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RUSHDIE'S DEFENDERS HIT BACK AT RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CRITICS

Distinguished academics, writers and politicians have appealed to the president of Iran to act in "a generous, tolerant spirit" by revoking the *fatwa* (death sentence) on author Salman Rushdie. The 22 signatories include Vaclav Havel, Gunter Grass, John Kenneth Galbraith, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Nadine Gordimer.

The Iranian president was told that since the *fatwa* was pronounced, "one of the world's most distinguished authors has been obliged to live secretly and in fear of assassination.

"An end to this disturbing and unacceptable situation must be found. However, we believe that no resolution to the affair can be achieved while the threat of murder continues to hang over Mr. Rushdie's head."

But even if President Rafsanjani responds favourably to the group's request, Salman Rushdie will still go in fear for his life. It is uncertain that fanatical Muslims will heed any decree issued by a head of State. They are more likely to be influenced by religious leaders' bellicose speeches upholding the *fatwa*.

It is not only in Islamic quarters that there is little of the "generous, tolerant spirit" towards the author of *The Satanic Verses*. Less gifted figures in the literary world together with politicians who care little about Islam or its followers (most of whom are non-white) have joined in the back-stabbing, "get Rushdie" clamour.

Norman Tebbit's anti-Rushdie diatribe in the Magazine section of *The Independent* was on a level to be expected, having been written by an ornament of the Philistine Tendency. This hero of Conservative Club bars hates Salman Rushdie with

a hatred rooted in xenophobia and envy. It is deplorable that a hitherto reputable newspaper should degrade itself by contributing to this squalid hate campaign against an author.

In the first sentence of his article, Tebbit described Salman Rushdie as "an outstanding villain" whose public life has been "a record of despicable acts of betrayal." He continued in similar vein, with sneers along the way at "the trendy intelligentsia" and "anti-Conservative writers".

The gospel according to Norman Tebbit says that one of Salman Rushdie's crimes is that he seeks the transformation of society "to one unwanted by the British". With that ineffable arrogance which has characterised the New Right since it emerged from the woodwork in the late '70s, Tebbit implied that his ideal of a hard-faced, anti-culture society is shared by the population at large. In fact it is increasingly being rejected, even by many Conservatives.

In a response published in the *Guardian* newspaper, film script-writer Hanif Kureshi got the measure of Tebbit and his ilk.

"Their world is based on class hatred for those beneath and concealed envy and contempt for those above", he wrote.

"Tebbit, with his tinny, slow, cliché-ridden mind, envies Rushdie's intelligence, his creativity, his flair, and ultimately, his education and privilege ...

"People who have more depth than Tebbit intimidate him because they represent a desirable world of which he has no knowledge ...

"The scepticism, complexity and relish for life

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

LIBERAL AND DEMOCRATIC

Having survived the kiss of Dr Death, the Liberals, now known as the Liberal Democrats, appear to be recovering the radicalism that characterised their party before it got entangled with the SDP. At the Blackpool conference of English members last month they passed several resolutions of particular interest to freethinkers, including one calling for the abolition of blasphemy law. But perhaps the most surprising decision by the delegates was to vote overwhelmingly in favour of a motion calling for disestablishment of the Church of England.

Party leader Paddy Ashdown said: "Given the strength of religious feeling today, I don't think you can look at the basics of a multi-cultural, pluralistic society unless you are prepared to be even-handed in your approach to different religions." Perhaps it would have been nearer the mark to mention the weakness of religious feeling in Britain today, but his support for the resolution, together with that of Simon Hughes, MP, party spokesman on church affairs, was significant.

Of course a resolution passed by the conference of a party that may never form the Government is not sufficient cause for secularists to be dancing in the Holloway Road. But it keeps the question in the public arena. It should also remind the Liberal Democrats that many of their predecessors were strong advocates of disestablishment - and they did not suffer at the polling booth as a result.

Herbert Henry Asquith, Liberal Prime Minister from 1908 until 1916, was an outspoken opponent of Church establishment. In one speech he described the Church of England as an institution dating from the time when society was founded on the notion "that the great mass of the people was a kind of infant that had to be kept on leading strings and in swaddling clothes, and to have its spiritual as well as its temporal wants carefully provided for by the governing classes." He said it was a Church "in the foundation of which the English people were never consulted ... a relic of the ideas of medieval times ... weak, stagnant, non-progressive and, in not a few cases, a retrograde force."

Needless to say, defenders of Anglican privilege did not take kindly to the Liberal Democrats' resolution. Dr Hugh Montefiore, former Bishop of Birmingham (and, as it happens, a Liberal Democrat), said that it showed bad judgment.

S AND NOTES

"There has to be a form of public religion", he declared. "The State has to have values."

Dr Montefiore went on to say that ordinary people would see disestablishment as "a repudiation of the Christian religion". How does he know? Has he consulted "ordinary people" on the fascinating subject of disestablishmentarianism? It is just as likely that a majority of people - including many Anglicans - would agree with the Bishop of Durham's description of Church establishment as "a vestigial rigmarole left over from the Middle Ages, a kind of Gilbert and Sullivan performance that must go." But then anyone who, like Dr Montefiore, believes "nobody thinks of the Church of England as privileged", is slightly out of touch with reality.

POINTING THE FINGER

Fundamentalist and often fundamentally dishonest Christians are adept at fostering scares and witch-hunts. This is hardly surprising in view of their churches' record. The witch-burning mania that swept 15th-century Europe is only one example of Christian fanaticism in action. Here in England the last execution for witchcraft took place at Exeter in 1684. Christians took their insane fantasies to the New World. The religious hysteria that led the trials and execution of "witches" at Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1690s, had similarities to the obsession with satanism that gripped the United States in the 1980s.

The historical background to Christian witch-hunting should not be overlooked during the present upsurge of unsubstantiated allegations about widespread ritual abuse of children in Britain. Contemporary witch finders - some barmy, most of them vindictive - are drawn from Right-wing religious pressure groups which march for Jesus and assault staff and patients at abortion clinics. These unscrupulous opportunists are ever ready to exploit people's understandable and proper concern for children's welfare. In the Middle Ages the Jews were accused of kidnapping Christian children for religious sacrifice; today the finger is being pointed at "Satanists".

The witch-hunting evangelical Christians are a menace to families and to society. Their unproven

accusations can lead to children being removed from their homes. Police, medical and social workers' time is wasted chasing satanic will-o'-the-wisps.

Christians hate competition from other faiths even more than they hate "Satan". At a time when they are losing ground on almost every front, the search for scapegoats proceeds apace. Now that the spectre of Communism has all but vanished, other bogies are being used to alarm a public that is not much impressed by claims about "Christian truths". Furthermore, rumour mongering about satanism and ritual abuse of children is a useful ploy to divert attention from an embarrassing fact. Rather than hearsay and gossip, court records - particularly in the United States where the satanic scare originated - show that physical and sexual abuse of children frequently occurs in a Christian institutional, church or home environment.

ASKING FOR MORE

Appeals and private generosity are no longer producing sufficient funds for the upkeep of cathedrals. So once again the Church of England is endeavouring to screw enormous sums from the public purse.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has written to the Prime Minister asking for financial help to maintain the buildings. Dr. Runcie points out that "the fabric and contents of Britain's cathedrals run into many millions of pounds." He does not refer to the assets controlled by the Church Commissioners and other Anglican bodies which run into hundreds of millions of pounds. Nor does he mention that the cathedrals are not Britain's, but the Church of England's.

It has also been revealed that only two cathedrals are adequately protected against an "act of God". The faithful could reasonably expect the Almighty to protect buildings which were erected for his glory. Not so; lightning is a recurring threat to churches, and no so long ago the venerable York Minster was in flames after being struck.

The cost of installing a protection system can be as much as £65,000. But the money will have to be found, for as one irreverent wag put it, during a thunderstorm it is safer to be in a brothel that has a lightning conductor than in a church that hasn't.

A 24-year-old Sikh was jailed at Leeds Crown Court for murdering his younger brother by stabbing him in the stomach with a 13-inch knife. Devout Jiggeven Singh Boyal was enraged because his brother listened to pop music instead of joining in family prayers.

NOBODY IS LISTENING

Christians who actually believe in the power of prayer are an odd lot. For the more they bow the head, bend the knee and grovel to their God, the worse he treats them. A typical illustration of this sado-masochistic relationship between the Almighty and his sycophantic supplicants is found in *CARE Magazine*, a new quarterly published by the loftily named Christian Action, Research & Education (formerly the Nationwide Festival of Light).

A review of Parliamentary affairs commences with this lamentation: "It is hard to be positive about a Parliamentary session which has seen the most fundamental setbacks to the pro-life cause since 1967." The setbacks included a resounding defeat in the House of Commons when it voted on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill last April. The campaign almost bankrupted some of the "pro-life" groups and the outcome left members thoroughly demoralised. Never mind; CARE derived much encouragement from fellow-Christians "as the terrible events of the pro-life cause unfolded."

Looking to the future, CARE promises to continue "the fight to regain ground lost this year. We can do this with God's help." Will they never learn? As recent history shows, God did not raise a finger to help when they were losing ground. In fact every unsuccessful campaign to wreck the 1967 Abortion Act has included prayer sessions, special Masses and religious services. During the run-up to the Embryology Bill debate in the Commons there was a positive orgy of God-nobbling. But *CARE Magazine* mournfully records "traumatic defeats" for the "pro-life" cause. So much for the power of prayer!

Nothing daunted, the publication includes a pull-out prayer guide for the period September until December. It was compiled by Celia Bowring, and the good lady has dreamed up a comprehensive list of subjects to which the Almighty is asked to give his attention during the ear-bending marathon.

Readers are exhorted to "pray for wholesome material in school libraries ... and for immoral books not to be used in religious studies, sex education or English lessons." It would be most interesting to know which books are being used to spread moral pollution in the nation's schools. The work of Darwin, perhaps? Or the Christian Bible, with its violent, anti-family content?

"Pray against any moves to deregulate Sunday trading"; ditto those who are campaigning for the abolition of blasphemy law. Oh, and "pray, too, for the Parliamentary Wives Christian Group". Poor dears, they have not recovered from the shock of

learning that one of their number, Susie Sainsbury, handed over nearly £80,000 to a religious charlatan named Derek Mainwaring Knight.

Saturday, 24 November, is designated for prayers on behalf of a number of organisations including the British Humanist Association. The National secular Society is not included on the list. Perhaps it is regarded as being past praying for.

It is regrettable that so many people fritter away their ability and energy promoting bad causes and indulge in the futile exercise of talking to themselves. Prayers to a deity are on a level with the children's rhyme: "Rain, rain, go away, Come again another day."

Parish priest Fr Joseph Harrison had a narrow escape when the roof of St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Flectwood, Lancashire, crashed down. A heavy beam which shattered the altar missed him by inches. The incident occurred as worshippers were offering thanks for the new roof which cost them £85,000.

TEMPORARY RESPITE

A 27-year-old mother of two who is living in fear of being stoned to death if she returns to Pakistan has been told by the Home Office that she can remain in Britain until August 1991.

Rabia Janjua faced imprisonment or death for a crime called "zina" (unlawful sex). She was raped at the age of twenty, but under Pakistani law it is virtually impossible to prove such an offence, and she was forced to marry the rapist.

He came to Britain and she was commanded to join him here in 1985. Speaking no English, she did not realise that her entry to the country was illegal.

Following two assaults which put her in hospital, Rabia Janjua obtained a court order restraining her husband. In revenge he informed the Home Office that she was an illegal immigrant. Officials attempted to put her on a plane to Karachi, leaving behind two young children, one of them still being breast fed. A campaign was launched to prevent the deportation. Although she has been granted "exceptional leave to remain in the UK until August 1991", rather than refugee status, Rabia Janjua is safe for the time being from what one campaigner described as "the degrading and inhuman laws of Pakistan."

Ecumenism Against Humanism

BARBARA SMOKER

The chief goal of ecumenism is, of course, to enable the various churches - traditionally at each other's throats - to gang up against secular humanism, which they now see as the common enemy.

So far, the Roman Catholic Church in this country has stood outside the British Council of Churches (BCC), founded in 1942, though it has been making gradual moves in the direction of the BCC during those 48 years. At first the moves were merely towards more co-operation, but three years ago, at the ecumenical conference held in Swanwick in September 1987, Cardinal Basil Hume declared that the Catholic community ought "to move quite deliberately from a situation of co-operation to one of commitment" to the other churches. These words were enshrined in the so-called "Swanwick Declaration", and now, after three years of detailed ecumenical discussion, they have evolved into an official commitment, the BCC having been superseded by a new body, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI), in which the

Catholic Church is a full partner.

The joyous joint ceremony of inauguration, which took place in Liverpool on 8 September was, however "historic", overshadowed by two anti-ecumenical clouds: first, the entrenched position of the RC Church on the question of women priests; and second, the refusal of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and the Baptist Union of Scotland, both of which had been part of the BCC, to be associated with the new CCBI.

The first of these difficulties might well prove, in the next decade, to be far more substantial than a mere shadow. It could, in fact, nullify this whole commitment to ecumenism.

It seems ironic that faithful women, who have always played the most compliant and supportive role in Christianity, should now, through their increasingly ambitious enthusiasm for ecclesial service, be rocking the boat of Peter the Fisherman - far more vigorously than all we feared unbelievers put together.

Experts Criticise "LIFE" Meddlers

Professor Sir Malcolm Macnaughton, former chairman of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, has accused "pro-life" groups of meddling in medical affairs. The world authority on maternity care, who held the Muirhead Chair for Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Glasgow University for twenty years, dedicated his long career to the care of mothers and babies. He has five children of his own.

In an interview on the occasion of his retirement, Sir Malcolm was highly critical of the life-at-any-cost lobby. He said the sad fact is that despite advanced technology, the medical profession is almost powerless to save very premature babies.

He added: "If you thought that a baby is going to have a chance to survive then you would do all you possibly could for it. But it is unreasonable to do that if you know it is not going to live."

"Groups like LIFE say that if something moves at eighteen weeks it should be given every facility. That is wrong in my view."

"The problem with LIFE people is that they are unreasonable about what they expect us to do."

Roman Catholic spokesman Fr Tom Connelly accused Sir Malcolm of being "unfair" to "pro-life" organisations. "I believe them to be the moral conscience of the nation", he declared.

But Dr Paul Galea, consultant paediatrician at a Glasgow maternity hospital, endorsed Sir Malcolm's comments.

"Intensive care will often prolong a baby's death, not its life", he said.

"We bend over backwards to resuscitate small premature babies. We assess for viability every baby born alive, but if there is no response we won't proceed with intensive care."

Robert Graham, LIFE's West of Scotland chairman, commented: "As far as we are concerned, the viability thing is just an irrelevance."

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Chapman Cohen's *Almost an Autobiography*

ELLEN WINSOR

Chapman Cohen's autobiographical work was published fifty years ago. The *Freethinker's* quality, success and reputation were products of his and G. W. Foote's industry, intelligence and courage. Yet both were secretive men who wrote little about themselves or their personal circumstances. *Almost an Autobiography* is the major source for Cohen's life although it fails to meet the need for an authoritative biography.

Chapman Cohen was born in 1868 of Jewish parentage in Leicester. His connections with the freethought movement date from 1889 and he records how on a later summer Sunday in that year, while walking in Victoria Park, London, he stopped to listen to a Christian Evidence Society speaker engaged in debate with an elderly freethinker who had a speech impediment. When replying, the speaker spent part of his time mimicking the older man's speech. Cohen was so infuriated by what he witnessed that he joined in the debate. Within two weeks he had accepted an invitation to address a local branch of the National Secular Society and a lifetime career as a freethought advocate had begun.

For a short time in 1896 he edited John Grange's monthly *Bradford Truth Seeker* while its editor was ill. By 1897 he was becoming closely involved with Foote and his *Freethinker* and he became Foote's assistant after J. M. Wheeler's death in 1898. Unlike others, Cohen's loyalty to the president of the NSS never wavered, and as Foote's health deteriorated he took an increasing share of the work involved in producing the journal which by then had become the mouthpiece of the Society. When Foote died in 1915 it was inevitable that Cohen should assume both the editorship of the *Freethinker* and the presidency of the NSS.

Almost an Autobiography is a very strange book. Its author goes to some trouble to justify his belief that he should write less about himself and his deeds than about his ideas and how he came to hold them. While one might wish for more, this access to the mind of the last great Victorian freethinker is simply fascinating.

Cohen's views on education may strike the contemporary reader as unfashionable in the era of a National Curriculum and the associated utilitarian beliefs. He argues that State education by its very nature must act as a barrier to the ready acceptance of new ideas and that all schools must aim at pupils absorbing and believing certain things. Real education thus becomes self-education, and the book

is all-important as it provides access to the world's greatest teachers. The accumulation of knowledge brings little, Cohen argues. What counts is understanding. To confuse knowledge and understanding is to "confuse the nutritive value of the money with which they buy food with the food itself." Knowledge is valuable in that it may aid understanding, but knowledge on its own is of little value and only puts the human in the same position as the performing animal that has learned to spell words by moving blocks at a sign from its trainer.

Cohen is similarly iconoclastic in his view of the media and its perceived benefits. The ability to read is no guarantee of freedom or education. To Cohen the "yellow press", of which *Tit-Bits* was taken as the prime example, makes the point.

The necessary thing was to avoid straining the intelligence of the class on which a huge circulation depended ... A newspaper no longer carried with it the threat that one might be led into serious thought ... A tabloid mind was developed with no great prospect of ever growing beyond that state - an intellect that thought in headlines and spoke in crowds was created.

One trembles to think what this writer would have made of the tabloid press and satellite television of today.

Cohen's ability to turn an argument on its head and view matters in an unorthodox light is well illustrated by his comments on that most English of institutions, the class system. While noting the indefensibility of the hereditary system, he contends that nobody should blame members of the House of Lords if they are looked up to. The real fault lies with those who look up to the Lords: "No one can look down on another, unless the other fellow looks up to him."

Cohen is revealing when writing of his relationship with Foote and the early years of the *Freethinker*. He quotes Foote when attempting to account for the journal's distinctive flavour and approach which has been apparent ever since its foundation. Foote declared: "The Bradlaugh case was on. The bigots were asking for the whip and I made up my mind they should have it." (He was referring to Bradlaugh's fight to enter Parliament.)

Most revealingly he also contrasts Foote's religious experiences with his own. Cohen's upbringing had been devoid of religious experiences, and whilst he abhorred religion for the impact it had had on civilisation, this easy-going contempt was of a rational nature and there were no emotional undercurrents. In Cohen's view this was not true of

Footo who, he felt, had never freed himself of an unconscious respect and dread of Christianity and which perhaps accounted for the passion of his refutations.

Cohen was proud of the paper's record during the First World War. He felt that it never compromised its principles during this trying period. The *Freethinker* never subscribed to the view that Germany was solely responsible for the war. Its editor believed that such views came close to bringing the wrath of the authorities down upon him and he cites three occasions when he contends that attempts were made to control what he published. The first involved a mysterious attempt to purchase the paper; the second an official request that commentary on the war was submitted for examination. Both these attempts at interference were resisted. The third incident was the most amusing and involved a visit by two military personnel who called at Cohen's office and asked to see the subscribers list. The request was refused and was followed by the following conversation.

"Do you send the paper abroad?"

"Certainly."

"Do you take care where it is sent."

"Not the slightest."

"Do you take precautions against it falling in enemy hands?"

"No! If the Emperor of Germany send for a copy of the *Freethinker*, with payment and postage, a copy will leave its office by the next post. If it is stopped en route I cannot prevent it. But I imagine that both the Emperor and yourselves would do better for a regular reading of the paper."

Cohen lived through an era when the public meeting and debate were as common as television chat shows are today, although one suspects that they were considerably more stimulating intellectually and demanded rather more of their audience. He estimated that in the course of one year he lectured 280 times between Plymouth and Aberdeen, speaking three times every Sunday. The conduct of audiences was not always as orderly as the speakers may have wished and the writer delights in relating the story of a number of close shaves he experienced.

Cohen continued to be active in the freethought movement after the publication of *Almost an Autobiography* in 1940. In fact, he continued to edit the *Freethinker* for another eleven years, until 1951 when F. A. Ridley took over. He had already, rather reluctantly, surrendered the NSS presidency in 1949. Chapman Cohen died in 1954.

To me, the fascination of this small book lies in three directions. First, it tells me a little about a man I much admire and who I would like to know more about. Secondly, it takes us back to an age

which may have been rather less sophisticated than the present one but strikes me as fundamentally less cynical, less materialistic and more honest. Thirdly, Cohen's ability to turn an argument and challenge orthodoxies reminds us of the true nature of liberal argument. It disturbs me that fifty years later there seem to be so few of his intellectual heirs around.

Lord Halsbury, one of the most ardent Christians in the House of Lords, has tabled an amendment calling for a commitment to Christianity in the Broadcasting Bill. During the debate he made what was, for him, a thoughtful contribution: "I am opposed to secularist quislings who burrow like maggots into the moral fibre of our society. At every level of management in television you find secularists, agnostics, humanists who want nothing to do with the Christian religion and want it put on one side."

Freethinker Fund

Every issue of *The Freethinker* carries a list of contributors to the Fund. They are all much appreciated, but occasionally a particularly generous gift is highlighted. On this occasion Mr. J. Van Slogteren, who lives in Spain, has boosted the total with the magnificent sum of £1,000. We thank him most warmly, together with all those listed below.

C. Beninson, D. J. Bye, A. Douglas, A. D. Gore, B. Morgan and J. O'Neill, £1 each; W. H. and E. Brown, D. M. Carter and L. M. Wright, £2 each; Anonymous, £2.50; Anonymous, £2.60; J. E. D'Aulby and W. J. A. Grant, £3 each; A. S. Edwards, £4; G. B. Stowell, £4.40; C. F. Ablethorpe, G. A. Airey, D. Aldridge, J. L. Broom, K. Byrom, J. M. Cardy, G. J. H. Forrest, E. C. Gray, J. C. Greenhalgh, J. R. Hutton, R. Huxtable, A. Jagger, C. James, D. A. Langdown, L. Lewis, R. Lewis, T. Liddle, A. Negus, M. W. Smith and D. Wright, £5 each; J. Lippitt, £6; A. Varlet, £6.40; Anonymous, P. Cullinan, R. E. Davies and D. N. Towers, £10 each; Anonymous, £15; Anonymous, A. Ewing and P. L. Lancaster, £20 each; Anonymous and A. Willans, £25 each; W. E. H. Butterworth, £45; J. Van Slogteren, £1,000.

Total for August: £1,353.90. (The total for July, not given last month, was £337.80.)

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.

CONTROVERSY

E. M. KARBACZ

Rubbishing one's opponents is not a good argument for a case, as I realise when I read Diane Munday's review of Ludovic Kennedy's book on euthanasia in the September *Freethinker*.

There I read that although those who approve of euthanasia are just "supporters", those who disagree "dogmatically oppose". Worse still, opponents' honesty is questioned, and those who hold that the legislation of euthanasia would be to get on a very undesirable "slippery slope" are tied in with some hypothetical persons "who don't want to come clean about their real motives". It isn't true, and it won't do.

Logical rather than emotional argument should characterise rationalists, and it has never been correct to make such a rigid division between religious and non-religious persons (as has been done, of course, by many other contributors to *The Freethinker*) in attitudes to euthanasia. There are serious, thoughtful people of all religions and none on either side of the euthanasia debate, and the "slippery slope" argument is precisely the important one, and by no means is it fallacious, as Diane Munday has it.

No amount of rigid wording of Acts of Parliament, Rules, Guidelines, or recommendations of committees can get over the fact that laws passed for one purpose have been abused (the Official Secrets Act 1911, intended to catch foreign spies is used to suppress information; the Abortion Act 1967 was never intended to provide abortion on demand, but has permitted it, at least if you have money); the Independent Television Charter allows advertising only during "natural breaks", but now all programmes, including films, are interrupted without any such excuse. Readers can probably think of many other instances. And these are not matters of life and death. Anyone who thinks euthanasia would be different is whistling in the dark. Quite to the contrary; the pitfalls are obvious.

For instance, does no-one suppose that pressure might not be put on an old, tired and sick person to sign consent to his own death? The pressure could come from his relatives, harassed and exhausted by his demands on their time, or just plain greedy and hoping to inherit; or it could come from himself, the desire not to be a burden. Either way it is clear that not every person "signing up" would be an entirely free agent - and it would be too much to expect busy doctors and bureaucrats to check every

application; it would become a matter of routine.

As to signing in advance a "living will" (what an odd expression) this may sound an improvement but of course it isn't any such thing: in fact it would mean that the final decision would rest not with the sick person but with someone else. And this idea represents a subtle change in thinking by the supporters of euthanasia, who used to insist that they favoured it only for those who suffered from disease both painful and fatal: the inclusion now of the senile is already an extension of the original idea, the first step on the "slippery slope". Because what about the senile aged who won't have made a "living will" or signed any other document - why should they be denied this happy release which is presented as being so desirable? What about children or the mentally handicapped who are incapable of giving their informed consent but whose suffering may be just as great? Would their parents or guardians be allowed to consent for them, as they can for most matters?

These are not fallacious arguments. On the contrary, they take account of human experience and human nature. One suspects, too, that there would be a great many people who would support this sort of extension to the original idea - indeed it might be considered a logical progression.

The quotation from Aristotle has no bearing on the pressure for euthanasia. He was speaking of the right to commit suicide if life lost its savour, and no rationalist would deny this right now or then. I doubt however if he would have favoured passing a law in respect of other people. To the old Greeks and Romans, suicide was very much a personal decision.

DIANE MUNDAY

E. M. Karbacz accuses me of "rubbishing" the opponents of euthanasia by, among other things, describing those who approve as "supporters" and those who disapprove as "dogmatically opposed". She may designate my words in any derogatory way she pleases - but I stand by them.

For there is a basic and essential difference between us that has nothing to do with the minutiae of euthanasia - or any other specific topic. Those who support the principle of voluntary euthanasia, and wish to see its practice made possible by law, emphasise it should be available only for those who, having conscientiously considered the matter, have

found it "right" for themselves.

Conversely, those who wish voluntary euthanasia to remain outside the law seek "dogmatically" to force their beliefs, wishes and values on to others, who having thought equally deeply, have arrived at different conclusions.

Thus, while I abhor and reject any thought of forcing death on to E. M. Karbacz - or on to anyone else - she, presumably, would be happy to insist I should endure a living death that I did not want or believe was any longer of value.

A parallel with the abortion controversy is clear. But despite the fact that a few women may be "pressurised" into seeking to terminate a pregnancy against their will, most women (and men) agree that in a multi-belief, democratic society there must be choice on issues of conscience.

However, as E. M. Karbacz and I are in complete agreement that rational rather than emotional arguments should characterise this discussion, I would like to suggest - regarding the "slippery slope" arguments on which she so heavily rests the case against euthanasia - that logical observation of the world around us shows that everything worthwhile carries some risk of abuse, of misuse, or of unwelcome extension. But, as a society, we accept those risks for the greater benefits conferred whilst, at the same time, trying to reduce and control the negative aspects.

If we were always frightened to get on the bus for fear we would not know where to get off, we would never go anywhere and would achieve very little. Similarly, without making pioneering changes, society would remain static and we would all have missed out on the great advances that have improved human health and happiness over the centuries.

The "slippery slopers" are defeatists. I do not believe it so impossible to build safeguards into the system (as they have in Holland) that we should refuse to legislate at all.

As for the Greeks and Romans approving suicide but not euthanasia, I cannot believe they were so irrational as to agree relief from an intolerable situation to one who was sufficiently fit to bring it about himself, whilst denying that same autonomy to somebody who, by chance, could not perform the physical acts necessary to effect the same decision.

And, finally, E. M. Karbacz makes the oft quoted objection that somebody might choose euthanasia out of the desire "not to be a burden" and goes on to write that "not every person signing up would be a free agent" - ignoring the fact that none of us, if we act responsibly, are ever free agents whilst participating members of a family or a community.

But, anyway, is it such a terrible thing to wish

not to be a burden? Forgetting history's account of Captain Oates as a hero for walking out into the snow so as not to further burden his comrades in the Antarctic, I know passionately and deeply, that I would not want to impose on my children the emotional hardship, the pain and the guilt that almost inevitably accompany watching the decline of a loved parent into pain or confusion and the consequent indignities.

Religious Prejudice and Gay Rights

Addressing the annual general meeting of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association in London last month, Daniel O'Hara, the Association chairman, appealed to members to provide help for those damaged by religion.

Referring to the religiously buttressed prejudice still operating against the gay community and individuals within it, he said: "Not only do religious leaders still frequently come out with homophobic statements, revealing all too little awareness of, or sensitivity to, the wide range of human sexuality, but the institutions of our society, with religious endorsement, still very largely perpetuate judgmental attitudes and stereotypes inimical to a greater acceptance of the basic humanity of lesbians and gays.

"There is no sorer sight than a lesbian or gay Christian trying to justify the Christian religion in the face of its blatant and age-long oppression of all forms of alleged heresy or deviance, especially homosexuality."

He called on gay Christians to stop oppressing themselves and work for a society "which is open, decent and free from all images of divine or human domination."

The city of Abbeville, in northern France, has rededicated its monument to a martyr who was executed at the request of the Roman Catholic Church. On 1 July 1766, a 19-year-old named Chevalier de la Barre was tortured and beheaded for failing to remove his hat while he walked within 25 yards of a Catholic procession. The youth was also accused of reading blasphemous works.

According to a new report by the Barna Research Group, church influence has decreased considerably in the United States. Most Americans regard it as an outdated institution.

BOOKS

IN GOD'S COUNTRY: TRAVELS IN THE BIBLE BELT, USA. by Douglas Kennedy. Unwin, £5.99

Exotic species should always be studied in their natural habitat, so if you want to look at evangelical Christians, where else would you go but the American Bible Belt? Douglas Kennedy took to the road in the Deep South in an attempt to find why people become born-again Christians. In a journey that begins with an escapee from the Jehovah's Witnesses and ends with a former murderer ministering to Death Row, Kennedy trawls through the misery and the despair that leads people to seek God where everyday life has failed.

With such splendid phenomena as the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church and the International Church of the Foursquare Bible to choose from, deciding who to visit is an endlessly difficult choice in the towns Kennedy passes through. But while he must have missed some classics, there can be no doubt that he has used his time well. Displaying a quite dizzying stamina, he visits churches, religious radio stations, record companies and even a Christian bikers' association. All hope to save souls, but some have even greater ambitions. For the Rev Joseph Morecroft, a Reconstructionist leader, all institutions must be submitted to Christ's rule: "So, yes, I am in favour of theocracy ... one where God's laws govern every area of life, and where the Bible is the bedrock of all institutions." With the victory of this vision, he proclaims, "every shred of humanism" would be abolished and homosexuality would be punished by death.

Reconstructionism is only one strand of American evangelism. For others, religion is less a matter of taking power than taking dollars, and one of Kennedy's most interesting chapters is that detailing the sorry story of Jim and Tammy Bakker's Heritage USA. A South Carolina-based Christian amusement park, Heritage boasted the Heavenly Fudge Store and the Heaven Scent Perfumery. Allegedly seventy million dollars were obtained in donations for a new hotel, but many more donors had been promised free accommodation every year than could ever have been accommodated. In any event the hotel was never completed. Eventually the dream came to an end amid revelations that a secretary Jim Bakker had reportedly coerced into bed was being paid from ministry funds to keep silent. The Bakkers lost control of their creation and while many of their former followers are still

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trying to stop Heritage from going under, others put up billboards for the "Bring Back Bakkers Club. The Dream Lives On."

If the Bakkers fell victim to sex and cash, they are not the only ones. The most dynamic of the televangelists, Jimmy Swaggart, was brought down by a sex scandal. Though he was not interviewed for the book, he too makes an appearance when a Christian radio entrepreneur tells Kennedy that Swaggart "was the victim of one - and *only one* force: the force of Satan ... It was the Devil that forced Swaggart to visit that prostitute."

Swaggart and the Bakkers are superstars, albeit fallen ones. But Kennedy may well have found further headlines in Dallas-based Robert Tilton, whose television show emphasises how viewers can obtain success by sowing a hundred dollar vow of faith. You can of course send more. As Tilton announced: "There's a person out there watching me... You need to call me right now. Real quick. And you need to sow a vow of one thousand dollars."

The territory through which Kennedy takes us is one in which the lonely can find an ersatz family, the desperate a kind of hope. He has not, fortunately, suffered the fate of two researchers he describes, who tried to study a Christian sect from within and ended up converted. Instead he has been able to portray a world in which he cannot share but which he helps us to understand.

ALAN GROVE

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES, by I.F. Stone, Picador. £4.99

When angina pectoris forced I. F. Stone to give up editing his independent "muckraking" weekly, he decided - in his retirement - to embark on a history of freedom of thought. Not freedom in general, "which has too many ambiguities, and may even be identified with the freedom of the strong to exploit the weak, but freedom to think and to speak".

He began with the seventeenth century but found it necessary to go further and further back until "like so many before me, I fell in love with the ancient Greeks". And at seventy, about the same age as Socrates when he drank the hemlock, I. F. Stone began to learn Greek and to study the sources, in an attempt to understand the trial in 399 BC, which has

REVIEWS

"much in common" with that which led to the foundation of Christianity.

There is, as he says, "no independent contemporary account of either, not even a fragmentary allusion. We have no transcripts, no court records. We do not hear the prosecution. We know only the story as told later by loving disciples."

And that's the problem which has faced philosophers ever since. Xenophon's Socrates is, in Stone's words, "rather platitudinous and banal". Indeed Bertrand Russell described Xenophon as "a military man, not very liberally endowed with brains".

With Plato, on the other hand, we are dealing, as Russell said, with "an imaginative writer of great genius and charm". And the difficulty has always been to decide how much of the dialogues can really be attributed to Socrates; how much he is a vehicle for Plato's own ideas.

Each owes the other a debt, says Stone. "It is to Plato's literary genius that Socrates owes his preeminent position as a secular saint of Western civilisation. And it is Socrates who keeps Plato on the best-seller lists".

It is easy to fall for Plato's charm and, so, to consider Socrates a great philosopher. But, in contrast to the pre-Socratics who, for two centuries had been laying the foundation of natural science, he declared (in the *Apology*) "I have nothing to do with physical speculation", and pursued instead, what Stone aptly calls "a wild goose chase in search of absolute definitions", a search which has been responsible for a great deal of what we call sophistry but ought perhaps to carry the Socratic/Platonic label.

Previously, as Stone says, "the term *sophiste* had a complimentary, not a pejorative connotation". And he cites a fragment of a work by Antiphon (a sophist who appears as a rival to Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*) which "seems to be the earliest explicit affirmation in Greek philosophy of the equality of man". Another sophist, Alcidas, is quoted as saying "God has left all men free. Nature has made none a slave", thereby challenging the institution of slavery which Socrates and Plato never questioned and Aristotle thought "natural".

And, of course, whenever we refer to Greek democracy we should remember it was confined to free men.

Within that context, however, the trial of Socrates is still disturbing. Stone admits that he couldn't

defend the death sentence when he started his research and couldn't defend it at the end. "But I wanted to find out what Plato does not tell us, to give the Athenian side of the story, to mitigate the city's crime and thereby remove some of the stigma the trial left on democracy and on Athens".

Socrates, he points out, had always denigrated Athenian democracy and admired Sparta with its ruling military caste. And there had been conspiracies in Athens in 411 and 404. "The first dictatorship - that of the Four Hundred - lasted only four months; the second - that of the Thirty - eight months. But each crowded many horrors into a short unforgettable span". Moreover, there was a further threat from the Eleusinians in 401, just two years before the trial.

At least two of the Thirty (Critias and Charmides) had "sharpened their wits" as students of Socrates, so there was some justification for the fear that he might have alienated youth. Had he allayed that fear, the trial might have been avoided.

As it was, he sought martyrdom. Not only did he deliberately antagonise the jury which voted 280-220 against him, he stubbornly refused to go along with plans for his escape. He was determined to die.

That does not, of course, excuse the Athenians, though *The Trial of Socrates* may, as Stone hoped, have removed some of the stigma.

More importantly, this book, compiled on a computer with letters one third of an inch high to overcome its author's failing sight, is an intellectual delight, from start to finish.

COLIN McCALL

Producers of a biblical musical have been told they can engage a black American actor to play the part of God. Peter Plouviez, general secretary of British Equity, the actors' union, said they welcomed talented foreign artists working in this country "even when they are required to play such an obvious British part as God."

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Battle of the Boyne

PETER BERRESFORD ELLIS

It seems everyone is prepared to throw in their tuppence worth of mythology when speaking about the significance of the Battle of the Boyne, 1690. Mr D. Boyce is no exception. If James II had defeated William in Ireland, says Mr Boyce, "this would have meant the continuance of the Catholic parliament in Dublin." (See Letters, August issue.)

The Irish Parliament which was called under James II in Dublin was not a *Catholic* parliament. Indeed, James made a point of summoning only Protestant Bishops to take their seats, the majority attending, while Catholic Bishops were not invited to the parliament. And only one third of the parliament were Irish while the majority were English colonialists.

However, the legislation passed by the Jacobite Parliament is of the utmost significance when it came to a more liberal and broadminded State attitude to religion. In opening the Parliament, James agreed to support legislation providing for liberty of conscience. Thus, by Acts XIII and XV of the parliament, the very ideals sought by the Presbyterians of Ulster and other Dissenting Protestant sects, were sanctioned. *All religions were made equal under law*. Each clergyman was to be supported by his own congregation only and no tithes were to be levied upon any man for the support of a church to which he did not belong. The Acts had the objective of removing the major Catholic and Dissenter grievances.

Here, indeed, was the start of what could have led to a real era of civil and religious liberty in Ireland.

The military victories of William of Orange overturned the short-lived period of religious toleration in Ireland. In the negotiations which led to the Treaty of Limerick and removed the Jacobite armies from Ireland, William agreed to allow freedom of religious worship to stand on the Statute Book. But once the Jacobite army was safely shipped out of Ireland, William brought in the Penal Laws. These were not aimed solely at Catholics (as popular histories would have us believe) but at Dissenting Protestants as well. Only the Established Church of England was to have freedom in Ireland and everyone, Catholic and Dissenter, had to pay tithes for the upkeep of its property and clergy.

Under William of Orange there was to be no religious toleration nor an "era of civil and religious liberty" for anyone who was not Episcopalian. Presbyterians suffered greatly from the Penal Laws which caused a quarter of a million of them to migrate from Ulster in the years following William's victory in search of religious freedom in America.

The freedoms which Ulster Presbyterians (and other Dissenters) celebrate so enthusiastically today were the freedom for a Presbyterian minister to spend three months in jail for delivering a sermon; the freedom to pay £100 fines for celebrating the Lord's Supper; the freedom to be excluded from all offices in the Law, Army, Navy, Customs and Excise and Municipal Employment; the freedom to be excluded from representation in any parliamentary borough; and the freedom to be excluded from all seats in the corporations (even in Belfast where Dissenters formed the great majority of the population).

They won the freedom to be given three months imprisonment if any Presbyterian was found teaching children; the freedom to pay tithes for the upkeep of Episcopalian ministers and the freedom to have any marriages performed by a Presbyterian minister declared illegal under fines and imprisonments and those who married being forced to appear in the Episcopalian parish church and make public confession of the sin of fornication.

It is sad to see in Ulster the descendants of a people celebrating the oppression and bondage of their ancestors with such a degree of enthusiasm.

William's "era of civil and religious freedom" caused the Ulster Presbyterian immigrants to take a prominent role in the American War of Independence and then bring the creed of republicanism and the "Rights of Man" back to Ireland where they were active in forming the United Irishmen. "Remember Limerick!" was the battle-cry of Dissenters and Catholic Irish for a hundred years afterwards.

To dismiss the Jacobite Parliament as a "Catholic Parliament" is to fall for the tired old Orange propaganda.

Let us be accurate on the matter of the Papal alliance. James II was merely an ally of Louis XIV in his war against the countries of the Grand Alliance which sought to counter his rapacious territorial ambitions. The Williamite wars in Ireland were a sideshow of the Wars of the Grand Alliance. The Grand Alliance was established, under a treaty signed at Augsburg in 1686. The countries aligned against Louis and James were not only Protestant countries but Catholic ones, such as Spain. One of the most prominent leaders of the Grand Alliance was the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I.

Benedetto Odescalchi, Pope Innocent XI, had been at loggerheads with Louis since the mid 1670s and was still outraged by Louis' march on the Papal States and then on Rome itself. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Augsburg alliance. In

simplistic terms, the Pope as temporal head of the Papal States was supplying men and weapons to William at the Boyne. When news of William's victory came, there was wild rejoicing in those Catholic states which supported the Augsburg alliance and *Te Deums* were sung in the cathedrals of Spain and Austria and in the Papal States. What is surprising about the official celebrations of these Catholic states at the victory of their armies over their enemies? Had Pope Innocent XI still been alive then in all probability a *Te Deum* would have been sung in St. Peter's in Rome, as a rumour had it actually was. But Innocent had died on 11 August, 1689. The new Pope, Pietro Ottoboni, Alexander VIII, was selected on 6 October 1689, and he was endeavouring to negotiate a separate peace with Louis. John Drummond, the Earl of Mellifont, noted that Pope Alexander VIII was "scandalised" by the singing of *Te Deums* for William's victory but not because he was a supporter of James or Louis; it was simply inconvenient and an annoyance while he was engaged in delicate negotiations with Louis. It was not until 1693 that the schism between Louis and Rome was, to some extent, patched up.

Mr Boyce is correct when he says that James was only using Ireland as a stepping stone in his pursuit of power. He certainly cared nothing about Ireland and his 1689 Parliament was so formed that its measures would not have alienated English interests in Ireland. James refused to repeal Poyning's Law, making the Irish Parliament subordinate to English control; and he made it clear that he would not undo the English conquest nor give Ireland any meaningful independence. The Restoration land-settlement (under which James himself had been given an enormous estate spread over sixteen counties) would not be repealed.

I do find it odd when Mr Boyce says if James was victorious "there is little doubt that parliamentary democracy would have been suspended", implying there *existed* a parliamentary democracy. In our modern understanding of democracy, there was little that was democratic about the English, Irish and Scottish parliaments at this time. However, there is no doubt that the Jacobite Parliament was more representative of the majority of the people in Ireland than any other parliament which had sat since the original conquest of the country.

Where the Jacobite Parliament is worthy of comment and interest from a non-sectarian viewpoint, is in the area in which Mr Boyce gives it no credit - in its liberal religious attitudes and approach.

However, when all is said and done, probably the best summation on the significance of the Boyne to modern Ireland comes in the old song:

Two foreign monarchs in battle did join,
Each wanting their heads on the back of a coin;
If the Irish had sense they should have thrown both in the
Boyne
And Partition back into the ocean.

Peter Berresford Ellis is author of The Boyne Water: The Battle of the Boyne, 1690. Published by The Blackstaff Press, 3 Galway Park, Dundonald, Belfast, BT16 0AN, Northern Ireland, price £5.95.

LETTERS

BLASPHEMY LAW AND "THE SATANIC VERSES"

In his review of my book on the Rushdie affair (*A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and "The Satanic Verses"*), Nicolas Walter says that I refer to "the support given by Lord Scarman and Archbishop Runcie to the existing blasphemy law." He goes on to complain that I fail to mention "that they have both changed their minds." He further criticises me for failing to mention that Norman Cohn, whose work I invoke, "also supports the abolition of the (blasphemy) law."

In fact, of course, as Nicolas Walter well knows, neither Lord Scarman nor Dr Runcie have lent their support to "the existing blasphemy law". Both have, in the recent past, supported the view that the existing discriminatory law should be extended in order to afford protection to faiths other than Christianity.

More recently still both Dr Runcie and Lord Scarman have modified their position. Dr Runcie did so during the course of an interview in *The Guardian* which appeared on 23 March 1990. I immediately revised my manuscript in the light of this new development, which I refer to specifically on page 67 of my book. I made this last-minute revision precisely in order to avoid the charge which Nicolas Walter now levels against me.

Lord Scarman's shift of position came even later and was announced in a brief letter to *The Daily Telegraph* which appeared on 14 April 1990, just as my book was about to go to press. I did not see this letter and learnt of Lord Scarman's change of heart only after the book had been published. This was when Lord Scarman himself wrote to me saying that he agreed with my analysis. He went on to make it clear that he now believed "that blasphemy must go and be replaced by a legislative provision making insult to a person's religion a public order offence." This seems to me an entirely reasonable position. Had I known about it in time I would most certainly have reported it.

As for my reference to Norman Cohn, its main purpose was to express my own feeling of gratitude for his work. I was aware that Professor Cohn had signed the Statement Against Blasphemy Law. But from my correspondence with him before my book was published I was also aware that he wished to see minorities protected against obscene abuse - possibly by emending the Race Relations Act. In this respect I find myself in broad agreement with Norman Cohn just as I am in sympathy with the most recent views of Dr Runcie and Lord Scarman. Contrary to Nicolas Walter's imputation, we would all like to see the blasphemy

law abolished. The question which remains is not about blasphemy but about whether religious minorities should remain unprotected against the kind of extreme and obscene abuse which is now illegal when it is applied to racial minorities.

There is one other point I would like to raise. Nicolas Walter upbraids me for writing that words "can be as lethal, almost, as bullets" and suggests that this is a "silly remark". But I chose my words with the utmost care. Ever since the Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced his *fatwa* on 14 February 1989, Salman Rushdie has been in hiding in fear of his life. That is how powerful and dangerous words can be. Of course the *fatwa* is an extreme example which emerged out of a very special religious and historical context. But one of the aims of my book was to examine the religious and historical contexts which can give words a quite frightening power. Nicolas Walter does not like the result. This is scarcely surprising since the book is, in one respect, an extended critique of his own position.

As an atheist and a freethinker myself I trust that readers of *The Freethinker* will make up their own minds about *A Brief History of Blasphemy* rather than relying upon a review which is, to say the least, partial.
RICHARD WEBSTER, Southwold, Suffolk.

Nicolas Walter replies: There is room for disagreement about who supports or opposes this or that form of a blasphemy law, but my point is that Richard Webster uses the trick of invoking the names of well-known people who don't actually take the positions attributed to them. The arguments for making religious insult a public order offence ignore the fact that it already is one under the existing Public Order Acts, if it is committed in a public place and is likely to lead to a breach of the peace; the arguments for making religious insult equivalent to racial insult ignore the fact that the criminal provisions of the Race Relations Act have done more harm than good. As for the point about words and bullets, Richard Webster says he chooses his words "with the utmost care" but then repeats his careless misuse of them. Muslims are harmed not by *The Satanic Verses* but by fanatical interpretations of it; Rushdie's life is threatened not by Khomeini's *fatwa* but by the bullets of his fanatical followers. Words have little power on their own, for good or bad; what matters is what people do, not what they say; otherwise we are all in trouble — including Richard Webster.

Richard Webster's *A Brief History of Blasphemy* is published by the Orwell Press, 64 High Street, Southwold, Suffolk, IP18 6DN, price £3.95. Nicolas Walter's *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern* is published by the Rationalist Press Association, 88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW, price £3.95.

ISLAMIC COMMENTARY

We were very kindly sent a copy of your August issue which included your editorial on the subject of Dr Kalim Siddiqui's speech which included the phrase "lava of hatred". May I comment in some of the points which you raised?

We felt here that this speech was particularly unfortunate and ill-timed, as well as containing suggestions which we could not support. You cannot have a state within a state,

otherwise there would be chaos. We are obliged to obey the law of the land, unless of course a law is enacted which made it mandatory to disobey God's Commandments; as a former Christian clergyman that would have been my position then also.

With regard to your comment, "Islam is a hidebound faith ...", I appreciate that *The Freethinker* has always taken a secularist and humanistic view. I can remember first being shown a copy by a colleague when I was a young 18-year old railway signaller some 45 years ago. However, I feel that much of what you criticise in Islam is its greatest strength. We believe that the Holy Qur'an was revealed to the Holy Prophet Muhammed (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him) and that the Arabic text has remained inviolate and unchanged to this day, unlike the Bible. Having said that, we do need to distinguish between what is true Islam and national cultural traditions which have become attached to it in some places.

Finally, you refer to "secular Muslims". This is a contradiction in terms, as a Muslim is one who has submitted himself/herself to God, he or she cannot be secular. Islam embraces the whole of life, and this is surely one of the points of the Five Times Daily Prayers; we break off from our daily tasks to worship God and then return to those tasks which are thus set within a framework of prayer and our acknowledgement of our utter dependence upon God.

ABDUL AHAD HALFORD, Islamic Propagation Centre International, Birmingham.

SPIRITUAL MATTERS

Unfortunately, I remain as little convinced by Jean Overton Fuller's reference to Dr Vernon Harrison's paper on Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (August) as by her original defence of HPB.

It's some time since I read about a court case involving handwriting experts, but I seem to recall such evidence was called by both sides! Even if Dr Harrison is correct, it's a long way from his thesis to Tibetan authorship and miraculous production of the Mahatma letters. My personal view is that the Hodgson Report was a little harsh but established its central case: that HPB was a charlatan.

Let me make it clear that in my July letter I intended "some contemporaries within" to refer to the Society for Psychical Research as well as to the Theosophical movement, as I was aware that SPR reports don't carry the imprimatur of the society itself. Further, I remembered that Harry Price established his investigative credentials with a number of debunking SPR reports before launching his own imposture - the Borley Rectory ghost.

On another subject in the August number, the editorial "Allah's Bover Boy", I was saddened to contrast the current atrocities of militant Islam in Britain with my own experiences a couple of decades earlier. These included work with the National Council for Civil Liberties to eliminate "Paki-bashing", and friendly relations (including visits and lecturing) with a mosque and its charming, liberal imam. I wonder what has happened to both during the current upheavals but daren't name it lest it should be fire-bombed by extremists.

Of course, I foresaw the problems that an activated Islam could create in education, blasphemy law and other areas of Christian privilege masquerading as "undenominational" religious sensibility, but didn't envisage the speed and intensity of such activation, emanating from Iran.

DAVID TRIBE, Fairlight, NSW, Australia

Muslim Women Defy Traditionalists

A conference of Muslim women held in London has condemned arranged marriages and sexual inequality.

One of the speakers, Suraiya Tariq, told the conference: "The importing of brides and grooms from a village in the Punjab just to satisfy some mistaken notion of family propriety is a formula for marital disaster.

"Equally to be condemned is a practice of keeping girls at home until marriage, with the result that the opportunity to mature socially, culturally or educationally between leaving school and setting up a home is denied them."

The speaker also called for special helplines for Muslim women who suffered from isolation, depression and racial discrimination.

Two men purporting to speak for all British Muslims have pledged the community's support for the anti-abortion Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC).

Addressing the Society's annual conference in Manchester, Mr Faiyazuddin, director of Leicester Islamic Foundation, said the anti-abortion message of Islam is clear.

Mohammed Khamisa, Conservative parliamentary candidate for Birmingham, Sparkbrook, said those who did not support the "pro-life" cause "would have to answer for it on the day of judgment.

"We have been sent down to earth as Allah's best creation", he declared. "We have to fulfil the obligation of living in this world as obedient servants of God."

A representative of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which operates counselling services and abortion clinics, commented: "A lot of the Muslim girls who come to us are from families who have been caught up in the wave of fundamentalism and are opposed to abortion.

"But women who want abortions will obtain them, regardless of their family background."

Pilgrims visiting the shrine at Lourdes have been told that holy water is in short supply, so don't go carting it off in gallon containers. There was little snow last winter and the reservoir which feeds shrine is at a low level.

Teachers in Scotland's Roman Catholic schools are worried about a new rule that could wreck their chances of promotion. Before they can take up a new job, they must get the written approval of the parish priest.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 4 November, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Beatrice Clarke: Cuba Through Esperanto Eyes.

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, 6 November, 8 pm. Rosemary Utidjian: Is Birth Control Still Needed?

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Weston-super-Mare. Information obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone (0242) 39175.

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, 25 October, 8 pm. Frank Field: The UN Today - a Personal View.

National Secular Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, 3 November, 2.15 pm. Annual General Meeting. Admission by current membership card.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 18 October, 7.30 pm. Public meeting: Freedom of Speech and Expression — Should there be Limits? Thursday, 15 November, 7.30 pm. Ramalingam Muthukamaran: Hinduism.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 November, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Roger Mattingley: The Future of Community Care in Sutton.

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.

Increased Support for Sunday Shopping

A new MORI survey published last month shows a big increase in the number of people who go shopping on Sunday.

The survey, carried out on behalf of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, showed that 63 per cent of the population now go shopping on Sunday compared with just 22 per cent in 1983.

When asked, "If a lot of shops were open on Sunday would you ever go shopping?", 71 per cent said they would compared with 52 per cent in 1983.

Commenting on the survey, SHRC Director, Roger Boaden said: "this is clear evidence that consumers are voting with their feet. The demand for Sunday shopping is now so great that the current law simply can't keep up. Coming on top of the recent muddle in the courts this will increase the pressure to bring the law into the 1990s. Consumers obviously want greater choice and they are looking to the Government and Parliament to provide it."

The survey found that DIY stores and garden centres were most likely to be used if more Sunday trading was allowed.

Survey participants were also asked: "At present

only shops selling newspapers and certain types of goods are allowed to open on Sundays. Do you think the law should be changed to allow other types of shops to open on Sunday or not?". Sixty three per cent agreed that the law should be changed. This is in line with previous surveys over a period of nine years which have consistently shown a majority of two to one in favour of substantial reform.

Hard to Accept

The Irish churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant, are gradually losing their grip on the nation's young people.

A "Hardest to Accept" project, organised by the Faculty of Education at the University of Ulster, has revealed a high degree of scepticism among adolescents. Asked to complete the sentence, "The thing I find hardest to accept about religion is ...", the 1,177 pupils from ten Catholic and ten Protestant schools gave the existence of God as the stumbling block. A typical comment by the young people was: "No one has any real proof that there is a God, Jesus or heaven." Many preferred a scientific explanation for the origins of the universe to the biblical one.

Lack of evidence or a first-hand experience caused many of the participants to reject claims about miracles; girls found innocent suffering caused by famine and natural disasters as a strong reason for doubting religious claims. Some posed the question: "If Jesus performed miracles and saved people's lives, why can't he save all those dying from starvation in Africa?"

In the Republic, Fr John Gavin, executive secretary of the Episcopal Commission for Emigrants, told a conference in Dublin that over a thousand young people left Ireland every week. The country could become the retirement home of Europe.

The Catholic Church has always discouraged emigration, particularly in Britain. And although there may be genuine concern for the welfare of young emigrants, the fundamental problem for the bishops is that many of those who leave are lost for good - not only to Ireland but to the Church.

Homosexuals should be compelled to wear identification tags in public, says the Association of Catholic Parents in a submission to Queensland's Criminal Justice Commission.

(continued from front page)

that the arts represent terrify Tebbit because they involve doubt and feeling. And he wishes to have neither."

Appropriately for a political reptile, Tebbit shed crocodile tears for Islam because of the supposed insult inflicted by *The Satanic Verses*. He castigated Salman Rushdie for making "an assault upon his own religion." The death sentence (which Tebbit, a Member of Parliament representing the "party of law and order", did not once criticise) was a consequence of the author's "egotistical and self-opinionated attack on the religion into which he was born."

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, answered the point well in the Magazine's correspondence page.

She wrote: "When Mr Tebbit denounces Salman Rushdie for "an assault upon his own religion" he means, of course, the religion into which the man happened to be born - and none of us can help the circumstances of our birth. If no one had ever been brave enough to renounce and attack the religious beliefs and practices into which he had been born, we would still be carrying out human sacrifice, or, from a later age, burning "witches" and "heretics" alive."