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LORDS RESIST NEW ATTEMPT TO INTENSIFY RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION IN SCHOOL

A kite-flying exercise described as the Education (Amendment) Bill was withdrawn after a four-hour debate in the House of Lords last month.

Moving the Bill's second reading, Baroness Cox wheeled on a cluster of reactionary supporters including religious die-hards like Lord Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Jakobovits, the Chief Rabbi, and Lord Halsbury, the evangelical Right's Lord High Everything. As the Bill proposed an extension of State support to small and mainly religious schools, it was backed by the Christian Schools Campaign, the Muslim Education Co-ordinating Council and the Islamic Academy.

Baroness Cox drew their Lordships' attention to the distressing plight of parents and teachers "deeply concerned about the situation in many State Schools, especially their secularism..."

"I shall never forget the honour of taking part in the speech day at John Loughborough School, North London.

"The school was set up by the Afro-Caribbean community which was so dismayed not only by the poor educational standards but also by the lack of spiritual and moral values that it established its own school with the help of its church."

She quoted one of the parent governors as saying: "Before John Loughborough was set up, we used to have to send our children back to the West Indies to get a good, old-fashioned, traditional British Christian education."

Declaring her opposition to the Bill, Baroness Blackstone (Labour) said there was a good case for making all publicly maintained schools secular.

She continued: "In the United States and many European countries, religious teaching is left to the churches and other religious bodies, and takes place outside school hours, rather than within them. That

means that parents can be absolutely sure that the religious teaching which their children receive in the evening or at weekends is truly in line with their own religious beliefs.

"It also means that children can receive their secular education together without being segregated into separate schools according to their parents' religious faith. That has much to recommend it in a multi-racial society. Segregation has little to commend it..."

"It would be wrong to create new legislation that puts pressure on successive Secretaries of State for Education to establish new schools, at a cost to the taxpayer and at the expense of the rest of the education system, in order to meet the wishes of very small minorities who want quite different education for their children from that of the great majority of the population."

Lady Blackstone described Clause 2 as "pernicious". It revealed an irresponsible attitude towards public expenditure and a complete disregard of the need to maintain good working relationships between the Department of Education and Science and the local education authorities.

"It shows a truly astonishing lack of understanding of the local authorities' role and their responsibilities in planning education and being accountable to their local electorate", she added.

"The Clause more or less empowers any group of parents, however fanatical or nutty they may be, to require the setting up of a new school, maintained by the taxpayer regardless of what provision already exists in the area.

"That cannot be a reasonable or sensible way to construct education law."

The Bishop of Guildford told the House there is no place for indoctrination in education.

(continued on back page)



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NEWS

FREE SPEECH OR TIED TONGUES?

Our March front page heading, "Voices for Peace Silenced by Gulf War Censorship", referred to restrictions imposed by both sides on press and broadcasting freedom. Such censorship was inevitable, and possibly justified on security grounds. But attempts to prevent opposition to the war being expressed by leading humanists -- particularly employees of organisations -- is another matter.

As the United Nations deadline approached, the Humanist Liaison Committee issued a press release condemning the drift to war in the Gulf. Later, after the fighting had started, the Humanist Peace Council was formed and it too issued a statement, as reported in the February *Freethinker*.

Both statements were virtually ignored by the media, but they infuriated a few prominent members of the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association. It was not long until complaints were made to both organisations, particularly about employees who dared to speak on behalf of the humanist movement against the war and gave their offices as contact addresses. (The National Secular Society is more easy-going about such matters; accepting that people who work for humanist organisations can express their personal views quite openly without compromising their employers.)

Sir Hermann Bondi, president of both the BHA and the RPA, asked the organisations to pass resolutions dissociating themselves from their employees' actions. He did so under threat of resignation, a rather petty method of getting his own way, and the committees gave in to his demand.

Although leaders of religious denominations and political parties could say what they thought about the Gulf war, without worrying about minorities in their ranks who might dissent, officials and staff of humanist organisations were expected to keep silent. It is in order for Sir Hermann Bondi to appear on Channel Four television (June 1987) to speak about humanist attitudes to war, while being identified as president of the BHA and RPA and at the same time as former Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence and as the then Master of Churchill College, Cambridge. But it is out of order for lesser mortals to speak on the subject from the offices of the BHA and the RPA.

Last month's issue of *Humanist News*, house journal

CHRISTIAN OBSESSION

How some Christians enjoy being offended! One sensitive soul, Mr Basil Thorn, of Lancaster, a retired religious education teacher, has got the hump over a new set of stamps issued by the Post Office. Illustrations on the stamps include a wishing well and assorted symbols of good luck which, according to Mr Thorn, will promote interest in the occult.

He is particularly miffed about the image of a magpie with a charm bracelet in its beak. Amulets on the bracelet include a crucifix, a hideous object described by Mr Thorn as "the symbol of all good". But one correspondent has written in the *Lancaster Guardian*: "I have been to the Post Office and inspected these stamps... Not having a magnifying glass with me, I could not even see the crucifix or the bracelet in the magpie's mouth. I doubt whether the postman or a recipient of a letter bearing one of these stamps would be corrupted."

Then there is an image of Puss. All very alarming, for as Mr Thorn warns us, the black cat "is the witch's familiar in black magic."

Lancaster has a history of Christian witch-hunting. It was there that the trial of the Lancashire Witches was held in August 1612. They were imprisoned in the dungeon of Lancaster Castle before being paraded before the Christian populace and hanged as "notorious witches".

It is likely that some of them owned a black cat.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The longest running farce in theatrical history is the subject of a forthcoming book by Nicholas de Jongh, arts correspondent of the *Guardian*. It ran from 1737 until 1968 when the curtain was rung down on the Lord Chamberlain and his company of censorious minions who had "imposed on the theatre the values and beliefs of the philistine, blue-blooded section of the ruling class."

Nicholas de Jongh chronicles how, even in the 20th century, "cabals of military men working in the name of the Lord Chamberlain" maintained rigid control over the British theatre. Their activities were kept "in a state of confidentiality tighter than that around M15 or M16." Productions of works by Sophocles, Shaw, Bond, Orton and Osborne were banned or delayed by "ancient and sometimes spectacularly stupid Establishment advisers".

One member of the Lord Chamberlain's advisory board took great exception to Noel Coward's *The Vortex*. He expressed an opinion that the play "presents the prosperous of today in an odious light and to that

AND NOTES

of the BHA, carried two letters about the Humanist Peace Council, one for and one against. The latter, signed by Harry Stopes-Roe and five other leading BHA figures, claims that "the choice set before us by the formation of the Humanist Peace Council is between 'Peace now' and 'the United Nations now'", adding that the BHA is committed to the United Nations and that the Gulf war was authorised by the UN Security Council. They don't seem to have noticed that the Humanist Peace Council is affiliated to the United Nations Association, which opposed the Gulf war precisely because it was not conducted according to the UN Charter. Like the United States and its allies in the Gulf, long-distance patriots invoke the UN when it suits them but ignore it when it doesn't.

Sadly, the discussion of peace brings out warlike attitudes, even in so-called humanists, and unreasonable arguments even from so-called rationalists. And it is rather shabby when humanist grandees behave towards the movement's employees in the manner of proprietors of a Victorian family emporium.

So much for the Open Society!

FROM CLASSROOM TO BATTLEFRONT

Eight of the British servicemen killed in the Gulf war were teenagers. The youngest was only 17. He could not vote, get married without his parents' consent, or legally drink in a public house.

It is argued that the teenage soldiers were volunteers. True enough, but a young person straight out of school and with scant prospect of employment is easily tempted by skilfully presented recruiting propaganda. At an Army Careers Information Office the 16-year-old is greeted by a highly trained officer salesman. He will be told about opportunities to acquire a skill, make new friends, enjoy travel and recreational activities; everything but the basic reason for joining the armed forces, which is to kill or to be killed. That is the reality behind those flag-draped coffins.

Here is an opportunity for those evangelical moralists who are constantly complaining about young people being exposed to violence on the television screen to protest against teenagers being exposed to real violence, injury and death in centres of conflict like Northern Ireland. Positive humanists should also protest, and thus demonstrate that Conscience in Action is not just a vapid slogan.

extent partakes of the nature of socialist propaganda”.

Strindberg's *Miss Julie* greatly upset Lord Cromer when he was Lord Chamberlain. "There is a sordid and disgusting atmosphere which makes the immorality of the play glaring and crude", he wrote in 1925. Worse still, "there is the very questionable theme in these days of the relations between masters and servants which the play tends to undermine."

Even a Labour Government did not have the temerity to ask the Lord Chamberlain to kindly leave the stage. His reluctant farewell appearance took place after a Private Member's Bill was passed by Parliament.

BIZARRE AND OUTDATED

Another attempt in the House of Commons to reform the Sunday trading laws has been defeated by an alliance of evangelicals and union-sponsored MPs.

Introducing a Bill "to relax certain restrictions on the opening hours of shops and other places where retail trade or business is carried on", John Marshall (Conservative, Hendon, South) said the Prime Minister's recent description of the Sunday trading laws as "bizarre" was a typical understatement. Pointing out some of the anomalies in the 1950 shops Act, one of which prohibited the sale of a packet of teabags but allowed the sale of a bottle of gin, Mr Marshall said: "The latter-day Marie Antoinettes seem to think that it is moral to drink gin but wrong to drink a cup of tea on Sunday.

"Who can defend a position where it is legal to sell plants but illegal to sell the pots into which they might be put?", he asked.

Mr Marshall said that every week the Sunday trading law is broken by around 60,000 shops which open to serve the needs of customers. Yet there are few prosecutions.

He added: "A law which is regarded as so indefensible that very few seek to enforce it, brings the whole rule of law into disrepute. If the law is regarded as out of date, it is an argument for repealing it.

"The irony is that if the law were enforced, there would be a minor revolution and a major campaign to ensure that it was changed dramatically."

Mr Marshall told the House that opposition to the abolition of Sunday restrictions came from two unrepresentative sources. One of these was the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. Yet only one shop worker in eleven is a member of USDAW.

"The Keep Sunday Special Campaign has sought to rubbish my Bill and to oppose it without having the courtesy to ask me for a sight of it. That suggests that those involved have closed minds.

"They have stated that they want a right of vote over Government measures on Sunday trading. I believe that

is wrong, because they are unrepresentative and a small minority."

A new organisation, the Reading Association of Sunday Shop Workers, has been set up by 27-year-old Julie Trussler who stands to lose £300 a month because of Sunday trading laws. Because of the greater earning power as a kitchen consultant at a DIY store, her husband gave up his job as a driver in order to run the home and mind their three children. But last month the Labour-controlled council was forced, against its wishes, to threaten DIY stores in the Berkshire town with High Court injunctions if they opened on Sunday.

Mrs Trussler said that over two thousand people turned up expecting the store to be open. Instead they signed a petition in support of Sunday freedom.

Reading councillors agree that the law is ridiculous. John Cook, chairman of the Health and Environment Committee, said: "The stupid thing is we have to enforce the law even if we don't like it. We took advice from lawyers and could face legal problems ourselves if we don't take any action."

Freethinker Fund

The latest list of contributors to the fund is given below. We thank them and all readers whose financial support enables *The Freethinker* to appear every month throughout the year.

W.T. Ford and D. Redhead, £1 each; M.A. Aitchison, L. Farbey, L.D. Griffiths, D.A. Hartley and K.M. Tolfree, £2 each; D. Berman, £2.40; A.E.B. George and F.A.M. Stevenson, £2.50 each; Anonymous, £3; P. Kennedy, £4.40; B. Able, C. Blakely, E. Cecil, I.C. Chandler, E.W. Clayton, G. Coombs, D.L. Dean, D. Dicks, S. Eadie, D. Franklin, N. Gibbard, M.D. Gough, W.B. Grainger, D.J. Holdstock, G. Lewarton, G.C.L. Lukas, H. Madoc-Jones, G. Mephram, G. Mosley, T.J. Peter, R.I. Raven, M. Sharp, E.W. Sinclair, R.K.E. Torode, S. Trent and J. Walsh, £5 each; J.G. Hillhouse, £6.40; H.J. Jakeman and G.S. Mellor, £7 each; R.J.C. Fennell, M.O. Morley and A. Oldham, £10 each; N. Moia, £14.40; B.A. Burfoot, £15; Anonymous, V.D. Brierley and R.J. Condon, £20 each.

Total for February: £296.60

The Bradford and Northern Housing Association have complied with a request by Muslims that the lavatories on a new housing estate should face away from the east. They believe it is disrespectful to be looking in the direction of Mecca when spending a penny.

The speaker at Wombwell Spiritualist Church, Barnsley, on 24 March, was Mr H. Deadman.

The Faith of an Unbeliever

CHARLES WARD

Though you could describe me as an unbeliever, I have sometimes watched programmes like "Highway" on the box, the combination of singing, scenery and sentiment being a pleasant background to teatime refreshment or whatever else I may be engaged in.

Masochistic? Well, maybe. Indulgently I wonder at the sickly sentiments and I occasionally wince. The worst offender is the belief expressed by many who are interviewed, particularly those who have suffered some personal tragedy, that without their religious faith they could not have shown the victorious spirit to which attention has been drawn.

This bland assertion does great injustice to many and indeed, in my opinion, to the speaker. Not only are there many people whose religious beliefs are different from those of the person concerned, yet who may demonstrate equal fortitude, courage or whatever, but such remarkable resilience is demonstrated also by those who have no religious faith at all. In other words the pious are mistaking the decorative wrapper for the contents.

To speak of the faith of an unbeliever may seem a contradiction in terms, but this is not the case if we use the word "faith" in its fundamental meaning of confidence. Of course dictionaries often define it as absolute trust and so on. There is a tendency to reflect religious usage, for instance, in respect of faith in "God", in "Holy Scripture", in a leader, a supposed revelation, in miraculous powers. But faith does not have to bear such connotations.

If I hail a taxi, I am exercising faith as I approach the vehicle with confidence. I do not mean that I place absolute trust in the driver. That would be excessive. Of course I assume that he is competent and that the car is in good mechanical order. Such assumptions are made without reflection. Moreover, I do not sit worrying whether the driver may have a stroke at any moment, or that a lorry out of control may smash into us, or trouble myself with any other disastrous possibilities.

You might say I believe the taxi journey will be uneventful. Yet all the words "I believe" mean in this context is that I hope for, and expect, a comfortable trip. The phrase is used in the woolly manner commonplace in everyday speech.

Using the same phrase in a religious way is a different matter altogether. Here "I believe" is understood to mean something much more definite -- a conviction

with an undertone of (presumed) certainly. This is obviously inapplicable to my taxi ride. I am not being pedantic, merely logical, if I remind myself they any number of events of which I have no knowledge and concerning which I have no indicative evidence, could occur to render the anticipated safe arrival of the taxi with myself inside it unlikely or even impossible. Yet I should be neurotic or morbid were I to allow this sensible reflection to effect the confidence with which I approach the vehicle.

This confident attitude may appear so ordinary and natural that it hardly seems to deserve the label of "faith" which some no doubt think sounds so much grander in its religious setting. Yet there are a great many of whom this basic faith is not ordinary at all. They may regard it as inaccessible so far as they are concerned. Perhaps (to extend the simile) there has been involvement in an accident and the would-be traveller is "just a bag of nerves".

The taxi journey may be seen as an example of the hazards we all face in life. Riding on our circulating planet are troubled, anxious, fearful passengers whose great need is clearly for confidence. How are they to acquire it? A widespread delusion persists that religion of one sort or another can do the trick

On the face of things this quite often happens. The cost to intellectual integrity is rarely measured. Religious beliefs can be compared to tranquillizers which can be quite effective for a time. However, when they lose their potency, what then? More of the same? Unforeseen and sometimes ghastly side effects may follow.

For many people, loss of religious faith is a crushing consequence of which they are terrified. For when confidence has been inspired or promoted through religious beliefs, at its peak all is well, or seems to be. Yet, when such faith has gone, the strength derived from it, like Samson's in the Bible story when he had his unwanted haircut, has gone too.

Spiritual strength (what else can we call it?) which does not depend on any degree of self-deception must have the advantage here, for it has no credal faith to lose. True, anyone may lose confidence. Believer and unbeliever are no different in that regard. We may allow fear or depression to get the better of us. But the remedy may lie in our own hands. Confidence may be gained, or regained.

I know it may not be easy for those who feel bereft of

confidence, or who never seem to have had any. Nevertheless I can vouch from personal experience that we stand a fair chance of getting it, if we persist. Our efforts could be more quickly productive if we first got

out of the way the notion that we need crutches of belief to support us. Religious beliefs are not aids but encumbrances to those who have discovered the latent strength of the human spirit.

Annie Besant's *The Law of Population*

ELLEN WINSOR

Annie Besant became well known as a defendant in the Fruits of Philosophy trial. But her own writings were a significant contribution to the birth control debate in Victorian times. In the third article of a series on Birth Control Tracts of the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century, Ellen Winsor considers Mrs Besant's *The Law of Population*.

In a previous article, I argued the importance of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* in opening the way for the publication of other, better pamphlets. First and foremost amongst these was *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and Its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals*, by Annie Besant. This grew out of *Fruits of Philosophy* as Besant had always recognised the weakness of the earlier work and had even drawn attention to them at her trial in 1877 and in her subsequent writings:

We... published Knowlton... to test the right of issuing cheap physiological knowledge, merely because that particular pamphlet had just been prosecuted. Having after hard struggle won the right, we dropped the particular book which had been forced on us... and issued the same information in a better form.

Mrs Besant's new work first appeared as a series of articles in the *National Reformer*, without the medical parts that were later added. It was subsequently reissued as a pamphlet of nearly fifty pages, at a price of sixpence, in November 1877. It went through a large number of editions and whilst the sections devoted to an explanation of the need for birth control, and the relationship between poverty and overpopulation, remained largely unchanged, the parts on technique became substantially altered.

In its first edition, Mrs Besant informs us that the safe period "is not certain". Withdrawal is considered safe, but "injurious". We are assured that "there is little doubt" that Knowlton's check of syringing with a solution of sulphate of zinc or alum, was an "effective one". However, she observed that "there are many obvious disadvantages connected with it as a matter of taste and feeling". The same remark applies to the employment of the baudruche, "a covering used by men". She therefore concludes that the technique to be

favoured is the sponge, which had been first promoted many years earlier by Richard Carlile. She writes of a "small wad of cotton wool, not more than an inch in diameter... secured with a string for its removal".

As later editions of *The Law of Population* were published improvements were made to the account on technique. For example, by 1890 the soluble pessary and India-rubber pessary (cervical cap) have been added to the sponge as techniques which "close the passage into the womb". There is also advice as to where these can be obtained. The syringe is given some attention together with discussion of the chemicals to be added to the water. Mrs Besant clearly had her doubts about the efficacy of this method. She notes that "spermatozoa" may have entered the womb before the injection is used and comments: "There are also many obvious disadvantages attending its use". If the reader had any doubts as to what she was referring to, a study of the advertisement pages which included a cumbersome device entitled Lambert & Sons' "Improved Irrigator and Syringe with Vertical and Reversal Current" will have removed all doubt. In the same edition, mention is also made of the advice available in other birth control tracts such as H. A. Allbutt's, *The Wife's Handbook*.

Attempts are made to discourage folklore of the worst kind. Young women are assured that "nursing does not prevent conception", although one might have more doubt over Besant quoting a Dr Chavasse who claimed:

A child nursed beyond twelve is very apt, if he should live, to be knock-kneed, and bow-legged, and weak-ankled, to be narrow-chested and chicken-breasted.

One further difference between the earlier and later editions of the work is that in later editions Mrs Besant devoted considerable attention to refuting the arguments of her socialist friends who were, on the whole, opposed to her on the birth control issue.

Unlike *The Fruits of Philosophy*, no attempt was made to prosecute the publishers or vendors of *The Law of Population* in the United Kingdom. In Australia there was an unsuccessful attempt when, in 1888, W. W. Collins was fined £5 by a magistrate. Collins

assumed responsibility for selling the pamphlet and for lecturing on its contents. The case was then carried to a superior court and the conviction quashed by Justice Windeyer, who argued that the law must not be static but must move with changing attitudes in society. He rejected past interpretations of obscene, and the view that birth control was immoral. He went on to argue that it was every woman's right to have knowledge of birth control, and, she should choose, practise it. Such a ruling was a real victory for freethinkers and soon the judgement was available as a pamphlet from the

Stonecutter Street bookshop in London.

The influence of *The Law of Population* must have been great. Up to 1891 175,000 copies were sold in the United Kingdom. It was reprinted in the United States and Australia. It was translated into German, Dutch, Italian, French and other languages.

Sadly, Annie Besant abandoned freethought in 1891 to embrace theosophy. The pamphlet was withdrawn and, although the publishers offered sums for the copyright, she refused to sell.

BBC Abuses Atheists

KARL HEATH

In a recent "Songs of Praise" programme, Colin Morris said: "Hatred is the ultimate atheism." Karl Heath has sent him the following reply.

Dear Colin Morris,
Do you realise how untrue, unjust and hurtful was your statement on "Songs of Praise" that "hatred is the ultimate atheism"?

I believe that you should retract these words before a BBC microphone. Better still, since the BBC devotes 700 hours a year to religious broadcasting, you might find thirty minutes on radio or television for an atheist to reply to your cruel comment.

Others must speak for me, but all the atheists I have ever known have been kind considerate people guided by strong moral principles, and in no way disposed to hatred. They have tried to lead good lives, expecting only oblivion at the end, not seduced by the promise of heavenly rewards nor intimidated by fear of hell. Nor have they sought any easy escape route from the consequences of sin, no salvation through faith, no vicarious atonement, no redemption, no "washing in the Blood of the Lamb". They accept total responsibility for their own misdeeds. Nor do they lightly abuse religion, criticising, disagreeing but condemning only those who have oppressed in the name of religion or disgraced it like the Bakkers and Swaggarts.

Nor do they undervalue the contribution of religion, the solace, comfort, and support, the sacrifice of genuine believers. I was born in the shadow of Lincoln Cathedral and still consider that great mysterious building the most beautiful in the world. My Coventry Humanist Music Group readily listens to Masses, Requiems, oratorios and cantatas. I love the language of the James I Bible.

We atheists are not to be found in the ranks of the unthinking irreligious, but have given deep thought to philosophy and ethics. We read the Bible and study

religious history and theology. As a philosophy lecturer, but now retired, I conducted many joint classes with a Roman Catholic college chaplain. I prefer to debate with a Jesuit rather than some ignorant fundamentalist raging about Armageddon and the Rapture.

Half a century ago, as a history student, I read Augustine's *City of God*, but knew that the same man, who, as a young man had prayed, "O Lord, give me chastity, give me continence, but not yet", was also the same man who was later responsible for propagating a doctrine brimming with hatred for mankind, the hideous concept of Original Sin. In 2,000 years of Christian history there has been turmoil, violence, oppression, persecution of heretics. There has never been a single war for atheism against religion. The great enemies of religious believers have always been other religious believers, usually rival sects professing the same religion. A history stained with blood, although the ceremonial executions of heretics in the "auto-da-fe", which lasted into the 19th century, required that the victims should be burnt to death since the Church was forbidden "to shed blood".

I have climbed to the hillside cave on Patmos where St John the Divine had his Revelations of pale horses and mass murder. I have walked the streets of Carcassonne, captured in 1209 by Simon de Montfort, during the most genocidal of all Crusades, launched by Pope Innocent III, not against Islamics, but against fellow-Christians in Languedoc, the gentle Cathari or Albigenses, who were the most cultured people in France. Shortly afterwards the Inquisition was set up to oppress the survivors, to be terrorised by the hooded Dominican Black Friars.

I have stood at the spot in Constance, by the Bodensee, where, in 1415, the reformer John Huss was burned at the stake by the treacherous Vatican Council after he had been given a safe-conduct to appear before it and state his case. A century later John of Leyden and Jacob Hutter, with their Anabaptist followers, were cruelly

tortured and killed. Luther turned against the German peasants in their uprising and declared "Whosoever shall smite, stab or secretly strangle a rebel" would deserve God's thanks. In 1572, after St Bartholomew's Eve, 50,000 Huguenots were massacred in France. In the 17th century the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants reduced the German population from fifteen million to nine million. During the same period Oliver Cromwell massacred Irish Catholics at Wexford and Drogheda and lamented "Would that God had not put upon me the doing of this deed". During this time and continuing much later thousands of innocent women, and some men, were killed as witches because of words which God was supposed to have uttered (Exodus, ch 22 v 18). Christian sea-captains and merchants happily engaged in the slave trade until 1806, and, just before the American Civil War, Bishop Meade of Virginia could preach to a slave congregation with those words: "I tell you that your masters and mistresses are God's overseers, and that if you are faulty towards them God will punish you severely for it in the next world." In the Pacific the missionaries brought their obsession with sin to the happy natives and were appalled at their innocent, carefree lives. The missionary, J.M. Orsmond, declaring "a too bountiful nature on Moorea diminishes men's natural desire to work" ordered all breadfruit trees to be cut down, reducing the people to servitude and a source of cheap labour.

Where, I ask again, was the atheist hatred during all this record of death and oppression by religion?

In this present century much has been made of religious persecution in the Communist countries, but it has been far safer to be a Roman Catholic in Communist Poland than in Protestant Ulster. For one Populieszko that there have been hundreds of Irish Catholic victims, five of them killed by Protestant gunmen during this very week of writing. Nor do we forget all the Protestant victims of the IRA.

The ecumenical movement advocates tolerance between faiths. Do you not believe that this tolerance should be extended to non-believers? Or are they to receive only abuse? You would not have said that "hatred was the ultimate Buddhism" or even "ultimate Islam". I must acknowledge one act of Christian respect for atheism which I have never forgotten. I attended Lincoln School with Steve Race. He was my junior, but his brother Philip was my best friend. This ancient school had a long connection with Lincoln Cathedral. We began each term with a service there, the whole school in the Angel Choir. In his autobiography, *Musician at Large*, Steve Race is right about our dreadful Scripture master, the Rev J. Lee, but I think he is unfair to the Headmaster, C. E. Young, a deeply religious and desperately shy man. One of the duties of school prefects was to take turn, week by week, in

reading the Lessons at morning service. By the time I became a prefect I was already the notorious Sixth Form atheist. The Head stopped me in the corridor and asked: "Heath, have you any objection to reading the Lessons?" This recognition that even a teenager's heterodox views might be taken seriously and shown respect made an unforgettable impression upon me.

My response was less creditable. I had every intention of reading the lesson to hear my own voice, being somewhat exhibitionist. This progressive school allowed us prefects to choose our own texts. We prudently avoided the more lurid passages, but I wish I had known then about the atheist Book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes. I would have derived great pleasure from reading Ch 3 v 19 and Ch 9 v 5-6. The few references to God must surely have been additions by some pious bowdleriser, shocked by what he read.

Finally, Colin Morris, are you not ashamed of your crude, intemperate and ill-considered remark? Atheists are as moral, free from hatred, loving and caring, as believers. They emerge from history with clean hands when compared with the long record of crimes committed in the name of Jesus.

They are also entitled to the expression of their views and deserve far more media coverage. When will the religious Establishment have the courage to relax its censorship? Until then BBC talk of "balance" is a sham.

According to a wartime ditty, especially popular with the lower ranks, Adolf Hitler had only one. Now a group of the Fuhrer's fanatically religious admirers in Spain have gone one better (or worse) by castrating themselves "as a sacrifice to the Virgin and God." Hitler has been "canonised" by the breakaway group of priests, led by the self-proclaimed Pope Gregorie XXIII who set up a mini-Vatican near Seville where he ordains priests, bishops and cardinals.

Michael Carr, who turned a Conservative majority of 19,000 into a Liberal Democrat one of 6,400 in the Ribble Valley by-election, has pledged his support to the "pro-life" lobby. The Roman Catholic father of seven is a former pupil of Preston Catholic College. Ribble Valley is one of the Conservatives' safest seats. When Mr Carr arrived at the House of Commons, Labour MP Denis Skinner advised him: "Don't take your coat off, you won't be staying!"

Ireland's Advertising Standards Authority have ruled that a television advertisement in which three men carrying packs of lager are captioned "the Three Wise Men" is blasphemous.

"Not With the Bigot's Leaven"

NEIL BLEWITT

When Thomas Hood died in 1845, there was some speculation as to whether he had been a freethinker. It was denied by his son, Tom, in the preface to *Memorials of Thomas Hood* - some reminiscences of his father which he had written in collaboration with his sister, Frances: "It has always been a popular misconception that men of letters are, as a rule, freethinkers.... My father's religious faith was deep and sincere; but it was little known to a world ever apt to decide by hearing professions rather than scrutinising actions."

That Thomas Hood was inclined to freethought was a view apparently widely held; it is supported by a passage in the *Memorials* - written by his daughter Frances - where, after a further protestation of his faith, she says: "These are strong words and facts, but they are called forth, not unnecessarily, by the impression that exists, not in one instance but in twenty, as to my father's disbelief and scepticism, a doubt that will now surely be set at rest for ever by the simple and unvarnished truth of those who knew him best."

One must concede that those who knew him best ought to have been his family; but Tom and Frances were only ten and fifteen respectively when their father died and but a year older when their mother followed him to the grave. And by the time the *Memorials* were published in 1860, Frances had been married to a clergyman for several years and Tom himself had been considering entering the ministry.

Hood's writings seem to support his children's views, but there is also evidence that his position was not as simple and unquestioning as they supposed. Certainly there was no commitment to church-going, as one of his biographers, Walter Jerrold, observed. True, he attended church when staying with his formidable Scottish aunt in his youth and towards the end of his life; but she was such a dominating personality that, if they had been staying with her, the entire committee of the National Secular Society would have felt obliged to go along too.

Perhaps J. C. Reid, another of Hood's biographers, was nearer the truth when he wrote:

Hood's religion was almost entirely a matter of sentiment, of decent feelings and instinctive humanitarianism. It was that form of humanism at the time close enough to Christianity to show the derivation clearly, but later in the century to become divorced from religious principle... But his reprobation of cant, hypocrisy and cruder forms of ostentatious piety proceeded from a genuine disgust at the soiling of religious values and from a spontaneous sense of what is truly charitable in human conduct.

What is beyond doubt is, that while Hood may be remembered in the main as one of the greatest of poetic humourists, he was also a writer with a highly-developed

social conscience and a man who was not afraid to attack the religious bigots of his day.

It was his "instinctive humanitarianism" which was responsible for the composition of some of his finest works, the social poems, many of them prompted by behaviour which would have been condemned by the religiously orthodox. Take, for example, *The Lay of the Labourer* in which he makes an impassioned plea on behalf of the unemployed. It was written as a result of his reading about an 18-year-old labourer condemned to transportation for life for threatening a farmer with arson if he was not provided with work. Or the woman, similarly sentenced for the murder of her infant son after she, at her wits' end because of her extreme poverty, tried to kill herself and her child - a case which led to *The Bridge of Sighs*; the poem which, incidentally, G. W. Foote used to recite publicly to great effect. Or the woman, ground down by poverty, attempting to support herself and her two fatherless children as a sempstress on seven shillings a week (about £10 in today's terms) whose being charged with having pawned articles belonging to her employer resulted in *The Song Of The Shirt*.

One can hardly imagine the established churches gaining inspiration from, still less pointing out the pity of, cases of arson, murder, attempted suicide and theft. Nor can one imagine them asking the question posed in *A Drop Of Gin* - that, evil though gin could be, what other consolation was there for the "ragged pauper, misfortune's butt" than the oblivion it brought?

Hood was always suspicious of those involved in the temperance movement anyway. As he pointed out at the conclusion of his *Ode To J. S. Buckingham*, an MP who was active in the cause:

... That men are brothers;
And those who make a fuss
About their temperance thus
Are not so much more temperate than others.

He retained a dislike of the Catholic Church throughout his life, and mockery was generally the weapon he chose to use against it; as, for example, in his *Address To The South London Literary Society and Up The Rhine*. ("Thank God Popery is none of my bugbears. I am not like old Mrs Twistleton of Beckenham, who never closed her eyes for a week after Catholic Emancipation for fear of being converted in her sleep!")

He often told with relish of an encounter he had with two priests while he was staying in Coblenz. They asked him for a contribution to a new church and

(continued on page 60)

BOOKS

THE COST OF FREE SPEECH, by Simon Lee. Faber £4.99

Simon Lee is an academic (a professor of law at Belfast) who writes journalistic books. His previous ones were readable accounts of Judges and Bishops. This collection of essays on various aspects of free speech is readable, but otherwise it isn't much good even as journalism.

The Cost of Free Speech isn't an entirely bad book, since it includes some discussion of free speech in relation to privacy, pornography, racism, official secrecy, terrorism, and so on, which is interesting and instructive. Lee comes unstuck with the *Satanic Verses* case, and then his whole argument about the need for responsibility in exercising the right of free speech falls to pieces. He suggests that Salman Rushdie himself is most to blame for the damage the case has done to the Muslim community. He suggests that *The Satanic Verses* really attacks Muslims and that Muslims are really hurt by it, despite the obvious facts that fictional satire about the founder of a religion is not a direct attack on its followers and that virtually none of the people who have claimed to be hurt have read or even seen the book. And he repeatedly spoils what might be quite good arguments with cheap sneers at Rushdie and the people who have defended him what he calls "the free speaking secularocracy".

Lee is right to stress the importance of serious discussion of free speech, but he is wrong in many of his own attempts at it. He begins his preface by saying that "speech is not free", which is quite true. He then says that "free speech is mostly under threat from ourselves", which is quite untrue. He complains that defenders of free speech avoid serious discussion, and then does so himself. "For example, in the sad Rushdie affair, the standard dogma of liberal folk has been an absolute commitment to freedom of expression for Rushdie and to dismiss as heresy any criticism of Rushdie. Those who wish to express themselves by burning his book are condemned as blasphemers against the sacred speech of the secular." Really? which "liberal folk" have expressed any "dogma" or "absolute commitment", or have called anything "sacred", or have dismissed anything as "heresy" or anyone as "blasphemers"? Later in the book he refers to "the absolutist stance of many secular literary and media folk" resting on "some kind of quasi-religious respect for absolute natural rights". Really? Has anyone held such a stance or shown such respect? Isn't the first duty of commentators on freedom of speech to make their own speech accurate?

Similarly, he begins his introduction by quoting the famous misquotation from Voltaire ("I disapprove of

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what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it"), displays his knowledge by showing that he knows it is a misquotation, but then displays his ignorance by saying that "it is endlessly invoked in such contexts as the travails of Salman Rushdie". Really? How often has it been invoked, and has anyone actually offered to defend *The Satanic Verses* to the death? He adds that to Rushdie's defenders "it is somehow unacceptable to say that one does not like the book". Really? I have said so several times while an active member of the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie, and no one complained, whereas when I defended free speech at the Muslim demonstration against Rushdie I was nearly lynched.

He then offers the following dialogue: "Do you believe in free speech? Yes. Do you believe in Father Christmas? No. Do you have the legal right to tell a young child that Father Christmas does not exist? Yes. Would you be morally right to do so? No." Really? If you don't believe in Father Christmas, wouldn't you be morally right rather than wrong to give a child an honest answer? He adds that "many of us hope that other adults will voluntarily restrain their speech so as to allow our children to enjoy the Father Christmas story". Really? Don't many of us wish that other adults would stop telling our children lies about Father Christmas and fairies, God, life after death, the universe, and everything else?

Does Lee have anything serious to say about this subject in what is after all not just a newspaper article but a full-length book? Not much. Like other moderate commentators, he wants to abolish the existing law of blasphemy but to replace it with a law against incitement to religious hatred, similar to the law against incitement to racial hatred, despite the facts that there has been such a law in Northern Ireland for more than twenty years with no useful effect, that such a law wouldn't cover *The Satanic Verses* or any other recent or indeed conceivable case, and that the law against incitement to racial hatred has had doubtful effects. He is even inclined to favour a law of "group libel". Is there no law so absurd that an academic lawyer won't support it?

On the other hand, Lee writes sensibly about the practical problems of allowing or denying free speech to terrorists, especially those involved in Northern Ireland. Here he knows what he is talking about, drops the silly sneers and foolish suggestions, and starts some serious discussion, and about time. So, like Richard Webster's *Brief History of Blasphemy*, *The Cost of Free Speech* is good in parts, but not many.

NICOLAS WALTER

REVIEWS

ECLIPSE OF THE SUN: AN INVESTIGATION INTO SUN AND MOON MYTHS, by Janet McCrickard. Gothic Image Publications, 7 High Street, Glastonbury, Somerset, BA6 9DP, £14.95

Although children gaze up at the *man* in the moon, our tendency is to think, mythologically as well as linguistically, of the moon as female and the sun as male. What Janet McCrickard has done is to demonstrate that this has not always been the case. In many societies the gender is reversed and sun-goddesses can be found "from Australia to the Baltic, from Siberia to Southern India, from Ireland to Japan, from Russia to Malaya".

Nor should we except our own country. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that "In conformity with the gender of Old English *sunne*, the feminine pronoun was used until the 16th century in referring to the sun; since then the masculine has been commonly used, without necessarily implying personification". And Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, contains the lines

... for yet the Sun
Was not; she in a cloudy tabernacle
Sojourned the while.

(VII. 247)

It was during the 16th and 17th centuries that "changes in the English language combined with Christian influence and revived interest in classical mythology" brought about the change. "The Sun-goddess of the West European pagans was gradually forgotten among English-speaking people, and it became 'normal' for the Sun to be a masculine god". But traces of the older myth survive in folklore and custom.

Indeed, evidence of a feminine sun cult can even be found in Greece and Rome, whose male sun worship was so obviously incorporated into Christianity. In 400 BC, on the occasion of a solar eclipse, Pindar called on

Thou beam of the Sun
Far seeing mother of the eye,

But the masculine sun was dominant when Christianity came on the scene and, in 200 AD, Clement of Alexandria compared Christ with the sun drawing his chariot across the sky. And as Janet McCrickard says: "Common ways of speaking about Apollo and Mithras were smoothly transferred to Christ, solar imagery was incorporated into the popular culture and official politico-religious art of the Holy Roman Empire. Christian altars were oriented toward the East (as pagan Sun-temples) and the liturgy blossomed with solar terminology". So that "To be a Christian is to take in the

concept 'Sun=divine masculinity' with one's every breath".

Christianity remains essentially a "masculine religion. God is male, Christ is male, the priest is male. Janet McCrickard believes that one of the objections to female priesthood is that "it will change the nature of the Godhead".

But enough of the religion that in R. G. Ingersoll's words "makes man an eternal victim and God an eternal fiend". *Eclipse of the Sun* ranges much wider and recounts fascinating tales from different parts of the world, not only "to reclaim the feminine sun myth where it has been lost or masculinised", but to express "a more humanistic view which sees all religious motifs as purely human expressions".

Nineteen-century ethnologists, it is argued, were all too ready "to assume a universal mythic language". When Sir James Frazer came across the Eskimo sun-goddess, "he simply referred to her as 'he'". And for Max Mueller, "Every god was the Sun, every goddess the Dawn".

Not surprisingly, though, there are widespread primitive views about the sun: that she or he falls into the sea at night or retreats into a cave, for example, and there is wide celebration of the winter solstice.

There are recurrent elements in lunar mythology too, one being the association of woman's monthly cycle with the moon, another madness and the full moon. The author effectively disposes of these persistent ideas. She slips up, though, surprisingly for a biologist, in referring to animals *and* birds, and she refers to the Book of Revelation in the plural.

Eclipse of the Sun is widely researched and delightfully illustrated by the author, who sees all religious myths as "purely human expressions rather than emanations from an eternal masculine or feminine principle".

COLIN McCALL

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(“Not With the Bigot’s Leaven”)

assured him that nothing would be considered too small, whereupon Hood gave them a tiny feather and hoped that they would use it in the tail of the weathercock.

Then, in his poem, *Our Lady’s Chapel*, he writes of a woman who, seeking a second husband after her first had been lost at sea, took advantage of an old legend attached to a Chapel of our Lady which held that a taper burned to the Virgin would bring a husband in next to no time. To make doubly sure of a man, the widow burned two tapers, only to find that her first husband had not been drowned after all and, to prove it, appeared at her marriage to his successor. The moral, of course, was:

Ye Coblenz maids, take warning by this rhyme,
And as our Christian laws forbid polygamy
For fear of bigamy,
Only light up one taper at a time.

But some of Hood’s finest mockery was reserved for the religious bigots. One such was Sir Andrew Agnew, who four times introduced a Bill into Parliament proposing the abolition of work on Sundays. In his *Ode To Sir Andrew Agnew* Hood used his mastery of the pun to telling effect:

Suppose your Act should act up to your will,
Yet how will it appear to Mrs Grundy
To hear you saying of your pious Bill
“It works well - on a Sunday!”

There is an interesting digression into serious thought elsewhere in this poem which gives an indication that Hood’s idea of a god was in some way bound up with Nature:

Spontaneous is pure devotion’s fire
And in a greenwood many a soul has built
A new church with a fir tree for a spire

But nowhere is his intense aversion to self-righteous bigotry more evident than in the letter which he called *My Tract* and his *Ode To Rae Wilson*. The first of these was written after he had been goaded beyond endurance by a Christian fundamentalist. She had called on him more than once to propound her religious views and assail his; but what stung Hood to compose *My Tract* was the letter she wrote to him after one of her visits in which she attacked his religious opinions and his work. What good, she asked, would his *Whims And Oddities* (collections of his comic verse) do for his soul? And how would he recall his levity on his death bed? His reply is worth reading in full even at a distance of 150 years, but a few extracts will give the flavour of it.

Your regrets over the *Whims And Oddities* that have made thousands

laugh may be alleviated if you only reflect that fanaticism has caused millions to shed blood as well as tears - a tolerable set-off against my levities.... I have used my talents in so cheerful a spirit and not abused them by writing the profane stuff called pious poetry nor spiritualised my prose by stringing together scriptural phrases which have become the mere slang of the swell mob.... In behalf of literature, I will boldly say that it is owing to our lay authors that the country is not now enthralled by priestcraft, superstition and, if you please, Popery, which has met with more efficient opponents in Dante, Boccaccio and Rabelais (profane writers, madam) than in all the McNeils, McGhees and McCaws of Exeter Hall.... But we will turn now from my death-bed to your own; supposing you to be there, appealing for answers to such solemn questions as whether your professed love for your species has been active and fruitful, or only the flatulent charity which evaporates upward in wind and catechises the hungry and preaches to the naked; and how far, in meddling with the spiritual concerns of your neighbours, you have neglected your own.... I implore you to spend a few years in self-scrutiny, which may be wholesomely varied by the exercise of a little active benevolence; not, however, in sending tracts instead of baby-linen to poor lying-in sisters, or in volunteering pork chops to distressed Jews, or in coddling a pulpit favourite, but in converting rags to raiment and empty stomachs to full ones, and in helping the wretched and indigent to keep their souls and bodies together.

Thus he continues, until his poignant, personal footnote: “Know that my poor sister has been excited by a circle of Canters like yourself into a religious frenzy and is at this moment in a private madhouse.”

And finally to Rae Wilson. Like the woman who inspired *My Tract*, Rae Wilson, a Scottish author and lawyer of narrow religious views, had been assailing Hood for some years for writing poetry which he had found to be “profane and ribald.” In his book, *Notes Abroad And Rhapsodies At Home*, Wilson attacked Hood for a stanza in his poem *The Blue Boar* which had appeared in the 1837 *Comic Annual*. The subject of this work was the Bill to emancipate the Jews. A boar and a sow were discussing a newspaper report on the progress of the Bill and they decided that it threatened their security. After all, they reasoned, if the Jews were un-Jewed there would be a greater demand for pork. It was a harmless piece of fun and this pun is, perhaps, typical of the humour of it:

Think then, with this new-waked fury,
How we should feel if tried by Jewry.

Rae Wilson, like so many of today’s keepers of morals, always felt obliged to read everything that was likely to cause him offence, and in *The Blue Boar* he found a stanza to which he could take particular exception. It read:

Whilst from the corner of her jaw
A sprout of cabbage green and raw
Protruded; so the dove so staunch
For peace supports an olive branch.

Wilson saw in this a blasphemous reference to the Holy Ghost. His crassness was the last straw for Hood and he

wrote the 500-line poem, which came to be known as Hood's Sermon, thus conferring immortality on a nonentity. J. C. Reid described it as "Hood's most biting poem; edged with righteous force, and not with personal malice, it sums up a good deal of his spontaneous, warm-hearted feeling for decent human values."

Hood makes his own position clear:

.... I'm not a saint.
Not one of those self-constituted saints,
Quacks - not physicians - in the cure of souls,
Censors, who sniff out mortal taints,
And call the devil over his own coals -
Those pseudo-Privy Counsellors of God,
Who write down judgements with a pen hard-nibbed;
Ushers of Beelzebub's Black Rod....

I do enjoy this bounteous, beauteous earth
And dote upon a jest
Within the limits of becoming mirth;
No solemn, sanctimonious face I pull,
Nor think I'm pious when I'm only bilious
Nor study in my sanctum supercilious
To frame a Sabbath Bill or forge a Bull.

Then, among "the pleas for toleration, the attack on mere formularies in religion and bourgeois hypocrisy" Hood makes some points to which freethinkers might well subscribe. For example, that piety does not depend on church attendance:

A man may cry "Church, Church" at every word
With no more piety than other people,
But a rook's not reckoned a religious bird
Because it keeps a-cawing from a steeple.

Or that no creed has a monopoly of virtue:

My heart ferments not with the bigot's leaven;
All creeds I view with toleration thorough,
And have a horror of regarding heaven
As anybody's rotten borough.

Or that one's religious views often depend on where one is born:

Consider then before, like Hurlothrumbo,
You aim your club at any creed on earth,
That by the simple accident of birth
You might have been high-priest to Mumbo-Jumbo.

The idea of a god in Nature also recurs in this poem and in a markedly similar tone to that later used by Longfellow in his sonnet, *My Cathedral*.

Thrice blessed, rather, is the man with whom
The gracious prodigality of Nature,
The balm, the bliss, the beauty and the bloom,
The bounteous providence in every feature,
Recall the good creator to his creature,
Making all earth a fane and heaven its dome....

Poor Hood's life was always a struggle against poverty and ill-health and it ended tragically at the early age of 46. The pity was that he had had to devote most of his energy to writing comic verse for a living to the detriment of his serious work. "I have to be a lively Hood to gain a livelihood", he reflected ruefully once; or, as his son put it, a little more theatrically: "He was compelled to jingle the bauble when he would fain have touched the lyre."

His early death was made the more melancholy by the fact that he had only just begun to produce the powerful and successful humanitarian poems such as *The Pauper's Christmas Carol*, *The Workhouse Clock*, *The Lady's Dream*, and others mentioned earlier. What might he have gone on to produce given twenty, or even ten, more years of life? That he intended to continue to work in this vein is clear from the unfinished poems found after his death, in particular *The Lay of The Lark*.

With the benefit of a few more years, one might speculate on the possible development of Hood's religious views. I am sure that Christianity was important to him, although his was a highly individual and not unquestioning faith; and one whose emphasis was on the second commandment and the Golden Rule and the generosity, warmth and toleration which were their consequence. One wonders if J. C. Reid's view that Hood was close to secular humanism would have been confirmed if he had lived into the age of Darwin, Huxley and Bradlaugh and the burgeoning of the freethought movement.

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Jehovah's Witness Nicola Geleff and her family ignored warnings from doctors at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital that she could die unless given a blood transfusion. Mrs Geleff, who was 35, started to haemorrhage after giving birth to twins. She died because as a Jehovah's Witness she would not accept a transfusion.

At a memorial Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral, Lord Deedes spoke of Malcolm Muggeridge's "contempt for material blessings". St Mugg left an estate valued £140,135.

Church Attendance Falls

A census described by Dr George Carey, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, as "the most thorough and comprehensive survey ever done of English churchgoing", has revealed a marked drop in numbers attending Church of England services. "We are not holding our youngsters in the faith", he declared. "This and other data constitute serious and uncomfortable realities for us all."

Conducted by MARC Europe, an evangelical-based organisation, the census was based on information supplied by parishes throughout the country. It was sponsored by World Vision and the Evangelical Alliance.

The Methodist and United Reformed churches have suffered notable losses. Attendance at Methodist churches fell eleven per cent between 1979 and 1989. United Reformed churches fared even worse with a decline in attendance of 18 per cent during the same period.

"The findings . . . provide depressing news for the established churches and, in particular, present a distinctive challenge to the nation's Catholics", declared the *Catholic Herald*. There has been a fall of 14 per in the number of practising Catholics. They account for 30,000 of the 45,000 Christians who have stopped going to church.

Unless the present trend reversed, there will be a fall of over a quarter of a million worshippers by the end of the century. One of the few areas of growth is the "house church" movement. But the emotional ranting and expounding of fundamentalist doctrines by born again zealots is something of an embarrassment, rather than a cause for rejoicing, among the circumspect faithful.

The highest statistics for churchgoing come from Lancashire and Merseyside (13 per cent). The lowest is South Yorkshire with only 6 per cent.

Watching the Censors

ARTICLE 19, the international civil liberties organisation whose report on censorship during the Gulf war was described in the last issue of *The Freethinker*, has now produced a "World Report" for 1991 - *Information Freedom and Censorship* (Library Association. £22.50). This is a 500-page hardback book with separate sections on 77 countries, as well as a general introduction and a concluding discussion of various "Themes and Issues". It contains masses of information, carefully researched and clearly presented, and the result is an essential reference source for anyone concerned with freedom of expression around the world.

In particular there are interesting items on some aspects of freedom of expression on religious matters in

Albania, Cuba, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mexico, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudia Arabia, South Africa and Zambia, mentions of the *Satanic Verses* case in several countries, and also a good short account of recent developments in the blasphemy law in Britain.

This most impressive publications is simultaneously depressing, because it shows how many threats there are to freedom in so many places, and encouraging, because it shows how many battles there are to keep alive.

The book was prepared too early to take account of the Gulf War, and ARTICLE 19 is preparing a comprehensive report. Meanwhile another useful publication in the area of free speech, the magazine *Index on Censorship* (Writers & Scholars International, £3), has produced a special issue (April/May 1991) on "Warspeak". This contains authoritative and informative reports of the manipulation of the news media during the Gulf War not only in Britain and the United States but also in Argentina, Australia, France, Germany, Israel, Turkey, and other parts of the Middle East.

This equally impressive treatment of the most recent major attack on free speech is again simultaneously depressing, because it shows how successful the operation was, and encouraging, because it shows how strong the resistance has been and still is.

LETTERS

A PRICKLY SUBJECT

In fairness to the god of Genesis, Janet McCrickard (*The Tree Of Lies*, March) ought to have pointed out that he wasn't all bad. Adam and Eve needed some leaves to hide their nakedness and he thoughtfully provided a fig-tree for this purpose. It could have been a holly-tree.

NEIL BLEWITT, Norwich.

WOODCRAFT ALTERNATIVE

I was really interested in the piece (March *Freethinker*) about Abigail Wright who could not join Guides because of not being sure about the existence of God. Ten out of ten to Abigail for making a stand and nought out of ten for the Guide movement and its prejudices.

I would advise Abigail to find a Woodcraft group or, if there isn't one nearby, to persuade her parents to help start one.

The Woodcraft Folk is a similar organisation to Guides and Scouts, but with important differences. First, it is for both sexes; secondly, it does not have any religious or any other prejudice. All are welcome, and all the children are encouraged to think for themselves.

Woodcraft is recognised by both local authorities and central government and is a registered charity. It is not new, having been established in 1925 by people who wanted to develop an organisation which used the skills of the scouting movement, but without the military overtones and concentrating on peace and co-operation rather than competition.

Democracy is important. The children are encouraged to participate in decision making, and are always on first name terms with the leaders. Woodcraft is opposed to all racism and

is very keen to encourage the children to think about the environment and resources.

All the Woodcraft children I have seen have been happy. They have fun. They play games they enjoy, but all the games have a point and encourage co-operation. I have found from my experience with Brownies that with them this is not usually the case.

Woodcraft have outdoor activities and camps where all ages and both sexes mix, and where the older children can be seen to help the younger ones.

For further information on The Woodcraft Folk write to 13 Ritherton Road, London, SW17 8QE.

GEORGINA COUPLAND, Preston.

BLAND AND CONFORMIST

My family and I enjoy reading *The Freethinker* and most of the contributors are lively and stimulating, but it is a continual moan of mine that there are not enough modern, relevant and possibly controversial articles such as war and peace, animal experiments, ecology, about which freethinkers may well disagree among each other as well as with religious persons. There is so much "preaching to the converted", and the articles by Janet McCrickard and Verna Metcalfe (March) may justly be described (I hope without offence) as Atheism for the Teeny Tinies. Most readers of *The Freethinker* are not teeny tinies and do not need to be told so often that the Bible and Christian doctrines contain discrepancies, nor that prayer is often unanswered. I presume that a few religious persons read *The Freethinker* anyway, and if they do are hardly likely to be influenced by these rather shallow arguments, which set up Aunt Sallies and then knock them down, all too easy really.

I feel that one result of this is a kind of bland conformism, quite the opposite to freethinking; surely atheists and agnostics may sometimes hold opposing views? And there may be points at which we will agree with some religious people (while not agreeing with their doctrines). Religion has produced courageous men like Trevor Huddleston and Bishop Tutu as well as charlatans like Jimmy Swaggart and the Bakkers. And atheism has produced Stalin as well as Charles Bradlaugh.

E. M. KARBACZ, West Mersea, Essex.

APPEALING IN VAIN

What with "war in heaven" (Revelation), their hilarious in-fighting the staff of Lincoln Cathedral (worthy of another series of *All Gas and Gaiters*), the sacked verger of St Paul's Cathedral stating that this institution is "a very unhappy place", I fail to see what benefit will result from the proposed advertising appeals to a lethargic public to "go to church on Sunday". There may be a response by those who care to worship the biblical god who is referred to as a "man of war" (Exodus), but for my part the appeal will fall on deaf ears.

DAVID YEULETT, London SE10.

POLITICAL BIAS

Having returned to *The Freethinker* after many years, not as a "born again atheist", I hasten to add, but as a lifelong agnostic, I am becoming increasingly perturbed at the political content of the magazine.

Its bland assumption of a political bias in its readers, I and I know many others, cannot concur. Having lived through the horrors of the last socialist Government, I have no wish to do so again.

When instigating another onslaught on Mrs Thatcher and the present Government, please remember that all non-believers and not left-wingers, trendy or otherwise.

R. A. COBB, North Luffenham, Rutland.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 5 May, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Michael Newman: T.H. Huxley and the Education Debate.

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.

The Humanist Society of Scotland. The Cowane Centre Stirling. Saturday, 20 April, 10 am - 5 pm. Annual Conference. Speaker: Nigel Dower (Aberdeen University). Subject: International Ethics. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock KA3 2JD, telephone 0563-26710.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Education Centre, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 14 May, 7.30 pm. David Parker: Is Marxism Dead?

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 25 April, 8 pm. David Seymour: Christ is the Answer - But what is the Question?

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Tuesday, 16 May, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 8 May, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. M.A. Zaki Badawi: Islam Today.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

CORRECTIONS

Important errors crept into the text of my article, "Belief in Prayer" (March). The first is in the third line of the second paragraph and should read "reasonableness" instead of "understanding", because reasonableness is a characteristic clearly lacking in the Christian God, whereas unspecified understanding is too vague.

The second is in the fourth paragraph, where the word "sacrifices" should have been in the singular, not in the plural. Christians refer to Jesus as the "Lamb of God" and to his death on the cross as the sufficient sacrifice for sin.

VERNA METCALFE, London NW3.

(continued from front page)

"It is over the issues of partnership, equality and indoctrination that the main controversies and anxieties lie", he added.

Lord Sefton of Garston (Labour) agreed with those who believe that children should be taught about all religions and then allowed to make up their own minds as to which, if any, they wish to pursue.

Referring to the Bishop of Guildford's statement on indoctrination in education, Lord Sefton said: "I wonder if that applies to teachers taking a crocodile of young children aged seven or eight, marching them along the street by order, sitting them in a church and then letting them be indoctrinated with the views of that particular church. If that is not indoctrination, I do not know what is.

"However, I am glad to see that the Church of England seems to be changing its mind. No doubt it will have a word with one of the other main faiths in this country."

Commenting on the case of parents sending their children to the West Indies for a traditional British Christian education, Lord Sefton said: "I have never before heard such arrogance. I do not know whether I am in the House of Lords or out on the stump somewhere listening to the evangelists.

"It has been said before in the House that secular education cannot maintain our moral values. I resent it now as I resented it then. I believe in a secular society."

Baroness Flather (Conservative) said that while the motivation behind the Bill was "of the highest", it did not serve the interest of society as a whole or of children.

"I do not believe in a proliferation of separate religious schools", she added.

"Changes which open the door any wider need to be resisted. Britain has undergone enormous change during the past thirty years. Large numbers of immigrants have come to this country from the former Empire and there is now a greater diversity of cultures, races and religions.

"In our schools we have second and third generations of British children of those immigrants and we need to consider the kind of society we want to build for them."

Baroness Flather sympathised with those who see their religion as a way of life that permeates all aspects of day-to-day living.

"That applies particularly to Islam and perhaps also to some of the Christian groups.

"But we know only too well what separate education can do. We already have an example within the United Kingdom, in Northern Ireland. Even on the mainland it is not so long ago that there was considerable antipathy between Protestants and Roman Catholics. With some of the other religious groups there would be the additional

element of racial differences to deal with.

"There is another important factor that we must not lose sight of.

"In many cases there is a desire to control the education of girls through separate schools. Many societies see equal opportunities and education for women as threats to their traditional way of life...

"Parental choice cannot be paramount. It must be balanced with the needs of society and those of the real consumers, the children themselves. It is their future and ability to compete and function alongside their peers that we should be most concerned about."

Rochdale Satanic Ritual Case Collapses

After a 47-day hearing at Manchester Crown Court, Mr Justice Douglas Brown dismissed claims that twenty children from a Rochdale housing estate had been subjected to satanic abuse. He said children had been taken into care because of social workers' "obsessive and mistaken" belief that a six-year-old boy's fantastical stories were true.

The saga started more than a year ago when the boy told teachers that he had seen other children drugged, sheep being mutilated, people digging up graves and babies being killed. It transpired that he had been up to the early hours of that morning watching a film called *The Evil Dead*.

Bill Thompson, of Reading University, who appeared in a recent Channel Four programme, *After Dark*, believes that satanic ritual abuse stories are being deliberately spread by fundamentalist Christian groups. The current campaign "bears all the signs of a classic moral panic, a scare promoted by a particular group to a particular end. They need evidence of satanic activity to validate their religious beliefs."

There has been an influx of evangelicals into the "caring" professions. A prominent "anti-Satan" crusader has given lectures to groups of social workers.

Like so many outbursts of irrationalism, the satanic scare has its origins in American fundamentalism. In the United States, Thompson encountered the "end-timers", Christians who are convinced by their interpretation of the Book of Revelation that the Second Coming is not far off. But before that happens, Satan will spread his influence and eventually take over the government of the world.

History shows that Christians are adept at fostering moral panics and witch hunts. The antics of present day foes of Satan are ludicrous and sometimes hilarious. But they are causing misery to individuals and families who are the victims of rumours and anonymous accusations.