions of this kind. I believe they are better left to the reprobation which they will meet in this country from all decent members of society."

Some, as we know, are not content with reprobation: they want retribution.

And, had such faithful Christian MPs not also insisted on a Christian act of worship being included in the Butler Education Act and this being rein-

forced in the Baker Act, the ground would have been taken from under the feet of those Muslims who now demand their own schools.

Again, I remember the Secular Education League, supported by Unitarians as well as secularists and humanists. I think it passed out of existence because its members thought that education was "virtually secular" anyway. Alas, how mistaken they were.

If only the campaign had continued for a completely secular educational system, with the inculcation of various beliefs being left entirely to parents' wishes in out-of-school hours. Many Muslims do, of course, insist on their children learning the Koran in their spare time. But that is not sufficient. And, they say, as Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews have their State-aided denominational schools, why not us?

Some sensitive heads have virtually (that word again) dropped the religion out of assembly or broadened the occasion to accommodate Islamic and other beliefs and rituals. Both policies have incurred the wrath of some Christians, and some parents have used such policies as a pretext to having their children moved to other schools.

"As a Christian I want my child to have the Christian education to which he/she is entitled by law and isn't getting at this school."

"As a Muslim I want the Government to aid Muslim schools in the same way that it aids Church of England, Roman Catholic and other religious schools."

Yes, Mr MacGregor says to the former. No, he says, to the latter.

Yet it seems likely that Muslim schools will increase in number, causing still more social divisions.

The lesson of Northern Ireland has not been learnt: that sectarian education leads to further sectarian division. Roman Catholic children escorted to a Catholic school along one side of the street, while their Protestant counterparts proceed along the other side, are not encouraged to mix.

Religious differences are there from the beginning in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, but it is the segregation that reinforces it, whereas integration in a secular education system would loosen its hold. Never was there a clearer lesson so near at hand. But it will not be learnt by the priests on either side who deplore the sectarian killings but perpetuate the sectarianism.

And such is the nature of religious belief that the respective parties are unlikely to give an inch. The impetus must come from outside.

The "troubles" in Northern Ireland are the present generation's inheritance. What we must not do

is repeat the mistake in the case of our Muslim citizens, however sympathetically we feel towards them and oppose the racism to which they are subjected.

Muslims, of course, have the right to instil the Koran into their children outside school hours and to send their girls to single sex schools; even to set up their own schools, however regrettable we may consider that to be.

But we must draw the line at State funding. That

would be compounding past errors and causing more trouble in the future.

And the next Labour Government should be urged to remove the Christian assembly clause from the Education Act. Then the aforementioned sensitive heads could continue their non-denominational policies, and perhaps others be persuaded to do the same.

I seem, anyway, to remember that the Labour Party itself once supported secular education.

Even in Hell You Find Humanists!

KNUT BERG

The editor of *Humanist*, journal of Norway's Human Etisk-Forbund, chronicles the growth of organised opposition to the Lutheran Evangelical Church's privileged position in that country. At the same time non-believers have been developing secular ceremonies as an alternative to those which by tradition have been performed by the church.

On the railway north of the Norwegian city of Trondheim there is a station serving the surrounding farming community. The place is so small it is not found on most maps of the country, yet American tourists arrive in droves. They buy the postcard sold there, showing the old wooden station building silhouetted against a beautiful sunset which makes it seem as if the whole sky is aflame. They write to their friends and relatives, things like "I have finally arrived" or "having a wonderful time", and always ending with "wish you were here". Then they put a stamp on it and mail it in order to get the postmark of the local post office. The name of this green and pleasant little place is Hell.

Yet even in this small, bucolic spot the Human-Ethical Association of Norway has six paid-up members. Hell is one of several local communities in the municipality of Stjordal. Of Stjordal's 17,000 inhabitants, 128 are members of the Association. With its 37,000 members nationwide, out of a population of 4.1 million, this Association is probably the only humanist organisation in the world which is larger than the Catholic church in its country; and with its steady annual growth rate of two to three thousand new members it will shortly pass the Pentecostal Assemblies to become the second largest philosophical or religious community of Norway. In terms of the United States population, this would mean a national organisation of two million members.

The whole thing started in 1951, over a very Norwegian phenomenon. In the Scandinavian countries the rites of passage celebrations of birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death, have traditionally been the monopoly of the Lutheran State Church, and

have great social importance. The coming-of-age ceremony, the confirmation, takes place at the age of fourteen. Since 1915, the Danes had celebrated a civil confirmation, and inspired by this a group of Norwegian parents came together to create a civil alternative for their children, having no wish to confirm their beliefs in dogmas they did not believe in. With these 34 youths began a tradition which over the years has multiplied by more than a hundred-fold, to well over 4,000 teenagers who will celebrate their Civil Confirmation this year. This is one of our three "legs", as we present non-religious alternatives to the rites of passage traditionally given by the churches, but free from its religious dogma.

In 1956 a group of people in the Association for Civil Confirmation called a meeting to form an organisation "for those who feel that ethical problems must be solved independent of religious or metaphysical systems", and on 9 April of that year the Human-Etisk Forbund was founded. At the start it was a small and select organisation; its founding leader was Kristian Horn, a Professor of Botany, who chaired the board from 1956 to 1976 and found himself leading an organisation of doctors and professors, justices and politicians, the Poet Laureate and members of the supreme council of the Resistance during the Nazi occupation. Diverse strands of freethought tradition came together in 1956, and created a sturdy organisation, sometimes a bit dull, but very serious and very respected. It was an open forum for discussion and a community of ideas. This sense of community, of being a place for meeting other people with similar views and with an equal interest in a secular approach to ethical problems, is the second "leg" on which we stand.

As we all know, something happened during the 'Sixties, in Norway as in other countries. In 1970 there was to be a census where one was to list whether one was a member of the State church, a free church, or had no membership of any church. No less than three independent movements began calling for non-religious people to leave the State church. This brought new people into touch with

secular, humanist ideas, many of them activists in the radicalism of the day.

While public discussion in the early 1970s was dominated by the question of Norwegian entry into the Common Market, causing an ad-hoc alliance between many of the urban radicals and rural traditionalists, by the end of the decade the burning issue of the day was the question of abortion. Opposition of the State church to freedom of choice caused many women to leave. (A majority of our members in 1984 were females.) There was also a widespread reaction against church practices and beliefs in the 1970s, and it was in this period that the growth of the organisation became notable. Our resistance to ecclesiastical power and criticism of irrational belief, is our third "leg".

But we have not only ourselves to thank for our strength. What we have accomplished is difficult to understand without a grasp of the historical, legal and ideological preconditions of Norwegian society and, last but not least, the strengths and weaknesses of the religious establishment in Norway.

As the 17th-century writer Ludvig Holberg put it, Norway was Christened by "halberds cavalry". The conversion of the whole population to Lutheran Protestantism was forced by royal decree of the King of Denmark in 1537. Until 1842 no other religious society was allowed to exist in the country; in that year other Christian churches were allowed. In 1851 the religion-based anti-Semitic laws were abolished, and in 1957 the last constitutional prohibition, against Jesuits, was lifted. Yet, while religious liberty was written into our constitution by the amendment of 1979, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway remains a State church, financed by the State and with many prerogatives left over from the period of despotic rule from Denmark. Half the members of the Government are required to be members of the State church, the Ministry responsible for the public schools is called Ministry of Church and Education, and its Minister must be a member of the State church.

However, Norway has never been a completely Christian country. The infidelity of Voltaire and Rousseau, deism and theological rationalism arrived from the continent before the last wooden gods of nature worship were burned, and sacred trees were honoured up to almost the turn of the last century. Under Enlightened Despotism, as practised by Danish kings of varying degrees of sanity, a love of Enlightenment, if not of Despotism, spread among literate Norwegians of all classes. At the Constitutional Assembly of 1814, which gave Norway the world's third democratic constitution, religious toleration was voted upon twice, with the majority in favour, yet was sneaked out of the document at the final vote by opponents of the principle. The history of our national literature would consist of the orthodox and

a handful of names if our heretics, freethinkers and atheists were excluded. At the end of the last century, the national awakening was the work of modernists and positivists, finding inspiration in the anti-clericalism of the French republicans, the US separation of church and State, Unitarian religious liberalism and the great developments of Darwinism and modern science. As the political ideas of liberalism and socialism spread among the people, the opposition of the established church to these ideas caused new dissent and, in short, there existed a difference between the formal organisation of Norway as a mono-religious, Lutheran state, and the real heart and soul of the country.

As new ideas arrived in the country, there was a retrenchment in the church. From the revival of Hans Nielsen Hauge early in the 19th century, and the later reigns of fundamentalist orthodoxy of Gisle Johnsen and Ole Hallesby, the Norwegian Church and Christianity have become linked with a joyless and closed Puritanism, without any opening to culture or learning. Being a Christian is usually understood as having made a personal choice of salvation, with attendant enclosing of one's life in self-centred organisations setting strict limits to one's life, ideas and activities. This orthodox captivity of the church has caused the choice between "Christian" and "Non-Christian" to be a very clear-cut one in Norwegian society, with many opting for the latter. As churches receive a Church-tax, a grant based on church membership, the only way non-Christians can keep these sums out of the hands of priests and preachers is by joining HEF, which then receives their Church-tax instead.

The German sociologist of religion, Ernst Troeltsch, divided religious communities into three types: churches, sects and cults. If we were to use these divisions in the Norwegian situation, an unkind observer might say that the Lutherans are a church with ambitions of becoming a sect, while the Humanists are a sect functioning as a church for its members. This is both our strength and our weakness, as we face new challenges from New-Age mysticism and imported American fundamentalist revivals promising Mercedes-Benzes for the true believer.

But looking at the future we must not forget that while we have six members in Hell, we also have 43 members in the pleasant suburb of Bergen named Paradise!

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

The Lourdes Legend

JANET McCRICKARD

Of all the Roman Catholic shrines, that at Lourdes is the most successful and lucrative to the Church and civic authorities. Janet McCrickard, who visited Lourdes in 1986 and 1989, puts the allegedly supernatural happenings in their historical and sociological context.

The Christian Church traditionally likes to present the sacred events of Judaism and Christianity as unique in world religion — evidence of God breaking in suddenly on the human world, confounding all our expectations and overturning merely human ideas of what the sacred ought to be. The apparitions at Lourdes are supposed to have been something of this kind. The Virgin Mary is supposed to have chosen a humble, dirty cave to appear in, and an artless, pious shepherdess to be her messenger. According to the usual Roman Catholic account of the Lourdes happenings, the grotto was an unlikely, even extraordinary place for the Virgin Mary to appear, and Bernadette Soubirous an unlikely — although in terms of her dreamy and educationally backward nature we might say religiously suitable — candidate. Under the personal direction of the Virgin, Bernadette uncovered a spring which the Virgin brought forth from the rock in that very hour. That, at least, is the official version.

The problem with claims of uniqueness is, of course, that they can be upheld only by steadfastly ignoring context, which necessitates the withholding of information. During the commission of inquiry into the apparitions (the records of which were eventually discarded) it transpired that there had always been a spring in the grotto, as affirmed in the depositions made by the Lourdes townfolk. The River Gave which regularly flooded the cave usually covered the spring's outlet with sediment, thus it had not been seen for some time before the apparitions.

In his study of Pyrenean myth and folklore, Olivier de Marliave says that there was no spring-cult here prior to the apparitions. But this is not wholly true — or rather it is a misleading statement which de Marliave, as a good Catholic, probably felt bound to make. In the valley of the Gave de Pau, and in the neighbouring valley of Batsuguere, there were current in Bernadette's time certain folkloric traditions about the rock of Massabielle ("old hump"), its grotto and the Mont des Espelugues ("mount of caverns") of which it forms a part. People were afraid of Massabielle, regarding it as the haunt of certain spirits. (It was also the traditional meeting place for prostitutes and their clients.) De Marliave is oddly silent about this tradition. One wonders, too, why he omitted to tell us that

in mediaeval times, a tribute of herbs from Massabielle was annually offered to the Blessed Virgin at the shrine of Le Puy (which had Druidical origins).

The Church is certainly not keen for the faithful to know the folkloric background to Lourdes; that is the Basque paganism which in barely Christianised forms survived well into this century all over the Pyrenees. Numerous Basque cults combine a grotto, a *gouffre* (natural hole or chimney in the rock), a sacred spring, healing miracles and the apparition of a divine female figure. In many cases the Blessed Virgin replaces the original inhabitant, a bad-tempered weather goddess coincidentally called *Mari*, who, when she wasn't galloping across the sky in a horse-drawn wagon hurling hailstones and ball-lightening at the hapless Basques, was comfortably at home in the grotto. There, if approached with suitable ritual obeisance, she would appear and grant boons, or at least protection from her wrath. She had a penchant for carrying off young shepherdesses — numerous folk tales tell how she lures or abducts a girl into her grotto, keeping her there under enchantment and even giving her an education.

The pagan traditions of this goddess inform many of the Basque apparitions of the "Virgin Mary". Another cult feeding into the Marian stream was that of the Sun, regarded as female (*Eguski Amandrea*, "Grandmother Sun") by the pagan and Christian Basques. At Betharram, just a few miles from Lourdes, a shrine cult of the Blessed Virgin, justified by an apparition and a miraculous spring (but both spring and nearby caves formerly being pagan shrines) replaced the earlier cult of Eguski, as evidenced by the problems the Church experienced in stopping Summer Solstice rites there. At Midsummer sunrise, according to folklore, the waters of the sacred springs were made especially magical the moment Eguski's rays touched them. Thus pilgrims turned up in large numbers on 23 June, the shrine's principal feast. In an attempt to discourage pagan ideas, the Church moved the feast to the Virgin's Nativity, 8 September. But all in vain. The pilgrims responded by turning up on both dates. Other Marian shrines in the neighbourhood of Lourdes commemorated apparitions to shepherdesses, miraculous springs, etc.

Finally the Betharram cult, which might have experienced an inconvenient revival in connection with Lourdes, was suppressed by a replacement. By 1858, the year of the Lourdes visions, the Basque priest Michael Garricoits founded a religious order at Betharram. As the Lourdes cult grew, the Church found it convenient to canonise him and make Betharram his shrine. All that remains of the

semi-pagan Marian cult is the trickling spring, a bad modern statue of the Virgin, and the old Sun-goddess's emblem, the "Basque cross", transferred to St Michael Garricoits "because he was a Basque", as the shrine guardian informed me.

It is inconceivable that Bernadette was somehow miraculously preserved from all the folkloric influences which surrounded the Pyrenean peasant from his or her birth. That she was indeed aware of this background is suggested by the name she gave the lady, *Aquero*, "that thing" or "that one". While later she passively acquiesced to the Church's view that *Aquero* was the Virgin Mary, quite clearly Bernadette herself simply accepted, right at the start, that the lady in the niche was something else entirely. I suggest that the apparition and all its details derive entirely from the common, folkloric background and practice of the Pyrenees, emanating in this instance from what I would semi-Jungianly call Bernadette's "collective Pyrenean subconscious". This explains some curious features of the apparitions. Bernadette said that *Aquero* "slid down" the natural chimney in the grotto — this feature is still there — to speak to her face to face. Very odd — except that this is precisely what the pagan goddess Mari was supposed to do at similar sites in the Pyrenees.

And what about Bernadette eating weeds during the apparition? The inquiry revealed that these were *Chrysosplenium* species, once a salad-herb, and, since it grows at Massabielle, one of the herbs offered to the Virgin. Although *Aquero* told Bernadette only to wash and drink at the spring, people decided to bathe in it — following a divine impulse, according to most Catholic accounts. Hardly. Bathing in sacred waters was part of the folkloric cults, especially at Midsummer when the waters were used to treat skin diseases.

The traditional background also provides a simple, rational explanation for the hysteria which broke out among peasants and gentlefolk alike, involving all kinds of weird visions mostly seen by children playing near Massabielle. The Church later described these disturbances as Satanic competition.

Just as the Church lifts Bernadette out of her folkloric and social background, so does it detach the grotto from its inconvenient historical context. When the grotto was adapted for Christian use, excavation of its floor revealed Neolithic artefacts, indicating that it had been a sacred place for a very long time. It is hardly unusual for Christianity to take over such a place, but the silence about the Neolithic past of Lourdes is inexcusable.

In the hill above the grotto another cave, Les Espelugues, also a Neolithic site, is now used as a repository for unwanted church monuments. One searches the town in vain for a guide-book, a museum exhibit, a single reference about the import-

ance of the grotto to Neolithic people. If asked, Catholic guides are quite uneasy about it and immediately change the subject. I have been unable to trace an account (if one exists) of any archaeological records of the grotto excavations. The Church does not want people to know. And if they had discovered evidence of a female fertility cult, as attested by some of the famous "Venus" figurines found in South West France, this may explain their desire to conceal the truth.

When placed in context, events at Lourdes support the view that religions exist as a human continuum absorbed (mostly unconsciously) from the social environment, particularly in the case of an illiterate peasant tradition of the kind into which Bernadette was born. Even her use of the term "Immaculate Conception" can be sufficiently explained by previous events. The Lagues family, with whom Bernadette stayed as a shepherdess during the months preceding the apparitions, included a priest who frequently stayed at the farm. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had been proclaimed only four years earlier, so the Church is being perfectly unrealistic to claim that Bernadette could never have heard the expression.

Indeed, at the time of the apparitions she already knew that the words "Immaculate Conception" had something to do with Mary, although she did not know what they meant. The idea that the Virgin did something inexplicable by calling herself an abstract concept is also false. Long before the Lourdes apparitions popular "holy pictures", crude reproductions of Spanish paintings representing Mary as the woman of Apocalypse, bore the title "The Immaculate Conception" (the feast of the Immaculate Conception had been celebrated in Latin countries since 1476), which people mistook for a title of the Virgin herself.

Bernadette was down-to-earth in practical everyday matters, but intellectually very slow, educationally backward through no fault of her own, sickly, malnourished, in a squalid and unhappy family situation and much given to daydreams. The Church's presentation of her as a simple, pious shepherdess, living a life of holy poverty in an ideal Catholic environment, really won't do. It is time to give back to Bernadette and *Aquero*, and the springs of Lourdes and Betharram, their real social and folkloric place in the vanished world of the old Pyrenees.

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BOOKS

EUTHANASIA: THE GOOD DEATH, by Ludovic Kennedy. Chatto & Windus, £3.99

Ludovic Kennedy's "Counterblast", *Euthanasia: the Good Death*, arrived on my desk at a sensitive time. Only that week, after visiting my 86-year-old mother who has Alzheimer's Disease, I had left so blinded with tears I could hardly drive away. Tears of sorrow, tears of anger, tears of fear and tears of frustration. Sorrow because we had always been so close and now there was practically nothing left of the person I knew and loved; anger against blind "sanctity of life" arguments that force continued existence in circumstances accepted as too cruel to keep animals alive; fear that I might finish up like that and frustration because nobody could help her in the way she requested.

For as she had looked round the room that had been her home for nearly a year she once again said "what is this place. . .? where am I. . .?" and then, unusually and suddenly with a momentary return of the old intelligence in her eyes, "but who am I?" and after a pause "why am I — I'm not me any more — I've outlived myself. Why can't I just go to sleep and not wake?"

Over the years we had discussed the right to die many times as she moved from conditioned and unthinking Jewish faith to acceptance of many of my own freethinking views. All the arguments — both for and against euthanasia — are there in the Kennedy booklet. But what strikes one first and hardest is that there is really nothing new to be said on the subject. Perhaps, indeed, Aristotle wrote it all in his letter to Plato in the third century BC:

"I should not relinquish old age so long as it leaves my better parts intact. But should it destroy my faculties one by one and leave me not to live, but merely exist, then should I make an end to myself. I should not make an end to myself through fear of pain, for so to die, is to be conquered. But should I be smitten with some painful and incurable disease, then should I depart from my tottering carcase; not through fear of pain itself but because it defeats all for which I would live."

Ludovic Kennedy echoes this theme time and time again, using personal experience of his own mother's death and of others to whose relatives he has spoken. He outlines the extreme measures taken by some who, determined their lives were no longer of value to them, were refused assistance in ending it; he gives heart-rending examples of those who do not wish to continue to live. Nevertheless emotion is not the dominant factor of this polemic and rational arguments back up the illustrative true life stories.

Throughout, emphasis is on "terminating life at

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the request of the patient and no other". A draft of a "living will" is reproduced to show how this would work in practice and successful experience in Holland is described in some detail. Standard arguments as used by opponents of euthanasia are dealt with coolly and rationally.

Shortly after publication of the booklet there was a relevant debate in Parliament (8 May 1990). Roland Boyes, MP (Labour, Houghton and Washington), sought, under the Ten Minute Bill procedure, "that leave be given to bring in a Bill to permit voluntary euthanasia subject to certain conditions; and for connected purposes". Like Ludovic Kennedy in his booklet — and like me in this review — he started by outlining the real life story of his mother. He bravely went on to say how painful preparing the speech had been because it recalled his own pain at watching his mother's agonised death.

Opposing the Bill, Anthony Nelson, MP (Conservative, Chichester), appeared to sympathise deeply but immediately outlined "why it would be a grave error of judgement" and how "it would give quite the wrong impression outside the House" if Parliament was to agree. He gave his four fundamental objections to the proposal — all of which have been heard many times before and had already been dealt with logically and compellingly by Kennedy.

First came the "sanctity of life" dogma; secondly the "slippery slope" scenario so fallacious and so frequently relied on by religious apologists who don't want to come clean about their real reasons; then the supposition that the medical profession would not go along with it; and lastly, and for me most nauseatingly, "the undermining of the splendid work for the hospice movement in Britain. . .". Later in his speech, enlarging enthusiastically on this point, Mr Nelson announced that "much of the work done by hospices, the enthusiasm of the staff and the joy (my italics) they bring to families of the dying would be undermined. . .".

At this point I was forcibly reminded of the parallel argument used a few years earlier by David Alton, MP, in support of his belief that abortion should be refused on the ground of fetal handicap and his lyrical description of his joy and satisfaction in teaching handicapped children. Presumably, if God had not created suffering so that others could gain satisfaction (and a reserved seat in Heaven?) from its alleviation, man would have been put to the bother of causing even more injury and hardship than (s)he already does in order to give such opportunities for do-gooding!

The House divided on whether the Bill should be

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introduced: 35 agreed and 101 disagreed. So despite numerous polls, some of them summarised in this "Counterblast", showing growing support among doctors and the general public for allowing and assisting with good deaths, there is a great deal of educating still to be done before those of us who have no wish to suffer unnecessarily and inflict suffering on those we are closest to can end our lives when we want with dignity.

Just how far we still have to go is further illustrated by a news report in the *Guardian* of 20 July. Following a request to the Crown Prosecution Service to drop the case against a brother and sister accused of attempting to murder their mother twelve days before she died of cancer, the report finished with these words "At the hearing . . . it was said that Mrs X was terminally ill and not expected to live for more than a few days. . . Nurses discovered the entire contents of a syringe containing the painkilling drug Diamorphine had been pumped into her. *An antidote was given and she was saved*". Did the journalist have his tongue in his cheek when he wrote that last sentence? I think not!

Reading Ludovic Kennedy's well written, easily read, compassionate and rational booklet should be a must both for those who are already supporters of voluntary euthanasia and those who dogmatically oppose it. For supporters it is an invaluable aid to mustering facts and presenting the arguments; for the opposers it might force a gleam of light into their closed minds.

DIANE MUNDAY

SHATTERED VOWS: EXODUS FROM THE PRIESTHOOD, by David Rice. Michael Joseph, £15.99

Though he left the priesthood and the Dominican Order to which he had belonged for more than twenty years in 1977 in order to marry, David Rice, now a Dublin-based journalist, has never seriously questioned or doubted the truth of the Catholic faith. Nor, he claims, has the vast majority of the estimated one hundred thousand Catholic priests who have left the ministry since the Second Vatican Council. His book is based on meetings and interviews with over four hundred former priests and their wives, girlfriends and children. He acknowledges, in passing, that some priests and former priests have come into conflict with the Church because of a homosexual orientation, but he is not really interested in them; he certainly shows them no sympathy. He might be aware that many priests leave the Church because they cease to believe in God, but you would never guess it from this book.

If it is not already obvious, it soon will be if you try to read his book, that it is a highly specific polemic on behalf of those who would have preferred to remain in the Catholic priesthood, but have been forced to choose between it and the women they loved. David Rice, perhaps, expects the Vatican to become in time less intransigent, and to allow its priests to marry. Recent Vatican pronouncements suggest he is on a hiding to nothing. Given, however, that he approaches his topic with relish, if also with a regrettable tunnel vision, his book may be of more interest to enemies of the Catholic Church than to those who would like it to reform itself in the direction he advocates.

Opening with a melodramatic account of an Italian priest who hanged himself in 1985 as he could no longer tolerate the loneliness that his vocation forced upon him and the clandestine nature of his long-term affair with a local woman, David Rice goes on to expose the savage relationship between a Texas bishop and his clergy in the late 1960s which led to massive defections from the priesthood, with much human misery and suffering. By the time he comes, several chapters later, to review the reasons for and behind the malaise in the Church and its rapidly declining priesthood, Mr Rice is thrown back on categories of doubtful adequacy to explain the phenomenon which he documents so fully.

Clericalism is one demon Rice identifies, but as he admits, this is "an elusive concept". The alienation symbolised by the clerical collar, the sense of being a "caste apart", supposedly sexless and on specially intimate terms with the Almighty, must indeed drive many priests to distraction, though for some they probably represent a ready-made and even desirable persona. That "clericalism" traditionally conceived as a proper and necessary aspect of priesthood is all of a piece with the Catholic faith is not something that David Rice likes to consider. But it is undoubtedly the case that Catholicism sees the priest as an *alter Christus*, set apart to offer daily the "holy sacrifice of the Mass", exercising the "power of the keys" supposedly given to Peter and his successors, the popes, whereby absolution may be given or withheld and men or women thus provided with a visa for a supposed heaven or consigned to a supposedly deserved hell. All this nonsense is absolutely implicit in the very notion of priesthood which Catholicism exists to perpetrate. Indeed, it is the essence, the *raison d'être* of Catholicism. It is the only thing that marks it off from Protestantism. Thus David Rice's apparently plausible and reasonable case against clericalism is, ipso facto, a case against Catholicism itself. It is a pity he lacks the perspective to see (or the candour to admit) this intractable fact.

Another of Mr Rice's gripes is against the

“control system” of the Church which reaches from top to bottom. Once again, this seems an inescapable component of any system which depends on authority rather than reason. And Catholicism is, *par excellence*, the religion of authority. It is senseless for David Rice to complain: “The clerical institution puts its own survival first and the needs of the People of God second.” If the institution really were (as it claims to be) the only ark of salvation whereby mankind can escape eternal damnation, then surely it must be not only imprudent but criminally irresponsible to put anything whatever before its own survival. It would be as senseless for anyone to complain that the seaworthiness of the lifeboats on a stricken ship was being given a higher priority than the survival of the passengers: if the lifeboats are not seaworthy, there will be no survivors. The nonsense, however, is to give credence to the notion that the Church is an ark of salvation.

Once again, Mr Rice complains that “suppression of truth and of the freedom to think and communicate . . . drives out many priests”. He also deplores his church’s “paranoid secrecy, legalism, anti-feminism and fear of sexuality”. Of course, he is right. But he is wrong to think that if those freedoms he desires were truly available and fully explored the Catholic faith could survive. It would simply evaporate. The “ghastly bonzes” of the Vatican are thus smarter than Mr Rice, for they know that Catholicism could no more survive the sort of *glasnost* and *perestroika* he is advocating than Soviet communism can survive the Gorbachev reforms.

While Mr Rice shares Anthony Kenny’s abhorrence of the system whereby stipendiary priests offer masses “for the intention of the giver” simply “to avoid the complicated book-keeping which would be necessary if the intention of each benefactor was spelt out”, he wholly fails to notice the equally abhorrent implication that the performance of magical rituals is intended to twist God’s arm in favour of those who trust in such things. I find such an idea utterly obnoxious, whether or not money changes hands or appropriate double-entry book-keeping protocols are observed in earthly (or heavenly) ledgers!

David Rice really seems to believe that the Catholic Church’s decline could be arrested and perhaps reversed (and that this would be a good thing) if only the Pope would sanction clerical marriage, contraception and a generally more liberal concordat with the modern secular world. I think him mistaken in this belief. If his Church were to change in the direction of Protestantism, its demise might be even quicker; for it would then have surrendered its (spurious) claim to absolute authority and laid itself open to much more serious forms of

criticism. Catholicism will always have an appeal, albeit a declining one, to those still hungry for “the old certainties”. The majority, however, will not be satisfied with a desacralised church (any more than the majority of Protestants are satisfied with a de-mythologised New Testament), but will be restless until they have been able to sweep away the traces of the nonsense which was Christianity.

There is, in secular humanism, a satisfactory alternative to all religions. That is a fact which David Rice has yet to discover.

DANIEL O’HARA

TO ENCOURAGE THE OTHERS, by David Yallop-Corgi Books, £4.99

In 1948, I was serving King and Country as an instructor in the Royal Army Education Corps. The bulk of my duties consisted of trying to improve the state of semi-literacy (if not downright illiteracy) which was then a common characteristic of many young conscripts, as a result of the catastrophic effects of wartime schooling.

In the event, they educated me. For their semi-literacy was frequently combined with a degree of criminal cunning which was quite astonishing. I learned a great deal about how to spirit away lorry-loads of cigarettes or whisky, and how to get in and out of warehouses without detection.

I offer this autobiographical fragment as an endorsement of David Yallop’s description of the social background prevailing at the time of the 1952 Craig/Bentley murder case, which forms the theme of this painstaking study.

In these immediate post-war years, as David Yallop says, “the British criminal came into his own”. The thriving black market coincided with a massive crime-wave. It was the main reason, Yallop asserts, why the authorities treated the case with such severity — to use it as an example. Even Prime Minister Churchill, apparently, called for an immediate report of the incident which ultimately led to the hanging of Derek Bentley.

What exactly happened on that November night in 1952? Bentley and Craig set out from their homes in south London with the intention of robbing a warehouse in Croydon. The 16-year-old Craig carried a gun — a sawn-off .455 Eley. They were seen on the warehouse roof and very soon armed police arrived. A gun battle followed in which one policeman was injured and another, PC Miles, was killed. Craig threw himself off the roof and was badly injured; both teenagers were taken into custody. At one point in the fight Bentley is alleged to have uttered the fatal and ambiguous words: “Let him have it, Chris” — ambiguous because they could have been interpreted as a plea by Bentley for Craig to *hand over* the gun, not to use it.

But in the event, while the 16-year-old Craig was sentenced to imprisonment (he could not be hanged as a juvenile), the 19-year-old Bentley was found guilty on the grounds of "common purpose" and subsequently hanged.

As David Yallop says, "it isn't every day that we judicially murder a teenager. The awful uniqueness of Bentley's fate extended even beyond that. He was to become the only man in our entire legal history to be executed for a crime for which he was only vicariously responsible when the principal actor could not be executed."

David Yallop's case is that a serious miscarriage of justice occurred. He produces evidence to show that Bentley was epileptic, that he was illiterate and had a mental age of nine. He was a petty criminal who had never committed crimes of violence before. Yallop claims that Bentley's mental and physical state was totally overlooked during the trial, that much vital evidence was ignored, and that crucial witnesses were not called.

One vital piece of evidence that did not emerge at the trial is that one of the bullets which killed PC Miles was discovered soon after the shooting on the warehouse roof. The bullet was between .32 and .38 calibre, yet the gun that Craig was carrying was a .455 Eley. There was not at any time, either before, during, or after the trial, any ballistic evidence to prove that Craig had fired the shot that killed PC Miles. Yallop alleges that on the contrary, "there was a startling amount of ballistic evidence to prove his innocence".

Yallop also says that Lord Goddard, the Lord Chief Justice, interrupted evidence some 250 times on the side of the prosecution. His 45-minute summing-up addressed itself to the defence case for

just over two minutes.

One of the more grisly farcical elements in the affair is a report published in the *Daily Mail*, reproduced in the book, which appeared the day after the tragic incident on the Croydon warehouse roof. Under the heading "Chicago Gun Battle in London: Gangsters with Machine Gun on Roof Kill Detective", the *Daily Mail* report was, as Yallop says, "a historic piece of misreporting — the staff reporters responsible should have got some kind of inverted Pulitzer prize". It would have been comic but for the fact that this report, and others like it which appeared in the popular press, were no doubt read by the twelve men who, a few weeks later, found themselves jury members at the trial.

Yallop's book was first published in 1971. This new paperback edition has been released because of the current climate in which cases such as the Guildford Four have been reviewed. Iris Bentley, Derek Bentley's sister, recently asked the Home Secretary to order a public enquiry into the case, and sent him a copy of the book. The Home Office's response (at the time of going to press) was "We are considering the book to see whether intervention is necessary in this case".

In an open letter to the Home Secretary published in the book, David Yallop writes: "The respect in which the public of this country holds our judicial system will not be shaken if it is finally admitted that in the case of Derek Bentley the law produced a miscarriage of justice. On the contrary, if the law and the judicial system in this country is held in contempt, it is because of the failure of the executive to admit such miscarriages of justice."

TED McFADYEN

LETTERS

PARTY POLITICS AND OFFICIAL SECRECY

Karl Heath ("No Politics Please, We're Humanists!", August) asks "why should (party politics) be disreputable?". He goes on to record his commendable efforts to fight Official Secrets legislation and other forms of censorship.

All party politicians who aspire to parliamentary office are agreed on the necessity for Official Secrets. Those who call for some degree of accountability ignore the obvious fact that an accountable Secret Service is a paradox. That is why party politics are disreputable. Furthermore, if our fate rests in the hands of an Establishment that works in secrecy, it makes no difference whether we have a one-party or a multi-party system.

Karl Heath may be politically Left-wing, but his parliamentary election vote can only support the worst form of censorship — official secrecy.

E. F. CROSSWELL, Slough

BECOMING AN UNBELIEVER

I should be grateful to any reader of *The Freethinker* for an account of his or her loss of religious belief. I

am especially interested in the moments (or hours or days) when belief turned into unbelief. The more detailed and personal such account, the more helpful it would be for the study on which I am working. I will, of course, respect any correspondent's wish for confidentiality or anonymity. Letters can be sent to me at: the Philosophy Department, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland.

DAVID BERMAN, Dublin

CROP CIRCLES

I was interested to read Jenny Randles' letter (August) responding to my remarks on 'crop circles'. However, her comments do not shake my conviction that whatever the answers turn out to be, they are still not yet known for certain. Until such time as they are, I shall remain fascinated, and sceptical, watching the circle watchers.

TOBY HOWARD, Manchester

David Leng, 31, heard the word of God and amputated his arm by thrusting it into a circular saw. He said that God told him to do it in order to get rid of a tattoo. Surgeons at a Newcastle-upon-Tyne hospital managed to stitch the arm back on.

A.B. Lever Complains to...

NEIL BLEWITT

It's all right for you, Neil, and the rest of your freethinking friends. You don't have moral codes to worry about. You make yours up as you go along, and if a bit of it gets out of date, or you don't like it any more, you just get rid of it and start again. And you don't have to answer to anybody.

Not like us church members. You're always poking fun at us, but I'd like to see some of you trying to live by our rules. We can't pick and choose, let alone change those we don't like. They're all laid down in the Bible and if we're church members, we have to take all the commandments that go with it.

I know you'll say we've only got ten to worry about so where's the hassle — but that's where you're wrong. There are hundreds of them, all written down in the first five books of the Bible where our god told Moses how we have to behave. He had several meetings with him to make sure he understood them all properly; and so they wouldn't be disturbed, he spoke to him in places where nobody would expect him to be; like in a burning bush, on top of a mountain, in a cloudy pillar and so on. Then, to prove he was a genuine god, he gave Moses magical powers. And you couldn't want better evidence than that. Moses used these powers to blot out the sun for three days; he made a brass serpent to cure snake-bites; he made a magic wand that could bring thunder and hail from heaven, and water from a rock; and he once went forty days without food or drink. Now if you don't think that's clever — you have a go and see how you get on! But, best of all, he was able to write about things that happened hundreds of years before he was born; who said what to whom, what everybody was thinking — and even what it was like before the earth was there. Then, to cap it all, he actually described his own death and burial. You've really got to pay attention to somebody like that. And if you don't believe Moses did all these things, you can read it for yourself. It's all there in the first five books of the Bible; or what our vicar calls, in that toffee-nosed way of his, the Pentateuch.

But to come back to the Ten Commandments (he calls them the Decalogue). If they were all we had to worry about we could get on pretty well. Nothing to make a song and a dance about there. You can't change your god of course; you're stuck with the same one Moses had; he never did me any harm. And better the devil you know, say I! You might not like having to honour your parents if they're paedophiles; you might not like being forbidden to work on a Sunday, especially if it's double time and a day in lieu; you might feel frustrated if you're married and fancied the organist's daughter — but you can't win all the time. No — on the whole, the

Ten Commandments don't cause any real trouble.

But it's the others. Do you know we're not allowed to eat things like pork sausages, jugged hare, turtle soup and black pudding? I thought that would surprise you! We can't wear clothes made of a wool and linen mix. We mustn't tattoo ourselves. Women can't wear jeans and men can't wear drag. We mustn't have anything to do with horoscopes and when our lady members have a baby they're supposed to bring a lamb and a pigeon to church for a sacrifice. We have to love our neighbour — and that's a trial as far as I'm concerned, I can tell you. Mine's horrible! The Bible says I'm not supposed to remove his landmark; well, I've never wanted to, but I must admit there are one or two other things of his I wouldn't mind removing! Did you know that bastards aren't allowed in church? Nor a man who's been — well, I'll quote the actual words of the commandment to show you I'm not making it up — "wounded in the stones or hath his privy member cut off". How about that one?

We have to kill witches, homosexuals, wizards, mediums, blasphemers and any member's son who is rebellious and a glutton and a drunkard; and, do you know, if a chap makes a mistake and marries a wife and her mother, then all three of them have to be burned to death? We can't be too careful. And if we disobey any commandment that doesn't carry the death penalty, we're punished with the itch, the botch, scabs, madness, inflammation, piles — and we get thoroughly cursed into the bargain.

Mind you, to be fair, there are lots of commandments that are easy to obey — well, for me, at any rate. There's one which says we mustn't eat weasels, mice, bats and cuckoos; I've never fancied any of them, so that's all right. We mustn't eat fowls that walk on all fours; and as I don't know any that's all right too. If a servant refuses to leave when his contract expires, we have to bore his ear with an awl. Now that doesn't worry me because I don't have a servant, but it could be awkward for people who do. I mean — what's to stop a servant retaliating and putting an awl through his employer's ear — or anywhere else for that matter? We mustn't lie with a beast — and that's definitely not my scene, I can tell you. We have to circumcise the foreskin of our heart; but that doesn't apply to me — I'm not constructed that way. We mustn't shave the corners of our beards; but that's no problem — I couldn't grow one if I tried. We mustn't have Ammonites or Moabites in church; well, we don't — we only have Acolytes. We mustn't take a millstone in pawn; now, to be honest, I wouldn't know what to do with it if I had one. We mustn't boil a kid in its mother's milk — and that's an odd one, because it would

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 September, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Brighton. Sunday, 7 October, 6.30 pm for 6 pm. Andy Angel: What is it to be Human?

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Langford's Hotel, Hove. Saturday, 10 November, 6.30 pm for 7 pm. Annual Dinner. Guest speaker: Diane Munday. Vegetarians catered for. Tickets £10. Joan Wimble, Honorary Secretary, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone (0273) 733215.

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, 2 October, 8 pm. Barbara Smoker: My Visit to India.

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

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 27 September, 8 pm. John Evitt: Philosophy, Knowledge and Belief.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 October, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting. Report on the IHEU Congress.

The Thomas Paine Society. Fircroft College, Bristol Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham. Saturday, 13 October, 10.30 am. Thomas Paine Symposium. Details obtainable from the Honorary Secretary, TPS, 43 Wellington Gardens, Selsey, West Sussex, PO20 0RE, telephone (0243) 605730.

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.

never have occurred to me if it hadn't been a commandment. Oh, and one other comes to mind: we mustn't plough with an ox and an ass together; but I work in an office as you know, so that's completely irrelevant.

All of those commandments are quite OK as far as I'm concerned. I don't lose any sleep over them whatsoever. But there are several that really do trouble me. I'm thinking of those that are supposed to be obeyed by all church members but that I happen to know for a fact are being ignored. I won't bore you with all of them, but just take a few examples. There's one which says when we go out, in case we need to relieve ourselves, we have to take a spade with us to dig a hole and fill it in again afterwards. Now I never do that. And, to be perfectly honest, I'd feel an absolute ass if I did. There are laws that lay down the types of curtains we're supposed to have in the tabernacle. They have to be made of linen and goat's hair and they have to be fitted with a certain number of loops and golden taches. But we haven't got anything like that in our church. And, frankly, I don't know anybody who has. Then we're supposed to have a mercy-seat with cherubim on it; and an ark and a table made of shittim wood. We've nothing like that either. In fact, I don't think our vicar would recognise a piece of shittim wood if he saw it. And we don't make all the sacrifices Moses laid down. He said we were to slay the odd bullock, then burn the offal on the altar and the dung outside. But our vicar's never done anything like that. It makes me wonder sometimes if he knows all those commandments are there. Then everybody's house is supposed to have battlements on it. Well — mine hasn't; and never has had as far as I know.

What worries me about all this is if our god comes down and tackles me about it and asks why I disobeyed his commandments? What can I say? If he tells me he saw me out shopping without my spade, I know I could point out it's stainless steel and too heavy to carry about, but that's a bit feeble, isn't it? As far as the battlements are concerned, I can honestly claim to live in a council house and that it's not my responsibility. The same with the curtains, the ark and the shittim wood. I can say it's the vicar's fault, not mine. But if he then says "Ah, but did you bring it to anybody's attention that my commandments were being broken?" — I've had my! I'm up the creek without a paddle.

Talking to you, Neil, has brought all this to the forefront of my mind again and I don't mind telling you it bothers me. I think, perhaps, I'll go and see the vicar and the Chief Housing Officer and take my Bible with me and point out all these things and see what they say. I'll mention the spade as well; though, on second thoughts, I think I'll take it with me.

I'll let you know how I get on. . .

Student Escapes "Cultural" Moonies

A 19-year-old student from Kenilworth, Warwickshire, was almost taken in by the Moonies when she volunteered for charity work abroad. The girl, whose family does not wish to be identified, thought that the "International Cultural Foundation" was just an ordinary charity. She applied for a summer teaching job in Bulgaria. Called to London for an interview, she was accompanied by her mother who said: "The interview was quite brief. My daughter was told that she would have to make up her mind immediately as the interviewer had another meeting."

The student accepted the job, handing over her passport and money for entry visas. Fortunately as she and her mother were leaving the ICF headquarters they noticed that it was next to the Unification Church. Inquiries established that the "Cultural" Foundation is one of the network of organisations under which the Rev Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church operates.

She immediately cancelled her trip, and is now warning others how easily they can get caught up in an unsavoury group like the Moonies.

In a press statement, Warwickshire Humanist Group's public relations officer, George Broadhead,

Rushdie Defended

Professor Sir Hermann Bondi denounces religious intolerance in his introduction to the British Humanist Association's annual report. The BHA president cites a number of examples, and pride of place — if that is the appropriate term — goes to "the death threat to Salman Rushdie, uttered by that vicious old man Khomeini . . . echoed amongst a regrettably large number of British Muslims.

"While the more responsible ones 'only' pressed for an extension of the obnoxious law of blasphemy, we had the unedifying spectacle of crowds of young Muslims screaming in our streets for the blood of the author.

"While the Government allowed this incitement to murder to proceed unchecked, the sensible, reasonable and humane letter of Home Office Minister, Mr John Patten, to leading Muslims, received no endorsement from any opposition party. Shame on them!"

The report mentions that although the Ayatollah Khomeini has died, the threat to murder Salman Rushdie has not been withdrawn. The BHA supports the author's right to free expression and endorses proposals to abolish blasphemy law.

Change of address: the British Humanist Association is now at 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH, telephone 071-430 0908.

said: "It is not so long ago that the Moonies were active in this area, collecting money for their supposed charitable work on the streets of Kenilworth.

"Their nefarious activities, including brainwashing their invariably young victims and preventing them from contacting their parents, has been exposed by the *Daily Mail* newspaper, television programmes and a book, *The Dark Side of the Moonies*.

"What remains a major scandal is that despite the many exposures which have never been successfully challenged in the courts, this sect, and others equally dangerous, still enjoy charitable status and all the moral benefit and financial privileges that go with it, simply on the ground that they are promoting religion."

Taking Leave of the Kirk

The Decade of Evangelism has got off to a limp start in Scotland. Writing in *Life and Work*, the Church of Scotland's official journal, Professor Alec Cheyne declares that the Kirk has experienced a "catastrophic decline" in membership. Furthermore, "short of a dramatic and unlikely change, we stand to lose another 200,000 or so before the century ends".

It is not that large numbers are actually leaving the church. (After all, how many of those who gradually slip into a state of indifference or unbelief submit a formal resignation of church membership, particularly if they live in a small community where such a step would mean social ostracism or a threat to their livelihood?) The fundamental problem for the Church of Scotland, according to Professor Cheyne, "is that new members are not being recruited in sufficient numbers to replace those lost by death.

"Above all, the young are as a rule refusing to join our congregations, so that there is a real danger that the proportion of elderly persons (most of them female) may soon be as high in Scottish Presbyterianism as it has long been in Russian Orthodoxy."

Professor Cheyne advises the Kirk to reconcile itself to being in a minority position within Scottish society. Declining membership will also mean a loss of influence, with those of "recognisably Christian conviction" growing rarer by the year. It will also mean fewer suitable candidates for the ministry.

He writes: "The slide towards a thoroughly secularised society, indifferent or even hostile to the Faith, looks like acquiring the proportions and momentum of an avalanche."