

The Freethinker

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TV EVANGELISTS: ACTOR SAYS PLAY WAS ONLY "A MILD REPRESENTATION OF THE FACTS"

Guests from many parts of the country and representing a wide range of groups within the secular humanist movement attended the National Secular Society's annual dinner at the Bonnington Hotel, London. They were welcomed by NSS president, Barbara Smoker, who was in the chair.

The first speaker was broadcaster and musician, Benny Green, who reminded the audience that there are many different roads to secularism. His own case was perhaps unusual in that he had been born an unbeliever.

"It never occurred to me to believe in something for which there is no evidence, so I was an unthinking secularist, which must be quite rare", he said.

"As a boy, I lived near the United Synagogue in Woburn Square, where a teenage friend took a job. But he so hated the rabbinical smell of the place that he was seconded to the Jewish cemetery to sort out the muddled records of who was buried where. In the frozen winter of 1947, he was the only person able to guide people through the snow and the ice to the appropriate graves when, with a rabbi in tow, family visits were paid on the anniversary of the death.

"As the graveside prayers seemed to be elastic, he always used to hope they would be short, but he soon came to realise that their length depended solely on the amount of the fee paid to the rabbi: the larger the tip, the longer the prayer. When he told me this, it confirmed my bigotry against religion."

Benny Green went on to say that when, in a published review, he had described Robert Louis Stevenson's short story, *The Beach of Falesa*, as an atheist tract, there were protests that he had imagined it.

The story concerns a Cockney street-trader who goes out to the South Seas with a collection of trinkets to trade with the natives, only to find that rival traders squeeze him out by telling the natives that if they trade with him the gods will indicate their displeasure by

moaning in the trees. This the traders contrive to bring about by hiding Aeolian harps in the trees — thus intimidating the whole population.

"Stevenson's message is clearly that there is always a hidden Aeolian harp, if only you can find it and find out who put it there."

Benny Green concluded by proposing a toast to the guest of honour on this occasion, the actor Barry Morse.

Calling upon him to respond to the toast, Barbara Smoker said that inviting Barry Morse as guest of honour had been inspired by his exquisite portrayal of the money-grabbing televangelist in the television mini-series, "Glory! Glory!"

Barry Morse said that he had often described himself as a born again agnostic.

"I began with the normal respect of the working class for received opinion, but this gradually got turned around, first, by listening to my father, who had great dubiety about received opinion.

"As a lad during the South African War, he had been persuaded that by joining up he would not only be serving the nation and Her Majesty the Queen, but also serving the Almighty. So, at the age of 15, he joined the Cavalry. Ten months later, when he was wounded and his horse was killed under him, he began to question the soundness of received opinion.

"At my school, which was not unlike Dotheboys Hall, it was received opinion that everyone wrote with their right hands, and I was constantly beaten for being left-handed. The master said of me, 'This boy is getting ideas', and when I ventured to say that I thought that getting ideas was what school was for, I was beaten again.

"So I simply stopped going there, and as the teachers

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

SPOT THE SATANIST

"It could well be that the whole basis of this nonsense is the involvement of the evangelical group", declared one Orkney resident, referring to the scandal that has caused so much pain and turmoil on the island of South Ronaldsay. It is known that one of the social workers involved in the case of the nine children being removed from their homes in an early morning operation — some were still in bed when the police arrived — belongs to a group of Christians who are trying to "drive the devil out". Nor was it just a coincidence, but part of a pattern, that the South Ronaldsay affair occurred shortly after a conference in Aberdeen on satanism. It was organised by evangelical churches, addressed by the leader of a fundamentalist Christian group which purports to help "victims of the occult", and attended by two Orkney social workers.

Until fairly recently, Satan seekers in Britain were content to distribute their sappy leaflets outside "occult" bookshops or trying to prevent children enjoying themselves at Halloween. But it is a different story in the United States where, during the 1980s, an anti-satanist panic was fomented by televangelists, moral majority crusaders and hick Bible thumpers. The religious brand of McCarthyism sweeping the United States has reached Britain.

The witch-hunt in Orkney, and that in Rochdale a few weeks previously, were the result of a campaign that has been gathering strength for some time. Its chief promoters are evangelical churches, "family" pressure groups, publicity-seeking politicians and self-appointed moral guardians who detect satanism everywhere. Their witch-hunting activities have led to an invasion of privacy, grief for parents who have been stigmatised as child abusers, unhappiness and possibly psychological damage to children who have been separated from their families.

Fundamentalists behind the satanist scare are as pernicious and socially mischievous as the Moonies or any of the cults which have appeared over the last thirty years. At a period when the social services are being slashed, they have sent police and social workers chasing will-o'-the-wisps, time-wasting operations which delay or prevent investigation of actual physical and sexual abuse of children. There is no question that such abuse occurs. There is no question either, as court records show, that many offenders are priests, Sunday school teachers and voluntary workers in Christian

AND NOTES

organisations.

Outbreaks of irrationalism and moral panic are nothing new. And there are several reasons why fundamentalists are in a frenzy at the present time.

In the past, through recourse to the inerrant word of God, Christian groups have made asses of themselves by predicting Christ's imminent return to earth and other momentous non-events. So although reluctant to commit themselves, in public at least, there is widespread belief among the "born again" fraternity that the Second Coming will occur in the not too distant future. But before the Clouds of Glory production number, Satan will make a last desperate attempt to rule the world. To this end, the family and society are being undermined by his followers who include New Agers, secular humanists, gays, friends of the earth, evolutionists, transcendental meditators, single parents, couples "living in sin" and adherents to non-Christian faiths (to name but a few). Christian witch-hunters are spoiled for choice of a scapegoat.

The year 2000 is of particular significance to fundamentalists. Its approach accounts for the urgency of their appeals to "accept Christ" and projects like the Decade of Evangelism and March for Jesus. Spearheaded by American "end-timers", a crusade has been launched to convert twenty million Europeans. In the United States, the Satan seekers have created a new "profession", generating enormous wealth from publishing, television appearances, lecture circuit tours, and organising "training sessions" for police and social workers. Vast sums have been allocated by television ministries for overseas missionary work; no doubt some of this money will be subsidising the anti-satanist industry in Britain.

Indifference to religious claims and a dramatic decline in church attendance by the British is no reason for complacency in the freethought movement. The fundamentalists have a lot going for them. There is no shortage of money and most groups are registered as religious charities. Increasingly their come-and-join-us jamborees are being backed by the mainstream churches, including Anglican and Roman Catholic. They are excited over the enthronement of Dr Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury. They have succeeded in hoodwinking social workers, journalists and broadcasters with horror stories about widespread satanic practices, including ritual sacrifice of children.

It is ironic that the present satanist craze started and is at its height in America. Next year marks the 300th

anniversary of that country's most infamous witch-hunt. During the summer of 1692, the Puritan-ruled community of Salem, in Massachusetts, was caught up in a witchcraft scare. Nineteen of those who were accused and put on trial went to the scaffold. The Salem witch-hunt originated in a child's fantasies — just like the satanist scare in Rochdale.

BACKWARD, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

These are sorrowful times for that esteemed body, the Lord's Day Observance Society (motto: "For Our Lord and His Day"). After striving for nearly 160 years against the forces of darkness — sinners who spend Sundays as they please — the Society's influence is now almost negligible. In the days of yore, particularly under the leadership of Herbert Henry Martin, known to one and all as "Misery" Martin, the LDOS was a pressure group to be reckoned with as it campaigned against the frivolity of Sunday cycling, cinemas, art galleries, concerts, boating, harvesting and work by funeral undertakers.

Nowadays the LDOS is but a shadow of its former self, except in a few outposts of 19th century-style Protestantism like Northern Ireland. But even there the Sabbatarians can no longer depend on the knee-jerk support they could take for granted less than a decade ago. Not long ago they lost the struggle to prevent Sunday opening of public houses. And now another defeat has been inflicted on the champions of Our Lord and His Day, this time in the largely Protestant district of Castlereagh, near Belfast.

Proposals to retain seven-day opening of leisure facilities were fiercely opposed by the godly and gloomy. A poll of electors was conducted, and needless to say the Almighty was on the Sabbatarian side during the vigorous campaign. But by a five-to-one margin, the vote was in favour of seven-day opening.

Gone are the days when in Britain the editor of *Lord's Day Magazine* could "thankfully report that two Councils . . . have decided in the interests of the moral and spiritual welfare of the children to refuse to allow the games apparatus to be open for use on Sundays."

A plan by the new president of Peru to make free contraception available to all has been fiercely attacked by the Roman Catholic Church. A United Nations agency made a grant of over one million dollars to fund the programme. The Archbishop of Lima warned women who resort to contraception that they "run a risk of not going to heaven." Peru has a high rate of illegal abortions. President Fujimori declared: "We don't want a country populated by children feeding themselves from garbage dumps."



COUNTING HEADS

Why didn't religious fundamentalists condemn the Census last month? Have they forgotten that when King David ordered his prime minister Joab to number the people of Israel and Judah, the Lord was so displeased with this thing that he smote the people with a plague — which seems rather unfair on the people — so David began work on the Temple which was later built by Solomon (II Samuel 24, I Chronicles 21)? Or have they decided that the events which took place when Caesar Augustus ordered all the world to be taxed somehow marked a divine change of mind on the subject (Luke 2)? When a census was first proposed in this country, in 1753, there were indeed religious objections, including warnings of divine retribution of some kind, but from 1801 onwards we have had censuses in flagrant disregard of biblical authority.

Seriously, though, there were some good reasons to condemn the most recent Census. At a time of economic recession, it involved enormous expense to obtain information which can now be obtained far more cheaply and efficiently through modern sampling techniques. And despite all the denials from the authorities, it involved a massive intrusion into personal privacy, which is no better for being nearly two centuries old.

A particularly objectionable feature this time was the question about "ethnic group". It may be a good idea to establish the number of the various communities in Britain, but this was a remarkably clumsy and misleading way of trying to do so. The first four alternatives offered were based on skin colour (White and various kinds of Black), but the next four were based on national origin (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese), and the last one referred vaguely to "ancestry". No wonder many Muslims described themselves as Muslim, and no doubt some Jews described themselves as Jewish (though those with longer memories would surely have hesitated). We wonder how many people rejected the divisive alternatives of White or Black and called themselves "British", and we know of several who rejected all such distinctions and called themselves "Human"! Others, of course, refused to take part in the exercise at all, and risked a £400 fine for their libertarian principles.

Other countries are used to a much higher degree of supervision and registration by the authorities, but we haven't ever got used to such things, even during wartime. This was indeed one of the factors in the successful resistance to the poll tax, and the unsatisfactory responses to the worst parts of the Census may lead to its eventual abolition. We already know quite enough about ourselves; what is needed is not more detailed information but more relevant action.

RELIGION WITHOUT MORALS

The New Life is a fundamentalist "Christian outreach newspaper" of Pentecostal persuasion, promoting odd notions like "the totally helpless state of mankind apart from Christ" and "baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in other tongues." It is published in Sheffield, and a recent issue has reached the *Freethinker* editorial address.

Contents of *The New Life* are incredibly mawkish, bringing to mind Lady Bracknell's description of Miss Prism's unpublished three-volume novel. Alongside the hotchpotch of reported miracle cures, conversions and calls to repentance, there are advertisements for services at oases of spiritual refreshment like the Glad Tidings Hall, in Hull.

The New Life gives Jehovah's Witnesses short shrift — hardly surprising as they are competitors in the superstition market place. It also delivers a lofty rebuke to environmentalists: "In these days of environmental concern the Bible reminds us to set our minds on eternity rather than our temporary dwelling place . . . Being a friend of God is more important than being Friends of the Earth."

To the best of human knowledge the earth is our only dwelling place. Rather than adopting the selfish and irresponsible attitude of *The New Life*, we should protect and leave it habitable for future generations. To that end, Friends of the Earth and other environmental groups promote research and projects to combat industrial and other forms of pollution. For their part, freethinkers should combat the social pollution emanating from fundamentalist Christian organisations and publications.

A London man nearly died after taking "miracle cure" tablets sold by a Buddhist monk. The tablets contained arsenic and mercury. A police spokesman said: "We don't know how many were sold. There could be a lot of very sick people around."

It has been suggested in the correspondence columns of the *British Medical Journal* that religious circumcisions should be made available on the National Health Service. Complications are being seen by doctors because the operation has been carried out by inexperienced practitioners.

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.

A STATEMENT

by Jane Wynne Willson, chairperson of the British Humanist Association, and David Pollock, chairman of the Rationalist Press Association

In News and Notes (April 1991) "Free Speech or Tied Tongues?" it was stated that Professor Sir Hermann Bondi had brought improper pressure to bear on both the BHA and the RPA. This was not the case. It was also said that Sir Hermann Bondi exercised double standards in that he had himself given his own views in a TV interview, speaking as president of both Associations, while he objected to the "lesser mortals" of the Humanist Liaison Committee doing the same. This was also untrue. In the interview in question, Sir Hermann Bondi made very clear, as he does scrupulously on all such occasions, that his personal views were his own and that the views within the humanist movement were various. This practice was not followed when the HLC issued its first press release, and this was unanimously regretted by the BHA Executive Committee and the RPA board.

We are shocked that *The Freethinker* should write an editorial based on malicious and grossly inaccurate hearsay.

A REPLY

by the Editor of *The Freethinker*

This joint statement was issued by officers of the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association without consulting their respective Executive Committee or Board of Directors — or so we understand by hearsay, which is the only evidence normally available to ordinary members of the organisations. If we quoted relevant letters or minutes of meetings, we would no doubt be accused of breach of confidentiality. In fact we have relied on many conversations among active members of the humanist organisations since February, and reject the charge of malice and inaccuracy.

Mrs Wynne Willson and Mr Pollock deny that Sir Hermann Bondi brought "improper" pressure to bear on the BHA and the RPA. However, when a public figure of his standing threatens to resign the presidency of organisations if they fail to accept particular resolutions, this is certainly bringing pressure to bear on the committees concerned. (Incidentally, we understand that the resolutions were accepted without dissent, but not unanimously.)

In the interests of accuracy, it should be mentioned that Sir Hermann Bondi complained about two separate things. The first was the opening sentence of the Humanist Liaison Committee press statement of 15

January: "British Humanists condemn the current drift to war in the Gulf". He claimed this implied that all British humanists did so and that anyone who did *not* do so wasn't a humanist. No such implication was intended or inferred, any more than when it is stated that humanists support or oppose any other political or social policy. The second was the founding statement of the Humanist Peace Council, which was issued in the names of employees and from addresses of the national humanist organisations. He claimed this implied that the organisations were involved in the HPC. Again, no such implication was intended or inferred, and indeed the statement itself explicitly disclaimed any such interpretation.

We maintain that Sir Hermann Bondi was applying double standards. For instance, when he discussed humanist views of war in a Channel Four Television interview (June 1987, published in *New Humanist*, December 1987), he was introduced (without demur on his part) as president of both the BHA and the RPA, giving obvious authority to his views. True, he said that his views were his own and humanist views on the subject varied; but it is also true that the Humanist Peace Council statement said the same thing.

Sir Hermann Bondi is not the only prominent humanist who has expressed controversial opinions as a humanist and then complained when obscurer humanists have done the same thing. This is a bad practice which should be exposed. Employees and officials of humanist organisations should have at least as much freedom of expression as employees and officials of political and religious organisations.

Wanderer Warning

The Wanderer, one of America's oldest Roman Catholic weeklies, has published an article calling for the suppression of secularism. George A. Kendall's "The Right to Persecute Heretics" is in line with the editorial stance of the ultra-Right defender of the traditionalist faith.

Kendall argues that society has a basic right to persecute heretics who have "no rights, and can legitimately be suppressed by both the Church and the State. The suppression of secularism is a legitimate project. . .

"The precise measures to be taken will have to depend on pragmatic considerations.

"It would certainly be desirable, even obligatory, for society to place secularists under some civil disabilities. Prohibiting them from holding public office or teaching in our schools are fairly obvious ones.

"We Christians have both the right and the duty to campaign for such measures."

Those Magnificent Men. . .

NEIL BLEWITT

Ascension Day is celebrated forty days after Easter. This year it falls on 9 May, which is also Freethinker publication day.

And, at the last, Mithra, who had come down from heaven to live and labour among men, found his soul liberated from the bonds of his body; and no sooner had this release been accomplished than the chariot of the sun-god appeared beside him and took his soul through the spheres of the planets to the eternal heaven of the fixed stars. . .

And Elijah smote the waters of the Jordan with his mantle and they divided so that he and Elisha could pass over on dry land. But, as they walked, there appeared between them a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. Elijah's mantle fell from him and he was carried up by a whirlwind into heaven. . .

And Romulus, the son of Mars and a Vestal Virgin, disappeared while reviewing his army during a thunderstorm, but was later seen ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot driven by his father. Immortality was there conferred on him and in the style of Quirinus was he worshipped thereafter. . .

And Jupiter, in the form of a swan, lay with the mortal Leda and she conceived and brought forth an egg from which twin sons, Castor and Pollux, emerged. But, during the war with Idas and Lynceus, Castor was slain, and Pollux pleaded with Jupiter to take his own life in exchange for that of his brother. The god so marvelled at this fraternal devotion that he rewarded the twins with immortality and they were transported to heaven where they were set among the stars, to be known ever after as Gemini. Notwithstanding this, they consented to appear from time to time in earthly battles mounted upon pure white horses, but always returning to their heavenly stations before nightfall. . .

And just as the place of Zoroaster's birth was suffused with a divine splendence on the day his virgin mother brought him forth, so at his death, in his 78th year, was the region all about illuminated by a succession of lightning flashes, in one of which Zoroaster was enveloped and borne up swiftly to heaven. . .

And Orion was a mighty hunter and a giant who was able, moreover, to walk upon the water. And when he died, after his side had been pierced by one of Diana's arrows, his body was despatched to heaven by the goddess and placed among the stars, where it may be seen to this day, complete with girdle, sword and club and with his faithful dog, Sirius, behind him. . .

And when Hebe was dismissed from the office of cup-bearer to the gods, Zeus selected Ganymede, a

Trojan boy, to be her successor. The god, in the form of an eagle, flew down to earth during a violent thunderstorm and, with the boy on his back, returned to heaven where Ganymede was installed in the office and granted the boon of immortality. . .

And as the corpse of Augustus was being consumed by fire on Mars Field, a cloud descended from heaven and hovered above it. When it rose again, it was seen to be bearing the soul of the dead emperor to heaven. . .

And when Hercules, the son of Jupiter and the mortal Alcmena, had walked to the top of Mount Oeta, he built himself a funeral pyre from the wood of the nearby trees. He lay down upon it with his head resting upon his club and his body covered with a lion's skin. The wood was ignited by a thunderbolt and when the mortal portion of his body had been devoured by flames, the divine part assumed a great dignity and was enveloped by a cloud and taken in a chariot drawn by four horses to live for ever among the stars. . .

And when Jesus, the son of a ghost and the mortal Mary, had taken his apostles to the top of Mount Olivet, he spoke to them of devils and serpents and then blessed them; but scarcely had his benediction been completed before a cloud descended to where he was standing and received him into its midst. And thus he was carried up to heaven, there to be observed by the apostles sitting at the right hand of a god. . .

For those readers who have followed me to this point and who may be under the impression that I have written ten veracious accounts of the ascension of mortals and gods to heaven, I have to confess that this is not necessarily so.

But the point of placing these accounts before you is not to mislead. It is, rather to invite you to decide which of the ten, if any, are factual representations.

Answers on a postcard, please. . .

An opinion poll in the Republic of Ireland shows that 64 per cent of people want an end to ban on divorce. This is a reversal of the position in a referendum four years ago when voters came out in favour of retaining the present law. The anti-divorce campaign was led by Roman Catholic priests and church organisations. And a survey of Dublin teachers, carried out by the Diocesan Adviser for Religious Education in Primary Schools, has produced some surprising results. More than 86 per cent of the interviewees declared they teach religion only because they are compelled to do so by the terms of their employment.

The Radicals' Bible

R. W. MORRELL

In 1791 the English Establishment, already shaken by events in revolutionary France, was infuriated by the publication of Part One of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Attempts at suppression failed, and *Rights of Man* became immensely popular and influential.

The Post Office is not noted for enthusiasm concerning issuing stamps to mark events of a social and political character. It will readily produce a hundred and one reasons for refusing to issue a stamp depicting, say, Charles Bradlaugh, although it will happily fall over itself to produce stamps commemorating some inconsequential celebration involving minor royalty. Consequently, it almost goes without saying there will be no stamp to mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of one of the most influential political works written in England, the first part of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. However, there will be a full set of stamps to commemorate, of all things, the 150th anniversary of the coining of the word "dinosaur". Interesting as this event is in palaeontological history, it can hardly be said to even remotely approach the importance of *Rights of Man*, which made a major contribution to the climate of intellectual freedom in which palaeontologists work.

Thomas Paine had been urged to return to England in 1787, following the successful outcome of the American war of independence, because the industrial and technological development in the new nation was inadequate for him to pursue a passionate interest he had in using iron for the construction of bridges. It is possible, if not probable, that the people who encouraged Paine's scientific curiosity wanted to get him out of the way, as they saw him as a potential focal point around which political opposition to their policies would gather. Paine was known for his role in the battle for independence, and a writer able to present even complex ideas in a manner readily understandable by the unsophisticated. As a strong supporter of democratic ideals he represented a danger to the new American Establishment; many belonging to this had much in common with counterparts in England, and in some instances had never really wanted to break with England in the first place.

The England to which Paine returned was ready for political change, particularly in the larger urban centres where the rich and the poor were united in a desire to bring about electoral reform. Paine, however, tended to keep his distance from politics; he was, after all, now an American citizen. However, when the Revolution broke out in France he found it impossible to stand aside; he

believed that the political changes the Revolution brought would result in the establishment of an American style democracy of the type he had advocated and fought for.

It is at this time Paine revealed rather more clearly than before his too trusting nature. He seems to have been convinced that British political figures like Edmund Burke, who had expressed strong reservations about the war against the colonists, would also welcome change in France. Therefore Burke's embittered attack on the French revolutionaries, first in a speech to Parliament, then some months later in a book entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, took Paine by surprise, but not to the extent of preventing him replying. This reply was entitled *Rights of Man*; not only did it devastatingly demolish Burke's emotive and often trivial arguments, but constituted a compelling argument for radical change in Britain itself. The book was an immediate best seller, despite the efforts of the Government to hinder its publication, and rapidly established itself as the Bible of radical political and social reformers, remaining so until well into the 19th century. Paine's programme of social reform, largely set out in the second part of the book published in 1792, is now well dated, even if some of the ideas retain their value in broad terms. But on the whole the book remains an important work with a very definite message for this day and age, its advocacy of the case for freedom and human rights. Indeed with little change in emphasis, the arguments advanced by Paine still apply to many parts of the world, including Britain, as being goals still to be attained.

History contains abundant examples of how privileged groups react to anything or anyone who challenges their dominant positions in society. Naturally the alarm felt by the English Establishment focused their minds on the problem of getting rid of Paine and eradicating the influence of his ideas. Eventually, after a rigged "trial", which he did not attend, Paine was outlawed and his book banned. However, try as they may, the authorities could neither prevent it circulating, nor the ideas contained in it exerting considerable influence, so any thought that a "trial" would solve the problem was a vain hope.

Rights of Man constitutes a direct challenge to political authoritarianism, whether from the Right or Left, or even the centre, which frequently masks a vicious authoritarianism in a fog of fine sounding rhetoric. But Paine had largely ignored another and perhaps more insidious form of authoritarianism - the religious variety. The omission, though, was deliberate for he had intended to put his ideas in respect to religion down on paper at a later date. However, a conviction about the

dangerous spread of atheism in France prompted him to act earlier than he had planned and he wrote what was to be a most tellingly effective criticism of the Judaeo-Christian Bible ever produced, *The Age of Reason*. In fact this was the first comprehensive attack expressed in popular terminology ever made against the Christian cult, for no ancient writer whose work survived in part or whole the orgy of Christian destruction of writings critical of them after they had attained political power, takes it apart in the manner Paine does. To this day *The Age of Reason* has retained its value as a criticism of the Bible, a fact given added emphasis with the current growth of Christian biblical literalism as expressed in fundamentalism, or what Joseph McCabe so rightly termed funnymentalism.

The Age of Reason provided the English Establishment with a weapon they seized upon with relish to beat Paine with. He had clearly underestimated the emotive hold religion had over peoples minds, preventing rational discussion of religious ideas. The Bible had an importance in Protestant Britain and the new United States which it did not have in formerly Roman Catholic France, where, as Paine had rightly concluded, atheism

was on the increase. But his attempt to turn back the clock by offering a deistical substitute, Theophilanthropy, was a failure from the start, for to many this was to all intent and purpose philosophically obsolete. But far from retarding the progress of atheism, *The Age of Reason* established itself as one of the two books to have created more atheists than any others, the second being, of course, the Bible.

Although *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* are different sides of the same coin and compliment each other, the latter dramatically harmed its author, effectively destroying much of his reputation amidst a storm of emotive religious bigotry. Even in the United States, the nation which he named, and of which he is as important a founding father as anyone else laying claim to such a status, Paine's contributions were largely lost sight of. He became, in effect, a non-person, and has remained so until fairly recently.

Perhaps, then, the bicentenary of the publication of *Rights of Man* may help to pull Thomas Paine further out of the obscurity from which in recent years he has started to emerge. His importance as a pioneer of basic freedoms and human rights may at last be acknowledged.

J. R. Holmes's *True Morality*

ELLEN WINSOR

This final article in the series, *Birth Control Tracts of the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century*, concerns the work of J. R. Holmes, an important but little known pioneer of the birth control movement. His activities spanned the 19th and 20th centuries. He died in 1938.

The three previous articles in this short series were all concerned with tracts published and sold by freethinkers and secularists. To some extent they were also advertised through radical journals such as *The Freethinker*. James Robins Holmes's *True Morality; or, The Theory and Practice of Neo-Malthusianism* is different because it was published by its author and most were distributed through the post from his home address at The Mulberries, East Hannay, Wantage, Berkshire.

The book first appeared in 1890 under the title *The Theory and Practice of Neo-Malthusianism*, the shorter, alternative title being added later. The copy which have to hand is bound in reddish-brown cloth and is titled in gilt. It is undated, but judging from the dates which are given to extracts from correspondence included in it, would appear to have been printed in 1905 or 1906. The volume comprises 172 pages, although it seems that for many years it was available in two forms. *Freethinker* advertisements of the mid-1890s refer to the most important parts of the book being available as a pamphlet of 112 pages at the extraordinarily low price of two

pence post free. A superior, and larger, hardbound edition (of the type I have) cost one shilling post free, and included a portrait and autograph of the author.

The author begins the book by explaining his view of "True Morality". Much of this chapter is organised as a series of quotations (mainly from freethinkers) from which the author concludes:

"True Morality" demands that people who take upon themselves the duties of parentage must, in addition to being married, be of mature age; free from any transmissible disease or infirmity; and able to provide the necessities of civilised life for their offspring.

There are a number of pages of advice as to how this can be achieved followed by a price list for "Neo-Malthusian Appliances" sold by the author. This is some 33 pages long and is much more than just a list, as there is detailed explanation of how the devices are used. The more expensive edition concludes with an appendix which encompasses such diverse concerns as the undesirability of young women wearing corsets and consideration of the best age for marriage. One engaging aspect of the book is the inclusion of extracts from three of many customers' letters:

I have been married ten years, and have had one living child eight year's ago. Had one miscarriage before he was born, and have had seven since. . . I want to prevent conception.

I am the mother of seven children, am only 36 years old, just in the prime of life if I had my health, but my health is gone. . . I am just dragging out a miserable existence. . . What I want now is the

safest, surest preventative that can be found.

Kindly send per return one medium-sized Secret Spring Pessary. Enclosed find 2/6 in stamps. I trust it may answer, as we have six children already, and both young. I am only 27, husband 30.

The book did succeed in attracting the attention of the law. In 1892 a firm of booksellers in Bombay were fined for selling it. In 1911, James White was fined £20 at Durham for selling it in Stanley market-place. He refused to pay the fine and died in prison before completing the sentence. In May 1912, Holmes himself was fined £10 plus costs at Wantage Petty Sessions for sending his book through the post, and on 1 July 1912, Berkshire Quarter Sessions dismissed his appeal.

There is much mystery surrounding J. R. Holmes. Even authors of authoritative works on the history of birth control (see the bibliographical note below) find it difficult to write much of substance about him or his book. Peter Fryer recognised his importance but failed to locate a single copy of *True Morality* when he was writing his book, *The Birth Controller*. Norman Himes could only locate a copy in a German translation, despite the fact that by 1912 Holmes had supplied no less than 150,000 English copies. This statistic is derived from evidence which Holmes provided in court that year. The last edition of the book that I can find any mention of is dated spring 1936, and it would seem reasonable to assume it had sold at least 250,00 copies by that date.

The mystery is further increased by the lack of recognition afforded Holmes by the National Secular Society. In the early years his book was advertised in the columns of *The Freethinker* and it received a very positive endorsement in *The National Reformer* when it first appeared. On the other hand, his obituary, which appeared in *The Freethinker* on 27 March 1938 was sparse indeed, and made no mention of his work as a birth-controller. It seems sad that this is so, particularly as Holmes always titled himself MNSS (Member of the National Secular Society). Perhaps one reason for this was that birth control had always proved a divisive issue among freethinkers. *Freethinker* editors G. W. Foote and Chapman Cohen allowed the advertisement of birth control literature and devices in the columns of the paper; but they stopped short of endorsing the theory and techniques of Neo-Malthusianism in the way that Bradlaugh had in *The National Reformer*.

One point of interest which the obituary does make is that Holmes was very involved with local community work serving on the Wantage Rural District Council and the East Hannay Parish Council. It mentioned that he carried out a number of improvements for the benefit of Hanney, at his own expense. Clearly those who knew him best did not regard him as a crank.

To return briefly to a point which was made in the introduction to the first article in this short series. In

1982 a scholarly and substantial work on birth control entitled *Birth Control and the Population Question In England, 1877-1930*, by Richard Allen Soloway, Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, was published. In its 418 pages not one mention was made of J. R. Holmes or his *True Morality*. Freethinkers must guard their history jealously.

Bibliographical Note

The two best books on the history of contraception are Norman E. Himes's *Medical History of Contraception*, 1936 and Peter Fryer's *The Birth Controllers*, 1965. Fryer effectively supplemented his book by the publication in 1969 of a catalogue entitled *British Birth Control Ephemera, 1870 - 1947* which listed some very scarce materials collected by David Collis. Substantial commentaries were written on many of the items. Research in this field has been limited by the survival of so few of the original tracts and this is the reason why the Collis collection was so important. The scarcity of materials may seem surprising, given the huge number of tracts which were printed. However, they were often flimsy and were produced with fragile paper wrappers. What is more, few people would have wished to draw attention to their interest in birth control techniques and doubtless discreetly disposed of the pamphlets when they had read what they wanted to know. The situation has been further exacerbated by the reluctance of libraries to purchase such controversial materials.

"Poor" CoE Cuts Losses

Commercial property holdings worth around £500 million are to be sold by one of the country's major investors. The Church Commissioners have decided to part with their interests in a number of developments, including the Metro Centre in Gateshead and the Marlowes Centre in Hemel Hempstead. Proceeds of the sales will be re-invested in shares and gilt-edged stocks.

It is reported that a fall in property prices has reduced the value of the Commissioners' portfolio by 20 per cent. Until recently property accounted for 70 per cent of the Church's assets of £1.5 billion.

The Church of England Pensions Board has also decided to sell one of its properties. It is a large house in one of London's most exclusive districts, The Bishops Avenue, Highgate. The elderly residents were given three months' notice to leave; not surprisingly some are reported to be "deeply hurt and disorientated by their experience."

The house has an interesting history. Many years ago, two sisters, who are still living, left it to the Pensions Board which offers security and peace of mind to retired clergy "who have cared for others in the name of Christ." The devout and generous ladies did not agree with the Board's decision to sell the property. But houses in The Bishops Avenue are fetching at least £750,000.

BOOKS

FUNERALS AND HOW TO IMPROVE THEM, by TONY WALTER. Hodder & Stoughton, £ 8.99
UNDERTAKEN WITH LOVE, by JANE SPOTTISWOODE. Robert Hale, £12.95

Death is often said to be the last taboo, though it is in fact widely discussed in conversation and in the media, and there are many books on all aspects of the subject. But there is less discussion of the ceremonies used to mark death, and these two books are welcome additions to the literature.

Tony Walter is the author of successful books on money and poverty, crime and punishment, and *Funerals and How to Improve Them* is a popular account of the whole subject which is easy to read and well worth reading. It covers virtually all the theoretical and practical issues, includes dozens of interesting examples and useful suggestions, and provides fresh ideas even for the most experienced practitioners. It is well researched and clearly written, full of compassion and humour, and ends with appendixes of valuable information.

The author and publisher are both Christian, and the book appears in a Christian series, but Tony Walter is extraordinarily open to a wide range of religious and non-religious attitudes. He mentions that in his own family "there is a complete spectrum of belief, half-belief, and non-belief"; he insists that, "though a majority of the population still believes in God, active church members are outnumbered by those who do not believe in God at all"; and he states that "I seek both to hold to what I believe and to say much that will be of value even within world-views I do not share". Over and over again he takes great care to include the concerns of unbelievers of all kinds, and indeed he is more tolerant of their ideas than many of them are of his.

Parts of the book will have particular appeal for secular humanists. Several of the individual funerals described were non-religious. The section on participation includes a reference to David Ibry's videos of people for their own funerals. The section on secular funerals in Britain includes references to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, with special reference to the work of Jane Wynne Willson (whose booklet on *Funerals Without God* is described as "excellent" and "invaluable") and Barbara Smoker (who is described as "a likeable, jolly woman very different from the stereotype of the intellectual humanist").

One aspect of the book might provoke disagreement from secular humanists. Tony Walter distinguishes between the "life-centred" funeral, as practised in Australia, and the "secular" funeral, as practised in

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Britain. He comments that the former has no ideology other than "the implicit dogma of individual self-fulfilment", whereas the latter "has traditionally aimed to interpret a life through an explicitly secular philosophy" and "to affirm an atheist, agnostic or humanist philosophy". This may be true of some non-religious funerals in this country — conducted by positive "humanists" or negative "secularists" — but surely not of many, and certainly not of most of those I have attended or taken myself. In fact most British unbelievers would probably approve of the idea of a non-ideological "life-centred funeral", and would find the account of the Australian practice very attractive. (There are also much briefer references to similar funerals in the Netherlands and the Soviet Union.)

Tony Walter emphasises that a funeral ceremony should be controlled by the people involved, and he also includes a section on "Doing It Yourself" — how the whole business of disposing of a dead body can be controlled by the people involved without using professionals at all. Jane Spottiswoode is one of the few people who have managed such a do-it-yourself funeral, when her husband Nigel died in May 1987. She made a radio programme about it (in the *Punters* series in November 1987) and got wide media coverage and public response.

Undertaken With Love is the book which grew out of her experience. It is a personal account of their life in the Welsh countryside and of Nigel's illness and death, and shows how their concern for self-sufficiency in life together continued in her insistence on self-sufficiency in dealing with his death, including all the funeral arrangements. She shows how it can be done, though she needed a lot of determination and also a lot of good friends.

Jane Spottiswoode has a lively personality, and her book is full of life and hope and also contains a great deal of stimulating ideas and useful information. She and Nigel were both non-religious, and she acknowledges the help and encouragement she got from the British Humanist Association both before and after and also mentions *Funerals Without God*; but she is one of those humanists who are self-sufficient in thought as well as deed.

There is a tendency for humanists to get rather obsessed with death (I sometimes wonder whether humanism should be called a "death-stance"!), but here are two books on the subject which are genuinely life-centred and which all humanists should enjoy and could learn from.

NICOLAS WALTER

REVIEWS

THE PERSISTENCE OF FAITH, by JONATHON SACKS.
Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £ 9.95.

These are the 1990 BBC Reith Lectures, supplemented by an Introduction and an Afterword in which the author undertakes to deal with criticisms and objections. He is Chief Rabbi Elect of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. The subtitle of the book is "Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age". What he has to say is of particular interest to freethinkers because he sets it in the context of what we have to say under that subtitle. He is informed, intelligent, realistic, decidedly not bigoted, yet not a theological nor political liberal in the usual sense. In broadest outline, his theme is that the sequel to the Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century has been the disintegration of society, an atomic diaspora, leaving individuals with consumer choice and themselves. We cannot go back, but this trend has brought us to a dead end.

Throughout, he uses the analogy of a social or moral ecology; and argues that we have ignored and lost the paramount element in the balance: "we have thought exclusively in terms of two domains: the state as an instrument of legislation and control and the individual as bearer of otherwise unlimited choices... We have neglected the third domain: that of community". It is in a community that one learns to be human, and to connect past and future. But these bonds of community are in the continuity of a tradition. That used to be a religious tradition, with the discipline and sanctions of such a tradition. Because religious institutions and practices are no longer generally adhered to and observed, there has been a drift into loss of meaning and purpose, other than choice in the supermarket and competition in the shrinking job market to exercise that choice. "The Persistence of Faith" is the persistence of an uninstructed and unstructured faith that still holds to certain values that used to belong to a religious tradition that has been eroded in practice by popular assumption of the right of individual choice and the duty of the State to provide it by legislation.

Religions have been polarized in response to the secularization of modern society since the Enlightenment. Liberal theologians have gone to the limit to demythologize and accommodate the faith to the Age of Reason and its sequel. Fundamentalists have been driven to defiant entrenchment in texts and dogmas, with blind faith in their literal absolute validity. The liberals go along with the disintegrating secular trend.

The fundamentalists, allied with nationalism and eschatology threaten violence and Holy War. Neither does anything to restore community. It is not too late. Our pluralist societies show ethnic minorities refusing and resisting cultural assimilation, demanding recognition of their religious identity and facilitation of their way of life. This persistence of community in community traditions must be complemented by a community of communities, a common order of shared values which enable all diverse communities to live together in co-operation: not merely legislative provisions, but shared values. Jonathon Sacks declares "Here the Jewish perspective underlying the lectures is apparent. Judaism sees the transformation of the material world as the primary religious imperative. It is in our acts, relationships and social structures that we create holiness."

My criticism follows two lines, and is not addressed in the Afterword because Jonathon Sacks, for all his personal enlightenment, remains blinkered by his religious tradition. First, the Enlightenment did indeed make the cardinal error of deriving society from individuals instead of individuals from society. That was a theoretical mistake, but to understand it one should recognize that the time had come to take society apart and remake it by conscious political will. Choice (election of representatives) had to replace tradition (hereditary privilege), equal rights collapsed authoritarian hierarchy (Paine v Burke). Because established social structures did mould individuals, and systematically corrupted or frustrated them, Rousseau took Emile out of society to educate him. It is indeed in a society that one learns to be human, but by taking the particular stamp of humanity imposed by that society. To win autonomy one has to emancipate oneself from one's upbringing: one may return to adopt and adapt what one was taught, but that is wholly different from being unconsciously moulded by it. Collective identity, merging oneself in a group, is a common substitute for autonomy, as Jung recognized, but even that is not submergence in a tradition. When I say however, that Sacks remains blinkered by his religious traditions I have in mind another aspect of the Enlightenment and its sequel; for the time had come when the onus of justification had shifted from the unbeliever to the believer. Rationality required the believer to show why I should take his beliefs seriously; and that became increasingly true after Darwin and the German biblical criticism. Rabbi Sacks seems not to recognize that the assumptions of the three Semitic religious traditions have been fatally undermined; so that to ground his argument he would have to re-establish first the grounds of belief.

Secondly, because of the practicality of Judaism its primary concern with the declarations of OT prophets

that God's will is to be done, in justice and compassion, the Rabbi identifies moral values with Religious values which "are transcendent, not immanent; absolute, not relative" That is, moral obligation is God-given, and is not implied in society and not modifiable in practice by any other consideration. The history of Ethics (moral philosophy) shows up the confusions in such a claim, and the questions that are raised. He is on more tenable ground when he enlists some philosophers in an attack on the abstractness and inconclusiveness of more than two thousand years of rational ethics. Moral obligation itself loses its cogency, which is only compelling when it is not put in question because it is the total expectation of the community in which one is brought up. However, the rational ground of moral obligation is in the mutuality of social existence in general, not in any particular tradition. There is in the human condition an equal need for fellow-feeling, for good faith, and for public spirit. The Enlightenment did not and could not banish from consciousness society and its immanent moral

constraints. What happened in the sequel provided good reason to banish God from consciousness: to say that humanity had come of age, and was now, with its technological capability, totally responsible for life on the planets with an overriding duty to care for the interests of posterity. That does bring natural ecology and social ecology together in explicit particular tasks that involve the global human community: conservation together with international security, population control, bridging the divide between North and South. This is the universal of Sack's "community of communities". This is not abstract ethics. This is more definite and inescapable than even "justice" and "compassion". This comes home to everyone's share in human responsibility. This need for political will is the proper sequel to a proper understanding of the Enlightenment as political will. Indeed, there is no going back. This is the substantive refutation of Rabbi Sack's special argument. It does not belittle his general concern.

H. J. BLACKHAM

THE FREETHINKER, VOLUME 110, 1990. G. W. Foote & Co,
£ 9.50

As an enthusiastic proselytiser, I tend to give away my used copies of *The Freethinker* to people who express even a vague interest in the topics it covers. This selfless act of evangelism does, however, make it difficult to keep track of exchanges of opinion in the correspondence column. It's most annoying to see a letter in the latest issue, referring back to something in the previous number which you didn't read properly but which now, in the light of readers' reactions, sounds fascinating. This is where the annual bound edition comes into its own for me. As soon as I see a letter which begins with something like: "I wish to take issue with the fatuous comments of Mr X on the subject of whether God is everywhere, nowhere, or just occasionally in some places where he has appointments", I can instantly gratify my curiosity about Mr X's original contention by turning back a few pages.

Yes, *The Freethinker* continues to maintain its wonderfully high standard of reasoning and writing and is always a pleasure to read. I have no quarrel with the content, but maybe the form could be improved. This leads me to ask the painful question: has *The Freethinker's* appearance fallen behind the times? The question is painful because I know the constraints under which each issue comes into being; the fact that the editor manages to perform this daunting task each month without fail, is a constant source of admiration. I wonder, though, whether a more modern format is

now required in order that the stimulating ideas and vigorous debates might reach a wider audience? If the print were less dense and there was an occasional illustration of some kind, would it attract more of the younger people who will make up the next generation of freethinkers? The tastes of modern youth — reared on "designer magazines" — are different from those of *The Freethinker's* traditional layout, and it might therefore not be attractive to them. Modern technology, in the form of desktop publishing, is now easily accessible and staggering results can be achieved with very little effort. Perhaps it would be possible for someone who knows about such things to volunteer their experience to the editor?

That said, the 1990 collected edition makes a marvellous bedside companion; the articles are just about the right length for bedtime dipping, although some of the editor's more mordant "News and Notes" pieces might send you off to dreamland with a wry smile on your faces; he has a knack of finding already ludicrous religious stories and then further pointing up their lunacy in a most pleasing way.

The frequent meanderings of other writers into the history of freethought are fascinating, and the close attention to individual philosophical questions challenging, but I particularly like the background pieces which give a Humanist slant to current affairs — Dick Spicer's "Mary Robinson's Irish Victory" for instance, and "The Satanic Panic" by John Campbell — both in the December issue. The latter gave an excellent insight into the ludicrous and damaging charges of "satanic" child abuse which are still being made even as

I write.

Stalwarts such as Karl Heath, R. J. Condon and Barbara Smoker continue to stimulate (and occasionally aggravate) with their contributions, and many of their pieces deserve close scrutiny and several readings. All in all, I find that there are few issues of *The Freethinker* that don't rouse me in some respect. To have it all gathered together in a smart bound volume is luxury indeed.

TERRY SANDERSON

THE FREETHINKER

Volume 110, 1990

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Another Ten Years

Ten years ago we celebrated a positive achievement: one hundred years of publishing *The Freethinker*. In the centenary (May 1981) issue, the then editor, Jim Herrick, wrote: "A broad superstitious deism pervades Western Europe . . . The established churches, although their active membership is now small, have retained a power and authority, both in the media and in the government of the country, quite out of proportion to their size . . . Those who seek to oppose social progress and social freedoms can always rely on support at the church porch."

Events of the intervening ten years have confirmed that comment. Policies advocated by religious extremists have been incorporated into legislation. Christianity has become more firmly entrenched in the education system, thus provoking demands by other religious groups for separate and segregated schools. An inordinate amount of broadcasting time is still devoted to religious propaganda. The ludicrous Sunday trading restrictions have been retained, thanks largely to the "keep Christianity privileged" lobby.

Of course the religious activists have not had it all their own way. Their demands for ever more censorship have been firmly resisted. Attempts to extend blasphemy law have fallen by the wayside. Capital punishment "pro-life" freaks have failed to get the hangman reinstated. Catholic-led campaigns against the Abortion Act 1967 and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 were unsuccessful. Surveys consistently show a declining belief in religious doctrines among Protestants, while a large proportion of Roman Catholics

now ignore the Vatican's "moral" teachings.

From the start, *The Freethinker* has been, in the words of its founder, G. W. Foote, "an anti-Christian organ". In 1881 it set out to "wage relentless war against Superstition in general and against Christian Superstition in particular."

In 1991 its range of fire has been extended to Islamic book burners and odd-ball sects imported from the United States and the mystic East.

Ancient Sunday Law Threatens Festival

This year's Brighton Festival almost came to grief because of an Act of Parliament dating from the 18th century.

Festival organisers who arranged Sunday performances of plays and other entertainments to which admission would be charged, found themselves in breach of Sunday Observance Act 1780. It decrees that places open for entertainment on Sundays to which admission was by payment, tickets sold for money, or refreshments sold at a special price, would be "deemed a disorderly house". Not only the organisers, but printers of posters and advertisements were liable to heavy fines.

Although amended, the Act remains on the Statute Book for the benefit of Sabbatarian informers and over zealous police. Brighton police have already stopped several public houses in the town from charging admission to live band shows.

Festival chiefs took legal advice before meeting senior police officers. After discussions, the police agreed not to take action during the Festival which covers four Sundays.

"At least on this occasion reason has prevailed", declared Joan Wimble, secretary of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.

"Resurrection and application of this ancient law would have affected the Festival adversely. It could possibly have been a fatal blow."

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Freethinker Fund

The Freethinker could not appear every month but for the loyal support of its readers and unpaid writers. Needless to say it operates at a loss, but readers' generosity helps to clear the annual deficit. Appreciation is expressed to all of them, including the latest list of contributors which is given below.

A. G. Bailey and E. T. Rose, £1 each; J. Brooks, J. K. Hawkins and J. C. Matthews, £2 each; A. M. Behr, £2.50; A. P. Allen, L. Georgiades, M. W. Gilbert, N. Haemerle, E. V. Hillman, D. A. Mackintosh and T. R. Richardson, £3 each; C. F. Ablethorpe, £4; V. Bridge, J. Cass, N. L. Child, G. F. Clarke, T. Cornish, S. R. Farrelly, M. J. Fuller, P. J. Gamgee, M. F. Kerr, G. C. Leslie, J. C. W. Lewis, C. Lovett, H. Madoc-Jones, M. Mordew, A. Negus, J. Patterson, D. M. Powell, R. V. Samuels, J. A. Stratford and D. Swan, £5 each; J. A. Blackmore, £6; I. G. Payne, £7; E. C. Hughes, £7.60; G. Jamison, F. Pidgeon, P. Ponting-Barber and D. L. Seymour, £10 each; B. N. Kirby, £15; I. Campbell, £19.40; Anonymous, R. L. Dublow and W.D. Eaton, £20 each.

Total for March: £290.50

LETTERS

A CRITIC ANSWERED

Your correspondent, E. M. Karbacz (April) writes a very strange letter, full of what are, in my opinion, wholly unjustified complaints. The critical comments about the over all contents of *The Freethinker* show no awareness of the fact that its primary purpose is to promote secular humanism and to supply readers with information and arguments in support of this position. Of course there are many questions over which humanists disagree, but these issues are widely discussed in other publications and on radio and television, so that there is no shortage of opportunities to engage in debate or at least to pay attention to the expression of differing points of view. *The Freethinker* is a small magazine, published only once a month, and under these conditions it is impossible to provide a forum for full discussion of the large variety of important issues outside of its primary concerns.

Your correspondent's criticisms of specific articles (mine and Janet McCrickard's) not only contain offensive assertions (despite the disclaimer) but are made without the support of any reasoned discussion or particular examples. The reference to shallow arguments, for instance, is in no way explained. It seems to me that the term "shallow" can only be applied to arguments which do not fully address the subject, but, instead, skim the surface, evading some of the main issues. To the best of my understanding, this was not the case in my article.

Furthermore, I did not set up any "Aunt Sallies". Most of the points I raised were in direct response to a letter in the December issue of *The Freethinker*. The rest relate entirely to Conservative Christian theology (another name for Christian fundamentalism), which is unfortunately becoming more widespread. Many freethinkers will no doubt have received tracts from people holding these views. I certainly have, and hope that my article will be of assistance to any non-fundamentalist engaging such people in debate. It really is important to recognise that, in the

light of a basic moral principle (which attracts very widespread support) i.e. that one should behave so as not to cause unnecessary suffering to sentient beings, some of the doctrines of fundamentalist Christianity (and Islam too!) are not good, but evil.

VERNA METCALFE, London NW3

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREETHOUGHT

Whilst I see the point of E. M. Karbacz's letter, the writings of Janet McCrickard are erudite and absorbing. I look forward to reading her book, *Eclipse of the Sun: an Investigation Into Sun and Moon Myths*.

If we wish to popularise freethought, it is going to be increasingly necessary to counter the hyped-up American evangelising we are about to suffer, judging by the tenor of freethought literature in the United States.

There is always a place for critical writing, even for those who have put the myth behind, let alone for those who write to local newspapers thanking saints for prayers answered. It pays to be informed, if only to pierce the darkness now and then: the American experience suggests we keep our powder dry, folks. We're gonna need it!

D. REDHEAD, Houghton-le-Spring

HUMANISTS AND WAR

The News and Notes piece on the Gulf War (April) was inaccurate and seemed designed to provoke unnecessary ill-will.

If the Humanist Liaison Committee's statement unwittingly gave the impression that all humanists opposed the Gulf War, then it seems reasonable to correct that impression. Sir Hermann Bondi requested that the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association, of both of which he is president, should make it clear that there was a wide range of attitudes towards the Gulf War. (The current issue of the *New Humanist* with ten different humanists expressing their views illustrates this point.)

The editor's sour and misleading comments on "humanists grandees" appear designed to foster bad feeling. Surely humanists and freethinkers, who believe in pluralism and tolerance, should avoid sectarian quarrels. Such bad grace is illustrated by the next item, "From Classroom to Battlefield", in which the editor refers to the "vapid" BHA slogan, "conscience in action". All humanists should demonstrate "conscience in action" - but alas this is not practiced by *The Freethinker* at present.

JIM HERRICK, Editor, *New Humanist*

THE GULF WAR

You object to the letter in *Humanist News* from myself and others supporting the United Nations. You quote the claim that the Gulf War "was not conducted according to the UN Charter".

Humanists should check claims against facts; what are the facts here? I have examined a number of such claims, and I have found they were all ill-founded quotes out of context, downright distortions, or otherwise misleading. Is this claim true?

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

It seems a pity to undermine Mr Heath's splendid piece of polemic ("Hatred is the ultimate atheism") by adding the half-sentence he left out - which makes it perfectly clear what I was and was not saying. Apropos of forgiving our enemies (the Iraqis) I said: "For Christians who believe that God is love, hatred is the ultimate atheism." I should have thought that this was logically irresistible. For Mr Heath to stand the whole thing on its

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 June, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Meredith MacArdle: New Developments at the British Humanist Association.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists. Waverly Day Centre, 65 Waverly Road, Kenilworth. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

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, 30 May, 8 pm. Barbara Smoker: Do Humanists need Rituals?

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 2nd June, 7.30 pm. Joy Croft: Can You be a Religious Humanist?

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, 12 June, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. John Peppard: Amnesty International's Campaign for Human Rights.

he has probably missed the continual criticisms of Antony Milne, S. E. Parker and others regarding the alleged Left-wing bias of *The Freethinker*, an allegation that I would warmly dispute.

Some *Freethinker* readers seem to be exasperated at having their prejudices disturbed. Such exasperation has continually led me to wonder whether those sensitive souls are really freethinkers. Mr Cobb should read his National Secular Society membership card, where he will find an endorsement of progress and the promotion of human welfare. As E. M. Karbacz suggests, these are subjects about which freethinkers are bound to disagree.

COLIN MILLS, Amersham

Susan Spicer knifed to death her five-year-old son Andrew as he slept at their home in Wivelsfield Green, Sussex. She told the police that she killed the boy after being in touch with the spirit world. At Lewes Crown Court she admitted manslaughter and was ordered to be detained in a psychiatric hospital.

head and say I meant by that sentence that all atheists are consumed with hatred must both be a fallacy in logic and patently absurd in fact.

Might one suggest respectfully to Mr Heath that atheists do not have a monopoly of atheism? Christians become *de facto* atheists not when they accept one set of ideas rather than another but when they claim to believe in a God of love and then hate their fellow men and women. I repeat: *Christians*. I would not presume to judge anyone else.

No responsible Christian known to me would dream of suggesting that believers have a monopoly of human virtue or even that they are *ipso facto* morally superior to atheists. Indeed, the real challenge to thoughtful Christians presented by individual humanists known to them lies precisely in the fact that most of them live such admirable lives without supernatural help.

COLIN MORRIS, Lewes, East Sussex

WORDS

Regarding the remark by Colin Morris, "Hatred is the ultimate atheism", one could substitute "hatred" and "atheism" with other nouns and always end up with a statement as meaningless as his. "Love is the ultimate theism"; "Joy is the ultimate fatalism"; "Anger is the ultimate communism" etc. Sounds like the woman who was "completely pregnant".

RAY McDOWELL, Larne, County Antrim

A SIMPLE CHOICE

I notice that once again a letter in your columns from someone too fastidious to permit a daughter to take the Guide oath has invoked the standard response of a plug for the Woodland Folk.

While agreeing that the Woodland Folk, being an organisation on the looney Left, is ideally suited to someone whose aim in bringing up children seems to be to indoctrinate them in political posturing, I would nevertheless suggest that these people are really best left alone.

Personally I never had any difficulty at all when I was a boy scout in promising to do my duty to God and the King. My duty to the King was simply what was required of me under the law as a citizen of the UK. My personal duty to God, in which I do not believe, was even easier to fulfil.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

DON'T BLAME THE FREETHINKER!

In response to R. A.

Cobb (Letters, April) may I point out that the Right has a long history of using religion as a political weapon. Never has this been more so than in the United States and Britain in the last decade. Inevitably, therefore, *The Freethinker* must appear anti-Right. But the fault is not yours.

N. WOODS, Sutton Coldfield.

FREETHINKERS - LEFT AND RIGHT

R. A. Cobb's return to *The Freethinker* after many years (Letters, April) is hardly an unmixed blessing. He hastens to disavow the label of "atheist" in favour of "lifelong agnostic". No freethinker need be ashamed of atheism - and the smear of bigotry against atheists is unwarranted.

Like E. M. Karbacz in the same issue, R. A. Cobb finds the contents of *The Freethinker* bland, though they seem to use the word in quite opposite senses. E. M. Karbacz deplors the absence of modern, relevant and controversial topics about which freethinkers may disagree. I find this criticism rather difficult to square with the same correspondent's comment that most contributions are lively and stimulating.

Since Mr Cobb has not read *The Freethinker* for many years,

(continued from front page)

did not, apparently, bother to report my truancy or mention it to my parents, I was able thereafter to get myself an education on the streets. I picked up some of the patter of the street-traders, which I eventually used in my audition for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

"At the very beginning of television, in the mid-Thirties, I got a daytime job on the small screen, to supplement my main income as a proper actor in the evenings, and an older actor told me what a fool I was to waste my time on such a transient fad, 'like the yo-yo'. And that was received opinion at the time."

Barry Morse said we live in an age of packaging, in which the image is more important than the substance.

"The Almighty is packaged in this way on American television", he added.

"Years ago, fundamentalist Christianity in the USA would use advertising techniques in live appearances of evangelist celebrities to present salvation, then it began making similar use of the wireless, and now of television. When the satirical film of 'Glory! Glory!' was made, I felt, in common with other members of the cast, that the script was a bit too exaggerated. But each day of shooting there were revelations in the news of financial and sexual scandals concerning the real-life televangelists, making us realise that what we had taken to be exaggerated satire was no more than a mild representation of the facts."

Barry Morse went on to recall, as an example of C of E hypocrisy, the broadcast the Sunday after the abdication of Edward VIII, by Cosmo Gordon Lang, then Archbishop of Canterbury, expressing holy horror at the iniquity into which our former sovereign had fallen. The next weekend, the following marvellous verse appeared in one of the weeklies — anonymously, though it has been ascribed to Hilaire Belloc: *My Lord Archbishop, what a scold you are! And once your man is down, how bold you are! Of Christian charity, how scant you are! And, auld Lang swine, how full of Cantuar!*

Proposing a toast to the NSS, Colin McCall said: "This is a particularly happy occasion for me, a former secretary of the Society and editor of *The Freethinker* who found it financially necessary to enter the world of commercial journalism 28 years ago, but who has been welcomed back like a rather elderly prodigal.

"Needless to say I have never wavered in my atheism. Indeed I have seen many prominent people announce their lack of religious belief—in the press, on radio, on television in a way that was rare, to say the least, 30 years ago.

"One interesting case concerns a priest with whom I debated on the radio, Father Anthony Kenny, who

subsequently left the priesthood, married, became a don at Oxford, Master of Balliol and, in his own words, agnostic.

"I hasten to add that I don't take any credit for Dr Kenny's apostasy many years after our encounter. Rather it illustrates a general social trend."

Colin McCall said that although an increasing percentage of the population is renouncing religion in favour of secular humanism, the work of the National Secular Society is far from done.

"Alongside the general drift from orthodoxy there has been a noticeable resurgence of fundamentalism, perhaps, as so often in the past, most conspicuous in the United States, where the last unlamented president seemed likely to bring about the Armageddon he believed in, and the present one seems bent on doing so.

"Fundamentalism is not only a feature of Christianity, but of Islam. And not only in the Middle East where, incidentally, George Bush may have encouraged its spread, but in Britain, where it is pressing for its own State-aided schools, and where the laws and the educational system are so absurd that it is difficult to deny them that right.

"The book burners of Bradford, like the Christian fundamentalists, have to be opposed and revealed as the fanatics that they are.

"This is a delicate as well as a difficult task. In the same way that opponents of Judaism are often accused of anti-semitism, the opponents of Islam may find themselves accused of racism.

"We must ensure that the distinction is clear: that the argument is against the religion, not the individual who professes it."

In response, G. N. Deodhekar, the Society's honorary treasurer for over 20 years, stressed the need for what he diplomatically described as "donations, however small, and legacies, however belated."

He declared that superstition is "a hydra-headed monster", and cited as an extreme example the case of an African gentleman who arrived at Heathrow and seriously asked for asylum from religious persecution because his neighbours insisted that he was ideal material for human sacrifice.

"That this should happen in the last decade of the 20th century may sound incredible. But in some societies such ideas linger indefinitely.

"After all, Christian theologians tell us not that human sacrifice is wicked per se, but that it is unnecessary because God has been appeased once for all by the sacrifice of his only son, Jesus."

Mr Deodhekar said that much had been achieved by way of social reform during the post-war years.

"Even so", he added, "vigilance on the part of the comparatively small secular humanist movement is essential."