

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 110 No. 12

DECEMBER 1990

40p

HIGH COURT UPHOLDS ATHEIST'S WILL AND SECULAR FUNERAL REQUEST

The funeral of David Nickson, a 39-year-old history graduate, has taken place in London nearly six months after his death. The delay was due to his parents' determination to prevent a non-religious ceremony as stipulated in the Will he made earlier this year. They obtain an injunction to stop the funeral which should have taken place shortly after his death in May.

David Nickson was an atheist for many years, a member of the National Secular Society since 1977. But Mrs Joan Nickson, who is a devout Anglican, refused to believe that her son's atheism was "genuine". She wanted him to have a Christian burial and for his estate to go to a member of the family.

Executors Mark Bunyan and Andrew Craig insisted that they be allowed to carry out their friend's wishes. They took the case to the High Court.

The parents' lawyers were to argue against both David Nickson's competence to make a Will two months before his death and also the suitability of a non-religious funeral. But they apparently persuaded the Nicksons to drop the second argument and rely solely on the first; for if that argument were to prove successful, the Will would be declared invalid and the executors ousted by the next of kin with regards to the funeral, as well as the financial provisions of the Will.

In his judgement, Mr Justice Vinelott said he had no hesitation in declaring that David Nickson was capable of making a Will on 30 March. This had been stated by the expert medical witness who, incidentally, is a committed Christian.

Judge Vinelott said that Mrs Nickson's feelings as a devout Christian prevented her from accepting her

son's strong antipathy to organised religion.

The High Court decision was itself clearly just, but some features of the case are disgraceful.

First, there was a determined attempt, for religious reasons, to flout Mr Nickson's wishes. Secondly, his friends were subjected to prolonged distress because of the delay in arranging his funeral. Thirdly, the parents' costs were met by legal aid, but the executors' costs (estimated at £12,000) have to be met by the estate, of which the National Secular Society is chief beneficiary.

NSS president Barbara Smoker commented: "There ought surely to be some provision to save successful litigants from being penalised in this way, especially when they have been forced into a case by 'frivolous' litigants on the other side who are not even risking their own money."

Executor Mark Bunyan recalled his friend as someone who strongly believed that the world would be a better place without religion.

"As long as I knew him, from 1975 onwards, David was always strongly opposed to any religion and indeed tolerated very few friends who professed religious beliefs, conventional or unconventional. He was particularly virulent against Christianity, especially for the hypocrisy of its values in preaching poverty yet having amassed vast wealth at the expense of its congregation.

"As a proud and very 'out' gay man, he also loathed Christianity's homophobia, justifiably seeing it as the cause of so many of the problems that gay people face worldwide."

David Nickson's wish was granted when a large gathering of friends assembled at Lambeth Crematorium for the secular committal ceremony. None of his family attended the funeral.

The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or Editor.

Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 18th of the preceding month to the Editor at 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT (telephone 0742-685731). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

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

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

ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

Printed by F. Bristow and Co., London

NEWS A

PROGRESS WITH REALISM

Looking back on 1990, freethinkers can detect encouraging signs and note at least two important victories.

The campaign for an extension of blasphemy law to protect Islam suffered a severe setback when the High Court rejected an appeal by the British Muslim Action Front to prosecute Salman Rushdie and Penguin books, author and publishers of *The Satanic Verses*. Secular humanist and anti-censorship organisations can claim credit for the noticeable decline in support for blasphemy law by ecumenically-minded religious leaders and politicians.

The success of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill was a triumph for its supporters and the most shattering defeat yet sustained by would-be wreckers of the 1967 Abortion Act. The "Life" lobby committed considerable resources to their campaign against the Bill, and its passage through the House of Commons by a large majority, together with adverse publicity following attacks on abortion clinics and harassment of patients and staff by priest-led "pavement counsellors", has demoralised and caused division in the "Life" ranks.

Freethinkers can also derive encouragement from results of surveys on attitudes to religion in Britain. These showed that indifference to and outright rejection of religion had increased to a marked extent. One poll (British Social Attitudes) revealed that Britain is now one of the least religious countries in the western world, with 34 per cent of those interviewed saying "no religion". It is significant that students and young people are becoming increasingly sceptical about religious claims.

On the international front, the demise or radical restructuring of rigid political regimes has been coupled with an alarming growth of religious fanaticism. As the Roman Catholic Church's influence wanes, a new menace, Islam, is becoming a dangerous threat to peace and freedom. Now that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are no longer paralysed by fear and distrust, Christian Right-wingers in America who have exploited the anti-Communist phobia may find that their seeds of faith are falling on less fertile ground.

ISSUES AND NOTES

There is a danger that American televangelists will transfer their operations to Europe; this includes Britain, where they could take advantage of charity law and provision in the Broadcasting Bill for an increase in religious output.

While welcoming those modest advances made during the year, immoderate optimism must be avoided. Religious pressure groups continue to prevent reforming measures from reaching the Statute Book. The 1967 Abortion Act still does not apply to Northern Ireland; Parliament is about the only place where voluntary euthanasia is a taboo subject; laws relating to blasphemy, charities and Sunday trading remain unrepealed.

No doubt the churches will continue to defend their privileges and exploit misplaced respect for religion. Christian "morality" groups will use every dodge from satanist scares to bogus statistics in order to hoodwink the gullible. They should be resisted at every opportunity.

STILL PERSISTING



The impending retirement of the Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, is no cause for lamentation. From the vantage point of the House of Lords, his pronouncements on "moral issues" have established him as one of Britain's most reactionary religious leaders.

What is to be expected of the next Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks? Some idea of his line of thought may be gleaned from this year's Reith Lectures which he has been delivering on BBC Radio 4 under the general title of *The Persistence of Faith*.

In the first Lecture (14 November), Dr Sacks set out the familiar thesis that the survival of morality depends on the persistence of faith. He included the patronising remark that "only a tiny minority of the population described themselves as atheists or agnostics". This figure, which is a little above or below ten per cent, depending on the survey, may not be large, but it involves several million moral people. It is as large as that for Roman Catholics. It is very much larger than that for religious Jews.

Britain is no longer a Christian country and a considerable proportion of British Jews are not religious. References to "Britain's two million

Muslims" are also highly suspect. The Islamic Party's candidate in the recent Bradford North by-election received only 800 votes — this in a city with the country's largest concentration of Muslims and where Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was burnt by fanatical worshippers of Allah.

The proportion of the population who simply have no religion is now about one third. But what chance is there of the BBC allowing a proper reply to Rabbi Sacks on the air, let alone of a Reith series arguing the opposite view?

THE REV IRON LADY

A few days before Margaret Thatcher was turfed out of 10 Downing Street by loyal colleagues, it was stated in the House of Commons that another door may be opened to her. Michael Alison, Conservative MP for Selby and Second Church Estate Commissioner, told the House that Mrs Thatcher would be "very welcome in the Church of England". It was "not out of character or possibility" that she "might wish to offer herself for ordination...

"No Prime Minister since Gladstone has made such an open and avowed commitment to Christianity", he declared.

The Bishop of London has not expressed (in public) his view on this fascinating suggestion by the Second Church Estate Commissioner. But many of those opposed to the ordination of women are reported to be in a state of severe shock.

Nevertheless Mr Alison's proposition will have its supporters. Mrs Thatcher's Victorian values are attractive to many in the nether regions of Anglicanism. Her concern for the poor and the family is well known, except by poor families. And she is a good preacher, as many former Cabinet colleagues will testify.

However, several important questions arise. Would Mrs Thatcher find that ministering to the small band of worshippers who toddle along to the parish church on Sunday a frustrating waste of her talent? Could she restrain Denis when the Communion Cup is passed around? And could she resist the temptation to handbag a squalling infant who resented having its head sprinkled with font water?

Olga Stringfellow, a Hampshire faith healer, has been fined for drinking while under the influence of spirits (the bottled variety). The court was told that she needed drink as part of the healing process.

ST MUGG: OFF TO THE PEARLY GATES

For someone who constantly proclaimed joyous anticipation of death, Malcolm Muggeridge was in no great hurry to depart this vale of tears. But at last he has consummated his ghoulish love affair with the grim reaper.

During the last three decades of his life, Malcolm Muggeridge's supercilious voice was uplifted in support of reactionary and invariably religious causes. He sponsored Jesus jamborees and campaigns organised by Festival of Blight-style groups in the 'Sixties and 'Seventies. Speaking at the 1967 convention of Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, he declared: "We are in a situation where our civilisation is running down at such a fantastic speed, and the only alternative I have got is this Christian view of life." Four years later in a foreword to Mrs Whitehouse's *Who Does She Think She is?* he described her as "one of the most remarkable women of our time", who has been "sustained throughout by a true commitment to Christ and his teaching."

Malcolm Muggeridge was a two-faced old humbug. He made frequent and well-paid appearances on television and radio programmes — lambasting television and radio. He fulminated against this materialist age, but did not go short of material comforts. Randy as any Rolling Stone in his younger days, when old and past it he became a relentlessly boring sex hater. He denounced sex education as "odious", and praised the Roman Catholic Church, which he joined in 1983, as "the only one that is opposed to abortion and contraception".

He was the supreme example of radical poacher turned conservative gamekeeper. Although the "Jesus Saves" brand of evangelical Protestantism was *infra dig* to the fastidious Muggeridge, he kept Rome at arm's length for a long time. But eventually he succumbed, through his "enormous admiration" for the reactionary Pope John Paul and the influence of Mother Teresa. Their "Christian view of life" was obscurantist and inhuman enough for Malcolm Muggeridge.

Parish magazines are often a source of useful information. The following is an extract from a report in Yatton Moor Parish Magazine: "The sudden gust of wind took all who were at the ceremony by surprise. People's hats were blown off, and copies of the Vicar's speech and other rubbish were scattered over the site."

IRISH ELECTION "MIRACLE"

Voters in the Republic of Ireland have given the Roman Catholic hierarchy a hefty kick up the canonicals. Last month the unbelievable happened when Mary Robinson was elected president with a majority in excess of 86,000. A constitutional lawyer, she will hold the post for seven years.

Mrs Robinson is a formidable champion of personal liberty who has opposed the RC Church on issues like family planning and divorce. Her defiance of traditional taboos in a narrow, church-ridden society has made her a hate figure of the "faith and family" fraternity.

The advent of television and a huge increase in air travel between the Republic and Britain are two factors that have lessened the church's grip on Irish society. Another is the courageous and dedicated work of groups like the Campaign for the Separation of Church and State. Dick Spicer, honorary secretary of the CSCS, analyses the presidential election on page 190.

Freethinker Fund

In this, the last issue of *The Freethinker* for 1990, we welcome many new readers who were enrolled during the last twelve months. Warm appreciation is extended to all who contributed to the Fund, including those who are listed below. The total for 1990, which will be announced next month, promises to be a record one.

M.G. McIver and J.W. Mooney, £1 each; G. Michael, £1.40; D.A. O'Sullivan, M. Pinsker, W.G. Stirling and G. Vale, £2 each; R.J. Delaurey and B. Piercy, £2.50 each; S. Jones, A. Marshall, S. Waite and J. Wimble, £3 each; C. Minary and F. Steihl, £4.40 each; G.L.C. Lucas, £4.50; T. Atkins, C. Bondi, J.F. Cleave, F. Coubrough, G. Coupland, M.J. Coward, S. Cox, D.H. Dale, M. Duane, P. George, T. Green, M. Hill, E. Lewenstein, T. McKinnel, T.A. Miller, D. Richards, M.J. Rogers, R.T. Savage, W. Steinhardt, O. Watson, C.M.G. Wilson and V. Wilson, £5 each; N.K. Bridge, £7; J. Dobbin, C. Brook and D. Lanten, W. Irvine, E. McCann and F.E. Seward, £10 each; A. Beeson and M.J. Sargent, £15 each; Anonymous and A. Whitehead, £25 each.

Total for October: £288.70.

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

Storytime, or How Christmas Appears to an Agnostic

CHARLES WARD

Many people in this country, not to say the world, don't "buy" the Christmas message. Not the theological part, anyway. About God becoming Man. The Incarnation as Christians call it. Yet year after year they fall in goodhumouredly with the whole shemozzle. Although they don't believe the theology, disagreement is suspended as it were.

The gaiety of the superficial features (cards, holly and the rest) is enough for some. Considerate unbelievers, acknowledging that a sincere religious faith lies at the heart of this popular festival, would not sneer at their religious friends' sincerity though, being atheists or agnostics, they will regard Christian beliefs — to put it no more strongly — as unproved, improbable assumptions.

In this undeclared armistice they are possibly moved by the sentiment of friendliness towards all and sundry which is generated in the festive season. Of course a realistic appraisal of history, not excluding contemporary affairs, reminds both believer and unbeliever that the cost to mankind of misguided sincerity has been of tragic enormity.

But you don't wring hands, or necks, at a party. People feel that to criticise the religious basis of Christmas at Christmas-time would be rather like blowing a raspberry at a wedding. In an atmosphere of merriment, who wants to be "heavy"?

Family life assumes a fresh significance. Children are in the forefront. It is their time, we are told. But there is a child in each of us who delights in make-believe. Just as Father has a plausible excuse to play with those fascinating toys, many adults fight shy of admitting that they personally enjoy this annual Storytime. Even if they think of it as "only a story" as unbelievers are bound to do.

The pre-Yule world, the nine to five commotion of survival, which will return with the January sales, is where we are caught up in the rough and tumble of mundane reality. And where we can debate the contradictory interpretations that we place upon the facts of existence as we perceive them. Whether or not it is rational to believe what we want to believe. Or to be agnostic without qualification.

For the time being there is an embargo (among all but the most churlish) on expression of dissent. Everyone is to be made to feel at ease.

Paradoxically, at this most dogmatic celebration ("God made Flesh" being the central theme) Christians demonstrate a depth of feeling for humanity which arises less, one suspects, from their

theology than from innate human qualities of love and compassion that unbelievers also share.

Even regular church-goers sing the mind-boggling lyrics of their Advent carols without a trace of comprehension, while with genuine pleasure in giving voice to an indefinable exuberance of spirit. Christmas is a season of emotion, not one of intellectual exercise.

Man is not wholly a rational creature. Getting people to listen to sweet reason has always been considerably more difficult than arousing their feelings. On that account we can be glad that "angelic" emotions dominate the Christmas period. Wonder, joy, goodwill and peace. Who is not for these? Since the dawn of history there have been advocates. Christianity may enshrine some high ideals but it does not have proprietary rights.

Who could quarrel with a Storytime (if recognised as such) so powerful to lift the spirit and revitalise our good intentions? And, if atheists will pardon the expression, "God knows" we cannot do without some hope also. Our personal happiness may depend a great deal upon it. As for the planet ...

Of course, whereas the devout tend to think in terms of Divine rescue operations, unbelievers have to get along with just trying to concentrate on how, if possible, they may solve the problems confronting them.

It would not be fair to suggest that all Christians expect a Higher Power to relieve them of responsibility but, in general, Christians have a preference for talking about what, they say, their God has done, or will do, rather than about the human activity or lack of it, which is all (along with natural events) that can actually be observed.

The trouble with stories is that we are inclined to enjoy them merely as providing a temporary escape from the humdrum and from reality. "And why not?" you may say. Yes, but how much more valuable is a story which inspires us to FACE reality.

Rare this may be, yet it does sometimes happen and we feel we can meet our difficulties with fresh understanding, courage and effectiveness. Out of the invisible, the formless — so to speak — comes a good idea that is given truly human shape and brought "down to earth" as purpose, plan and practical expression.

That, I suggest, is a kind of incarnation no rational person would dispute.

Brave Fighter for Free Thought and Free Speech

NICOLAS WALTER

Richard Carlile, one of the main campaigners for freedom of thought and speech in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century, and also one of the main founders of the freethought movement, was born 200 years ago on 8 December.

Richard Carlile was born in 1790 into a lower-middle class family in Ashburton, a small town in Devon (where he is being remembered by an exhibition in a house near his birthplace). He was fairly well educated, attending the local grammar school, but he continued to educate himself all his life. He was apprenticed as a tinsmith and worked in several places in southern England before getting married and settling in London in 1813.

In 1816, during the social and political upheaval following the Napoleonic wars, he was drawn to radical ideas and activity. He adopted deism and republicanism, abandoned his trade, and became a leading publisher, editor, writer, speaker and prisoner for the cause. For ten years he was a central figure in the struggle between the official authorities and the unofficial forces of reaction on one side, and the organised opposition and individual dissidents on the other. His great assets were unlimited courage and energy; his great liabilities were intellectual eccentricity and emotional instability.

In 1817 he took over the publishing business of William Sherwin, a younger colleague, and immediately got into all sorts of trouble. He was imprisoned without trial for four months in 1817 for reprinting political parodies of church services (which William Hone had published and withdrawn under pressure), and for a week in 1819 for publishing extreme denunciations of those responsible for the Peterloo Massacre (of which he was a principal witness and one of the first reporters). Then in 1819 he was prosecuted both by the Government and by private vigilantist societies for publishing *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine and other anti-Christian writings.

This was the beginning of Carlile's great fame, but also the end of his wider influence. He was so determined to provoke the authorities that, when they failed to prosecute him for sedition but decided instead to prosecute him for blasphemy, he deliberately continued to publish books which had already been found blasphemous. In this way he founded the first permanent freethought publishing business in Britain, but at the same time he lost

much support from the wider radical movement, which was afraid of seeming to oppose religion. As a result he was virtually isolated by the time of what he called his "mock trials" at the end of 1819.

In October he was convicted of blasphemous libel, in spite of — or because of — his vigorous conduct of his own defence, and in November he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment with heavy fines and sureties for good behaviour. He refused to pay a penny, so he spent a total of six years in Dorchester Jail, and the authorities repeatedly raided his premises and seized his stocks in an attempt to destroy his business. But he succeeded not only in continuing to produce subversive literature from prison (which was possible in those days) but also in mobilising his family and a growing circle of friends and supporters to continue the work.

His helpers tended to share his fate. He was joined in prison by his sister and his wife (who even had a child there), and many other people were fined and imprisoned for selling his publications, including dozens of workers in his London shop and an unknown number of street-sellers all over the country. From this struggle for the freedom to circulate freethought writings emerged the first permanent freethought movement in Britain, in the form of a network of local groups often called *Zetetic Societies* (*zetetic* is Greek for *seeking*).

Carlile developed his ideas in prison. He moved from Paine's deism to true atheism, and became the first person in Britain to deny the existence of God without disguise or reservation or equivocation, summing up his views in *Every Man's Book: or What is God?* (1826). He adopted the philosophical system later described as scientific materialism, describing it in an *Address to Men of Science* (1820).

He was a puritan in personal matters, opposing tobacco and alcohol and any excess in behaviour, and he called himself a prude in sexual matters. Yet he also became one of the first people in Britain who openly defended freedom of sexual activity and of so-called obscene publications, and he also openly defended and described contraceptive techniques in an essay called *What is Love?* (1825), which was frequently reprinted as a pamphlet with that title or else as *Every Woman's Book*. But this caused him to become yet further isolated from the wider radical movement, which was even more afraid of seeming to support free love. He also

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advocated easier divorce and votes for women, which made him still more unpopular. Carlile was a strong individualist and opponent of socialism (like Charles Bradlaugh). He was one of the few radicals of his time who rejected both the old myths of the English law and constitution and the new myths of parliamentary democracy and utopian communism, and he opposed both the Chartist and the Co-operative movements. He was increasingly marginalised by his rejection of prevailing left-wing ideology, and his reputation declined, but he never lost his position as a pioneer in the struggle to discuss these issues.

In 1825 the authorities at last gave up their campaign, the blasphemy prosecutions stopped, and Carlile and his followers were released. He resumed his business in London, but soon ran into difficulties again. He had won the right to publicise unorthodox views on religion and politics, but too few people agreed with his particular views to provide the basis for a viable movement or even for financial security.

For a time he was associated with an idiosyncratic clergyman called Robert Taylor, who preached a mystical and mystical form of religion combining an allegorical interpretation of Christianity with what was later called religious humanism. He toured the country, either alone or with Taylor (who spent several periods in prison for blasphemy), on what they called "infidel missions", which brought him notoriety but lost him support. He also held public meetings in London, which were successful for a time, and produced a series of periodicals, which were not.

In 1831 he was prosecuted for an article defending the Swing movement of rural sabotage. He was convicted of seditious libel and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, again with heavy fines and surties. Again he refused to pay a penny, and spent two-and-a-half years in jail in London. While he was in prison he was approached by Eliza Sharples, a follower from Lancashire, and they began an association which became a lifelong union. In 1832 she became the first woman in Britain to give freethought lectures and to edit a freethought magazine — calling herself and it *Isis*. Carlile had long been on bad terms with his wife, they separated in 1832, and when he was released in 1833 he was joined by Eliza (who already had their first child — prisons were very different in those days!).

Carlile lived for another ten years, but his important career was over. His publishing business declined and was superseded by that of his former colleague James Watson. He was imprisoned again,

spending a couple of months in jail for causing a public nuisance after refusing to pay church rates and displaying blasphemous effigies in his shop window. He scraped a living from freelance journalism, gifts from rich admirers, a series of periodicals and a series of lecture tours. He developed his ideas to extremes of eccentricity, calling himself a Christian as well as a rationalist, taking out a licence to preach, and advocating church reform. This only succeeded in alienating his old supporters without gaining new ones, since he seemed to have abandoned freethought but his version of Christianity was unrecognisable to other Christians. His actual arguments became increasingly peculiar, but his basic attitude remained unchanged; one of his last public actions was to support G.J. Holyoake in his trial for blasphemy.

By the time Carlile died in London in 1843, he was almost forgotten. His last recorded words were: "I am the same man I have always been; I have gone neither to the right nor to the left; my aim has been to accomplish one great purpose". His failure was to isolate himself from the movement he joined, by following unorthodoxy to extremes, opposing fashionable movements, and quarrelling with all his colleagues; his success was to be his own man to the end, to defend the principle of open discussion of all subjects, and to extend the practice of freethought and free expression. He failed in most of the purposes he aimed to accomplish, but he succeeded in laying the basis for other people to carry on the struggle.

Carlile will always be remembered as one of the bravest pioneers of the free press, and as such he appears in every history of the subject. He should also be remembered as one of the first founders of the freethought movement. One of his few religious defenders in 1819 was William Johnson Fox, the minister of the Unitarian chapel which later became South Place Ethical Society. The Zetetic Societies which appeared in the 1820s were followed by the Secular Societies which were organised by Holyoake in the 1850s and reorganised by Charles Bradlaugh in the 1860s, and whose work is continued by the National Secular Society (which symbolically owns his gavel). His publishing business was followed by a continuous series which were run by James Watson, Austin Holyoake, Charles Watts, and C.A. Watts, and whose work is continued by the Rationalist Press Association (which symbolically owns his writing-table). He was a humanist long before the word was used in our sense. Everyone who cares about freedom of thought and freedom of speech should honour the memory of Richard Carlile, two centuries after his birth.

The Satanic Panic

JOHN CAMPBELL

Christian fundamentalists, in line with their American counterparts, are fostering a panic over "satanic" activity involving the ritual abuse of children. Is Britain in danger of becoming embroiled in a witch-hunt directed against what is broadly described as the New Age Movement?

Accusations of the existence of highly organised satanic abuse emerged long before the recent Rochdale and Nottingham cases hit the headlines; the United States has been suffering from this panic for ten years. For most of the 'Eighties, the British opposition to satanism took the form of picketing "occult" shops by fundamentalist Christians who failed to get Parliament to outlaw them in 1982. Self-styled Satanists committing sexual crimes, and the odd American accusation, periodically emerged in the media, but no one paid much attention. All that changed in 1988 when the press, from the *Sunday Sport* to the *Independent*, fell over themselves to expose the deadly menace of satanic abuse confronting Britain.

But these accusations were merely the first step. Interviewed on the B B C's "Heart of the Matter", self-styled "cult" member saviour Sue Hutchinson of SAFE, when asked was it true that descriptions of satanic ritual abuse "would be so shocking, people wouldn't believe it", replied: "Nobody's ready for that yet." She was alluding to the allegation that thousands of babies are sacrificed to Satan every year by members of the New Age Movement.

This fantastic claim found its way to Britain through "anti-satanic" publications, including a comic book for fundamentalist children called *The Poor Little Witch*. It details the experiences of "Mandy" who dabbled in the occult before giving herself to the Lord, but was murdered by her former coven members because she had witnessed babies being sacrificed. Unfortunately for Sue Hutchison, the British press fears social workers more than Satanists, baby-slayers or not.

The American panic began back in the late 'Seventies, following heavy media publicity surrounding the serious, though rare, threat of abducted and murdered children, currently about fifty a year. Americans, and particularly religious fundamentalists, became obsessed with missing

children. The media, hungry to cover any angle, willingly repeated fundamentalist claims that 50,000 a year were disappearing. Despite these claims being debunked by Pulitzer Prize journalists, the 1986 Surgeon General's Advisory Board on Missing Children, and by the Abducted Children Directory established after the initial panic, speculation about "what happens to all those kids" became a national pastime.

The fundamentalists provided the most sensational answers. Anti-porn crusaders like Donald Wildmon swooped to take advantage, asserting most were kidnapped, raped, abused, filmed for porno magazines and movies, and then murdered. Others favoured abductions by strange and bizarre religious sects, with a taste of Heavy Metal music. Whatever the claims, fundamentalist Christian proselytizers and pressure groups were behind them. Here was a chance to prove that every child was threatened by permissiveness, and that only their brand of religious belief could save the kids. The stock secular evils — pornography, Heavy Metal rock music, fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, and undesirable TV programmes — were all integrated into the explanations. But, whereas no one else had swallowed the fundamentalists' secular humanist conspiracy theory of the 'Seventies, which was blamed for everything from drug addiction to the world's economic slump, an innate desire to protect children made many people vulnerable to the satanic panic.

By 1982 the various theories were fused together by several fundamentalist ex-police officers, known as "cult cops", who claimed to have uncovered evidence of a secret satanic cult, kidnapping and murdering American children for sacrifice to Satan. The cult had escaped detection till then, because they had powerful allies within police departments and Government, enabling them to cover their tracks.

When faced with the awkward fact that too few children and teenagers disappeared to justify these claims, some fundamentalists seized upon the plot of the film, *Rosemary's Baby*, to suggest 50,000 women were being held captive by Satanists and "breeding" babies for sacrificial purposes. These absurd stories gained credence from other accounts told by a group of mentally disturbed individuals, who became known as satanic "survivors". The first was Michelle Smith, whose best-selling book, *Michelle Remembers*, concerning the baby murdering

activities of Canadian covens thirty years ago, spawned numerous imitators. Typical were "Lauren Stratford" whose *Satan's Underground* was rushed into print by fundamentalist publishers, and "Elaine" who co-authored *He Came to Set the Captives Free*. These accounts have been used by psychologists like Lawrence Kline to claim that an international network of secretive, "hard-core" satanic cults are linked together to infiltrate the higher levels of power structures to western countries, enabling the destruction of society by undermining its moral standards through making snuff movies and trading in narcotics. Gaining members from teenagers who dabble in Heavy Metal music and fantasy games, their ultimate aim is to induce world chaos.

As the Christian journal *Encounter* recently revealed, far from being seduced into satanism, appearing in blue movies, and giving up her babies to Satan, "Lauren" was a piano teaching, gospel singing, virginal fundamentalist, with an over-active pornographic imagination, who has been hawking her everchanging "victimisation" stories around fundamentalist congregations for the last fifteen years. Likewise "Elaine", a former mental patient of her co-author "Dr" Rebecca Brown who was struck off in her real name Ruth Baily for addicting patients to drugs like Demerol "without valid therapeutic reasons". Both now work for Chuck Ministries — the publishers of Mandy, the comic book convert — and have been engaged by Larry Jones, who distributes the *File 18 Newsletter* to police departments and otherwise promoting the panic.

The most dramatic "proof" offered by the conspiracy theorists was the growing number of ritual sexual abuse allegations. Given the emotive nature of this crime, this was unconditionally guaranteed to silence any sceptics. Between 1983 and 1986, over a hundred pre-school play groups were raided by the police and their staff arrested following allegations of mass abuse. The revelations, linking schools like the McMartin's in California, with the "survivor" accounts stunned the nation when broadcast on the popular "20/20" programme and "Geraldo Show". The kids had apparently revealed that when they arrived at school, they were systematically injected with drugs, taken to another venue — often in aeroplanes or submarines — to be sexually abused by satanically robed figures who frequently video or photograph the proceedings. One or more of the victims was then ritually murdered and the others made to drink the blood or even eat the cooked flesh. Failing that,

they drank urine or ate faeces. These accounts appeared to confirm everything the growing number of "survivors" said.

But America is now having second thoughts. The vast majority of those accused of play school perversion have since been acquitted; doubts are being raised regarding those jailed because they plea accused were women, not normally known for paedophile tendencies, and the failure to uncover any satanic paraphernalia in the accused schools or leaders' houses, demanded further investigation. One police department even took a whole school apart brick by brick and then excavated the foundations looking for the tunnels and basements featured in the stories, and found — nothing. It then emerged that the parents of the "abused" children were often fundamentalists in contact with "cult cops" and "survivors" who had coached the kids or interpreted allegations in the light of their own "experiences" in satanic cults.

The accounts do not add up. If murderous, cannibalistic abuse was being performed by secular play leaders, where does that leave the cult cops' frequent ethnocentric assertion that African religions were behind the ritual killings, or the psychiatrists' belief that their patients membership of this ancient "satanic" cult is maintained through their own Caucasian families? And why would such a secretive organisation involving so many "top" public figures risk divulging their plans to unreliable, presumably drug-crazed, teenage Heavy Metal fanatics, picked up in shopping malls, who then apparently get jobs in play groups? And what happens to all those murdered babies' bodies?

In 1985 when the local police in Holland village, Ohio, organised the excavation of the local woods for evidence of the fifty children who had been murdered by two hundred local Satanists, national TV broadcast what is still cited as proof of satanic baby sacrifices. The "occult ritual relics" amounted to a headless doll, two old knives, and some torn children's clothes found on former allotments, now used as the local dump!

But what about the kids' allegations? In every case, what allegedly happened to the children was not based upon what they said but an interpretation and synopsis provided by adults — in the McMartin's case by "Michelle" and Ken Wooden who had failed to note that children who are drugged are unlikely to be able to recount exact details.

(continued on page 188)

BOOKS

THE MAGICAL DILEMMA OF VICTOR NEUBURG, by Jean Overton Fuller. Mandrake, £9.99

Victor Neuburg is best remembered now as the poetry editor of the *Sunday Referee* in the 1930s who first published poems by Dylan Thomas and Pamela Hansford Johnson, later Lady Snow. Victor wrote a great deal of poetry himself, including some for *The Freethinker* and Stewart Ross' *Agnostic Journal*. But, like Walter Mitty, he had a "secret life" which, not surprisingly, puzzled his freethinking friends, and which Jean Overton Fuller has painstakingly uncovered for her biography. She makes some errors of fact in more mundane matters, but let that pass.

I remember being surprised on reading a review of the book when it first appeared 25 years ago, and the new paperback edition justifies that surprise. For, as the title implies, the freethinking Victor Neuburg not only believed in "magic", but actively participated in mystical rites and invocations to the moon and the planets.

Jean Overton Fuller sees "no inconsistency in his position". The ideas of immortality and God are, she says, "perfectly separable"; and in Victor Neuburg's case they certainly seem to have been, though he preferred the term agnostic to atheist because "I cannot deny the possibility of His or its existence". But, according to the biographer, as long as he could remember, "Victor had felt that he existed prior to his birth and that his new body and surroundings were strange to him. He had no feeling that he had ever begun or would ever end".

In short, he believed in reincarnation or, to use Jean Overton Fuller's more scientific-sounding word, metempsychosis. Scientific is not, however, an adjective that can be applied to her beliefs or those of Victor Neuburg as she presents them, no doubt accurately. Palmistry, astrology, telepathy, astral travel all find a place in this book, apparently with the author's blessing. Immediately drawn to him the first time she attended his poets' circle, she "always wanted to read Vicky's hands" and when she did, she found "A good Heart line swept down from the base of the first finger...".

There is much more in similar vein by both the subject and the author, between whom there was a "spiritual consanguinity".

What is touching is her concern for Victor

FREETHINKER

Neuburg and especially over the harm she felt was done to him by Aleister Crowley, with whom he indulged in magical rituals in the Sahara. She also devotes a chapter to the *Sunday Referee* and has reminiscences of the Marxist A.L. Morton (*A People's History of England*) and *Freethinker* contributors Herbert Cutner and Bayard Simmonds. Indeed Victor Neuburg himself told Jean Overton Fuller that this was "a little paper that changed my entire life".

Not sufficiently alas.

COLIN McCALL

THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S BLUE PENCIL, by John Johnston. Hodder & Stoughton, £17.95

The Theatre Censorship Reform Committee, on which I had the privilege of sitting at one time, played no small role in getting rid of that anachronistic institution, the Lord Chamberlain, for so long feared under his working title as "Her Majesty's Censor of Plays". Many were the harsh sentences and injustices committed under a cloak of secrecy that were suffered by pioneers in the Theatre. When the end of this repressive regime came, more than 250 years after it had been introduced by the unpopular Robert Walpole (who hurried it through Parliament, as much to protect himself as anyone else), there were hats thrown in the air, dancing (well almost) in the streets and mighty rejoicing by those who fought for a free, untrammelled, outspoken and liberally-minded drama.

Walpole's "protection" from radical dramatists of his day would not easily be forgotten. And in the last two score years we have been confronted by a number of self-appointed arbiters of decency who serve as pressure groups, awaiting any and every opportunity to cry for the banning of this or that which may have more to do with one's sexual fancies and political affiliations than anything else. In the past it has been "abnormal" sex, capital punishment, prostitution, slum conditions and any subject that could make the comfortable playgoer feel that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Jarring notes were out of order; most of the leading actor-managers of their day, however unorthodox their renditions might be, confirmed the type of entertainments that conformed with prevailing prejudices of the ruling classes.

REVIEWS

The wretched Thing has lingered on in various forms for years past, but officially it is dead. Nevertheless constant vigilance is necessary to make its return unlikely; like capital punishment, censorship of the drama is always being called for in some quarters.

The history of the Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil has frequently been told in the past and now comes its history by title, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil*, written by John Johnston, a former colonel in the Grenadier Guards. Appointed a Censor's reader in the early 'Sixties, Johnston was there in time to see it go in 1968. He has written a useful account up to a point; as noted for its exclusions of the banning of many worthwhile plays as it is for its inclusion of less controversial pieces. Courteous, amiable — even benign — the Lords Clarendon, Scarborough and Cobbold, in turn, were going about their business in the nicest possible way. But their drastic, sometimes savage, actions belied their social manners, as I know from my own "sword-crossing" experiences with two of the trio in connection with such pieces as Drieser's *Hand of the Potter*, Wedikind's *Spring Awakening*, Elsa Shelley's *Pick-up Girl*, Tennyson Jesse's *A Pin to See the Peepshow*, Arthur Laurents's *Home of the Brave* and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, to mention from a longer list when wrong was done and, in certain cases, never put right. Even "Jeez" (short for Jesus) in one production of mine was disallowed.

That Mr Johnston's book is not for scholarly research is largely due to the fact that he has not felt called upon to more carefully examine all the contradictions, as well as the whys and wherefores, which down the years went to help build up such a basically autocratic and grossly unfair institution. The "behind the scenes" stories of many of the plays being banned are far more interesting than a mere recital of which words had to be cut out to satisfy the Censor that the public would not, could not, be offended in any possible manner. Apart from such masterpieces as Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* — amongst a long list of powerful, educational and unsalacious pieces that once got "the chop" — there were scores of minor plays of doubtful talent and virtues which were banned out of hand on account of subject alone. But while one may not favour barrack-room smut and graffiti on the walls of public lavatories I still would not require those plays with which I

disagreed, or found wanting in merit, banned on my account.

The restricted and sometimes narrow lives led by so many Censor's readers hardly qualified them to pronounce on a play's merits. Dirt for dirt's sake usually makes for boring entertainment anyway, and those who live in a democracy should not be "nannied" into having their entertainments chosen for their delectation by others whose merits were frequently questionable.

Now that the Office of a Despot in the Wings has been officially removed, it is up to vigilant artists and playgoers to be sure that Mrs Grundy, in a variety of disguises, does not surreptitiously come around to the back door and conduct her vendettas there.

PETER COTES

LETTERS

ADVANTAGES OF ESPERANTO

"Nation MUST speak unto Nation" would have been a more appropriate title for the article by Brian Donaghey (November). In a world in which we not only travel as tourists, but must export and import to live, we must aim to understand each other at the United Nations and other agencies.

Communicating through translation services is not only clumsy but also costly — the European Parliament spends 55 per cent of its budget on translation; the World Health Organisation spends more on translation than on health projects.

I learnt Esperanto in one year, one hour a week, and could as easily write this letter in Esperanto as I am writing in English. I have talked in Esperanto not only with Europeans and Americans, but with Japanese and Koreans who had learnt it just as quickly (some of whom had failed to get anywhere in English after more than ten years' study). Brian Donaghey is right in saying that the words of Esperanto are derived from European sources (mainly Latin), but the construction of sentences is in a form which people far from European — the Chinese for example — find very familiar.

National or regional languages have roots in the cultures of their peoples; long may they live. But for communicating with those whose languages are different from one's own — in speech or writing — Esperanto is ideal. The annual World Esperanto Congress regularly attracts between two and six thousand participants from some sixty countries from every continent. Communication barriers in the world would largely disappear if children in every school in every country — for just one year for one lesson a week — would learn Esperanto.

PETER DANNING, Richmond, Surrey.

BELIEF IN PRAYER

I count myself privileged to be numbered amongst the "odd lot" of Christians described in your October editorial, **Nobody is Listening**. I do indeed believe in the power of prayer, but I do not, as the article suggests, see prayer as

(continued on page 191)

The Satanic Panic

America, however, had woken up too late. What the fundamentalists were really doing was trying to discredit the various groups that make up the New Age Movement, which they denounce as "occult", through guilt by association to satanic crime. But the consequences were dramatic. Early critics vouching for individual play school leaders were also accused of satanism and forced to leave the neighbourhood. Businesses were boycotted and ruined because of tenuous links with the alleged abuse. Whole communities have been paralysed or provoked into witch-hunting as rumours of imminent abductions of local children spread. Teenagers have been kept from school by anxious parents. Heavily armed self-appointed vigilante squads have roamed their districts, descending on rumoured ritual sites, destroying property in their search for evidence, making death threats to unconventionally dressed teenagers, even harassing a drama group rehearsing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the local woods. A Halloween party in New York State was raided by police with guns drawn determined to rescue the non-existent victims. Two Bay City girls were forced to leave school after the principal failed to stop accusations they were satanic cult members.

The real question to ask is obviously not which of the conspiracy theories is true, but why so many people fell for them. American sociologist Professor Jeffrey Victor, from Jamestown Community College, has studied the panics in detail, following death threats against his own son. He points out that before the panic anti-occult crime speakers held meetings in the areas affected. The one in the Jamestown area, for example, was preceded by a seminar for social workers at which Kenneth Wooden asserted that 25 per cent of all unsolved murders and child abuse cases were the work of satanic cults; he has seen too many child victims on slabs to ignore it.

This rabble rousing has had its effect, especially in small town USA with large fundamentalist church-going populations, where economic depression and high emigration is disrupting family stability. The harsh reality of life can not reflect these people's belief systems. Professor Victor says:

"A great many parents these days are seeking scapegoats for their fears and frustrations. The increasing breakdown of the family structure in rural areas serves to deepen these fears and intensify the need to blame someone."

He is also scathing about the way in which satanic "experts" are making thousands of dollars out of this panic through publications, lecture tours

and TV talk show fees.

In Britain satanic plots are not new. Back in 1986 Derry Mainwaring Knight swindled almost half a million pounds out of Christian fundamentalists, including the Sainsbury family, by claiming he was a satanic slave. In every recent case, satanic abuse and baby-slaying accusations can be traced back to interviews with Maureen Davies, Dianne Core, Geoffrey Dickens MP, Audrey Harper, Beth Gurevitch and the Rev Kevin Logan who has published *Occult and Paganism*, a bizarre account of fundamentalist parents blaming the wayward behaviour of their children on the New Age Movement, rather than their restrictive upbringings. All of these are, or have been, connected with Outreach, a fundamentalist Christian organisation devoted to opposing the occult, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and even the ecumenical plotting High Church.

The way their allegations have steadily progressed can be traced by the contribution of Geoffrey Dickens, whose claims became more fantastic as 1988 progressed. In April, he demanded the reimposition of the Witchcraft Act 1735, promised to provide the Home Office with a dossier detailing satanic activity, and denounced the Sorcerer's Apprentice bookstore in Leeds for spreading demonology to teenagers. (The shop was subsequently bombed.) In May, Dickens repeated allegations connecting witchcraft to child abuse on the ITV "weekend" programme. In August, he claimed that disappeared children are being murdered by a satanic cult, alleged that his long awaited dossier of proof had been stolen and that he was being threatened by Satanists. By September, Dickens had followed Sue Hutchinson's route, alleging that babies were being sacrificed to Satan all over Britain. Many of these stories were covered by the *Sunday Sport*, famed for discovering "Hitler was a Woman" and that "Elvis is Alive".

In less than a year the media had uncritically broadcast accusations which steadily progressed to the same level as America. The contemporary case in Rochdale, and the continuing Nottingham allegations, are being pushed to validate those claims.

Self-styled occultists like Brian Williams have committed crimes; but that does not prove a satanic plot. Is it not a little odd that the allegations and interpretations emerging are an exact repetition of the current state of the American satanic conspiracy theories? And what are we to make of Dianna Core's American interview with Lyndon LaRouche's

Journal *The New Federalist* back in 1988?

Having repeated the unsubstantiated Hull case of, "three children, aged 8, 10, and 11, have been crucified upside down and forced into sex acts at a ritual last April for Satan's birthday..."

Core reported that Childwatch was investigating

"the basic people who run these [Satanic] groups." But, she added, "We have not yet gotten to the hierarchy [which] cover their tracks very well, and are protected at the highest levels."

However, she was not worried.

"But there will be quite big court cases in relation to Satanism and young children", she added hopefully. "For example in Nottingham, we have knowledge of 17 children who have been put into care, after being subjected to horrific rituals... There are other cases too. Because of these cases, which will be in 1989, the atmosphere in relation to the realisation that Satanism is going on will be a lot healthier..."

"Reports from psychiatrists are disclosing the same information that we have been reporting. It is coming together."

Then came the big one.

Core reported: "I was talking to one psychiatrist, and this person told me that at least 4,000 children were being sacrificed a year." The figure referred to Great Britain alone... "We're in the middle of the most massive spiritual warfare. The whole satanic movement has decided to initiate as many young people as it can. We are at war. At this moment, in this country, Satan is winning, he's in the lead.

"Awareness must be raised, We're doing everything we can, causing reactions, receiving information, letters. If we can present a united front, and if the police support us more, I think we'd win. But often, the police deny it is really going on." The economic crisis creates fertile ground for recruiting kids to cults based upon despair and hedonism.

"Satanism really gets hold where there is poverty and social deprivation. This is where the biggest harvest is."

All, however, is not lost: Dianna Core's own theology would see to that.

Mrs Core expressed no sympathy with those who believe that, as bad as Satan is, it is somehow necessary to acknowledge his existence as eternal, in a Manichean war between good and evil. "I want Satan out and finished, he's causing dreadful suffering."

The level of Core's "proof" for this one was astounding.

"I've been speaking to a mother of a 3-year-old, who was tied up by a Satanic group, and left in the woods at night. The child was so afraid, he was told by them that the spider would get him. Then, they came back, and the child actually welcomed them for coming back, he was so scared. That's the way the Satanic networks operate, and gain control."

But her allegations are no laughing matter. Four thousand baby sacrifices a year! Top people and Police involved in a cover up! Poverty making council estates a breeding ground for satanism! Big trials coming soon "added hopefully!" Improving the public's awareness of satanism! Core clearly

has the gift of prophecy, or has some explaining to do. *The New Federalist* is no ordinary journal. LaRouche is a theological-fascist conspiracy theorist who has claimed that Henry Kissinger and the Episcopal Archbishop of New York head the international satanic cult responsible for America's financial difficulties. La Rouche was instrumental in creating the original satanic panic, and his Schiller Institute is behind library bans on occult books, assaults on New Age shops, and demands to ban rock records. LaRouche also initiated the seminar system of spreading tales of ritual slayings. Does Core know that LaRouche is currently serving a prison sentence for securities fraud? Needless to say he claimed it was a satanic plot to silence him.

Clearly, the real origins of satanic abuse hype have yet to emerge. They are merely a small part of a larger satanic conspiracy theory, and this blatantly dishonest abuse of the issue of child exploitation matches anything a devil could do.

On the day before Guy Fawkes Day, the Sunday Times colour magazine asked some celebrities what they would like to see put on a bonfire. The writer Hunter Davies replied: "The concept of God, Allah, Buddha — all of 'em. Over the centuries, give or take the occasional placebo effect, all gods have done more harm than good."

Adelheid Streidel, a 43-year-old doctor's assistant who nearly killed Oskar Lafontaine, a leading candidate in the German elections, has been committed to a psychiatric clinic. She randomly attacked Herr Lafontaine with a butcher's knife "on orders from Jesus Christ".

A driving ban has been imposed on women in Saudi Arabia. Announcing the ban, the Interior Ministry said that women driving cars "contradicted Islamic conduct which is enjoyed by the proud Saudi citizen over female members of his family."

Carl Lofmark

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Mary Robinson's Irish Victory

DICK SPICER

"Mary Robinson's success in Irish terms, is nothing less than phenomenal. It is more than a milestone. It marks the point at which a narrow and often cruel road, journeyed by a society that is often narrow or cruel, gives the first sign of broadening out; widening into a more tolerant and accommodating carriageway, offering its users the choice of travelling at their own pace and in whatever company they wish." The Irish Times.

During the presidential campaign here, when Mary Robinson was registering surprisingly well in the polls, a commentator suggested that if she got elected it would be the ultimate Irish joke — a liberal feminist representing a conservative, patriarchal society. Mary Robinson has carved out a name for herself as a radical lawyer fighting for women's rights. She has defended those before the courts for breaching the ban on abortion information. Not only that, she left the Irish Labour Party after the Government (of which it was a coalition partner) signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, because she saw the Agreement as a slap in the face for the Northern Unionists.

Mary Robinson was proposed for the presidency by the Irish Labour Party, supported by the Workers' Party, as an "independent" candidate of the Left. The combined votes of the parties proposing her amounted to 15 per cent of the Irish electorate at the last election (a relative high). Then the governing party, Fianna Fail, secured over 40 per cent, followed by the other Right of centre party, Fine Gael, with approximately 30 per cent. This time Fine Gael could not agree on selection of a candidate and its eventual choice was Northerner who polled only 15 per cent.

The election of this radical woman was an impossibility by any assessment of Irish politics. Yet she is now president, and her election is being seen as a watershed in the Republic. As a symbol alone, this is surely correct, and symbols are not by any means to be denigrated. Certainly Mary Robinson's election has demoralised the conservative elements in Irish society who previously assumed their continued dominance, illustrated in the referenda on divorce and abortion which they won in a two to one vote. All parties are at least aware that to be labelled a liberal (or to be one) is at least no longer a slur which can demolish a candidate's chances. If, at best, Mary Robinson was elected despite her radical liberalism, that in itself speaks volumes for the changes that are taking place in Irish society.

The electoral system here operates on a transferable vote arrangement, which means that your vote carries over to another candidate if your first choice is eliminated. So although Mary Robinson came out of the first count some 15 per cent behind the Government candidate, transfers from the Fine Gael man pushed her ahead. The significance of this is that although her first vote count was liberal referendum votes of the past few years, her image and stance did not deter Fine Gael voters from transferring to her in an anti-Fianna Fail move.

The euphoria over Mary Robinson's victory is understandable. Liberal elements in the Republic of Ireland have ploughed a lonely furrow for many years. Now at last they have got something to celebrate. The real politic of the victory is naturally a little more sobering. Much of the transfer to her was impelled by a disastrous blunder by the Government candidate when he was caught out in a braggartly lie about his role in past political events. His recantation "on mature reflection" entered the political lexicon overnight and spoilt his chances of transfers from the holier-than-thou Fine Gael supporters. And also the attacks on her by Family Solidarity, the driving force behind the Right-wing church side, helped Mary Robinson's campaign.

Despite the fact that the presidency is simply a figurehead post with little real power — which may have reassured many nervous voters — it does seem that the mould of Irish politics has at least been severely dented. No longer does being Left-wing, or liberal, or female, or anti-nationalist, guarantee defeat at the ballot box.

The young in particular appear to have voted in large numbers for Mary Robinson. Enthusiasm in rural areas was not significantly less than elsewhere. These are encouraging signs for the future. Her victory has sent the main political parties back to the drawing board to reassess their future and no doubt cultivate a more liberal electoral image.

We have yet to achieve enlightenment here. But at last we see the dawning of that possibility, which will stimulate Irish liberals in their efforts — that is when hangovers from the celebrations wear off!

A silver box and its contents, the teeth of St Biagio, who died four hundred years ago, have been stolen from a church in Sicily. Villagers have so far collected £10,000 to recover box and gnashers.

Letters

a way of twisting God's arm. It would be crass in the extreme to believe that anyone had a hot-line to God to get what they want, when they want it. The so-called "name it, claim it" brigade, emanating predominantly from America, bring nothing but disrepute to the Christian faith.

Atheists should not attribute to the Christian's God the same characteristics as the gods they worship. True, the gods science, blind change and evolutionary progress are not available for intercessory prayer! They offer no comfort to the despairing man or woman crying to them for help. I feel nothing but pity for men and women who worship at such shrines.

Christians believe in an infinite personal God who is there. I have no doubt that he hears prayers and answers it according to his own will. I would not however be optimistic enough to think that I could convince hardened atheists of his existence. But please consider that even according to your own narrow "freethinking" creed — we might be right — and then what?

S.J. NICHOLLS, Crawley, West Sussex.

WILLIAM III AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It behoves a professional historian not to misrepresent the truth, so after criticising one type of propaganda, Peter Berresford Ellis ought to have avoided another, namely, heaping all the opprobrium for the unsatisfactory and intolerant religious settlement in the wake of the Battle of the Boyne upon the name of King William III (October). None of it was of his making or of his will.

Anyone not apprised of the facts would think that the King was the bigot, rather than his Parliament and the Episcopal Establishment which, as a Constitutional monarch, he was obliged to accept.

It might have been pointed out for example, that William was a Presbyterian and endeavoured (unsuccessfully) to have Non-Conformists given some kind of comprehension within the Episcopal system. Scotland owed the establishment of her Presbyterianism to him, and all the penalties and punishments suffered at the hands of the Established Church in Ireland we may be sure horrified and disgusted the King who did everything he could to hinder existing statutes from being employed. He also refused to sanction the introduction of the English Test Act into Ireland (this disallowed public office to anyone who did not communicate in the Established Church).

Well it is said by the Rev T. Hamilton in the **History of Presbyterianism in Ulster** that when the King died "the Presbyterians lost the best friend they ever had on the British throne. No wonder they venerate his name and memory to this day."

(MRS) J.M. FOXON, Burbage, Leicestershire.

ACCOMMODATION

My lady friend and I are a young idiomatic atheistical couple, professional and non-smoking, who require accommodation in similar thinking environment. An unconventional arrangement would be most welcome. Anything would be considered in London and the surrounding area if possible.

(MR) D. LANTEN, London WC1, Telephone 071-837 6963.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 6 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Forum and New Year Celebration.

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.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 13 December, 8 pm. Saturnalian Party.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 17 January, 7.30 pm. Philip Howell: Charles Bradlaugh (to mark the centenary of his death).

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 796829.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday programme: Lecture 11 am; Forum 3 pm. 16 December, Lecture, John Rety: The Mathematics of Publishing; Forum, Wendy Grossman: The Separation of Church and State in Ireland. 13 January, Lecture, Richard Scorer: The Values of Science. (No Forum.) 20 January, Lecture, Jim Herrick: The Relevance of Bradlaugh Today; Forum, Nicolas Walter: the Social Thought of Simone Weil.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 January, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Meredith MacArdle: Humanist Objectives in 1991.

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New Vice-President for the NSS

Nicolas Walter, the freethought movement's "man of letters", was elected vice-president at the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society. In recent years his name has appeared frequently in correspondence columns of the national press. His *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern* (Rationalist Press Association, 1990) was the most effective addition to freethought literature for a decade.

A Londoner, Nicolas Walter was born in 1934. His father was W. Grey Walter, an eminent neurologist and active humanist. His grandfather was S.K. Ratcliffe, journalist, lecturer and active member of the RPA and South Place Ethical Society. He published a history of the latter.

Nicolas Walter studied history at Oxford. He had several jobs in publishing and journalism, including work on *Which?*, *Good Food Guide* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. He has been manager of the RPA for 16 years.

Nicolas Walter is a former executive committee member of the British Humanist Association and the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. He was involved in the Committee of 100 and Freedom Press, the anarchist publishers. Nicolas Walter is currently chairman of the Humanist Liaison Committee. His wide range of interests include literature, music and art.

The departing vice-president is S.D. Kuebart who has made a notable contribution to the NSS and the Board of G.W. Foote & Co. He has been involved in the movement since the early 'Sixties. Unfailingly reliable, his contribution to discussion added much to committee meetings. Mr Kuebart is soon to retire and will be living in the Republic of Ireland.

Barbara Smoker was re-elected president, R.J. Condon vice-president and G.N. Deodhekar treasurer.

A resolution welcomed the British Board of Film Classification's decision to grant a certificate to the video film, *International Guerrillas*. It called on the Board to reconsider its refusal to grant a certificate to the video film, *Visions of Ecstasy*.

A second resolution urged the Government not to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury's request for subsidies to repair and maintain Anglican cathedrals on the ground that they are national monuments. The meeting urged "that tax-payers' money should not be used for buildings which are owned and controlled by a sect, denomination or religion. Where support may be necessary, the monument should be secularised and made available for use by

all, including the churches, or a rental or lease-back basis, and be controlled by a public authority."

A resolution reiterated the Society's long-standing opposition to blasphemy law. It urged the Government to abolish, rather than extend, blasphemy law, "before another outburst of fundamentalist Islamic or other religious intolerance takes place, and thus remove at least one instrument from the hands of fundamentalist disturbers of the peace of whatever religious persuasion."

Campaigner Honoured

The veteran campaigner Diane Munday was guest of honour at Brighton and Hove Humanist Group's annual dinner on 10 November.

In a lively speech, Mrs Munday recalled some of the highlights of 30 years' work for, and protection of, law reform.

"Wondering what has characterised those years, I have decided that it is the irrationality and contradictions all around us", she declared. "They have become so much part of our lives that we don't even notice them.

"For instance, there was the contradiction between Mother Teresa's Nobel Peace Prize and her remarkably stupid statement that abortion is a greater threat to world peace than nuclear weapons.

"Mother Teresa was disappointed at being unable to attend a family congress in Brighton earlier this year. She had hoped to tell the Prince and Princess of Wales that they should have five children by now, instead of only two.

"After all, if having a large family of children is as desirable as Mother Teresa claims, why has she not done her bit?

"Then there is that other professional celibate, Pope John Paul II, appealing to chemists not to sell unnatural products. I ask you!

"This would mean a ban on razor blades, hair curlers and indigestion tablets. But this is just another way of the Pope indulging his obsession with contraception."

Nevertheless, Diane Munday said that much had changed for the better over the past three decades.

"But there is still much to do, and I hope you will continue the fight", she concluded.

Group secretary Joan Wimble thanked Diane Munday for her speech and for all the campaigning work she had undertaken during the past 30 years.