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GREEN LIGHT FOR RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS TO BROADCAST FINANCIAL APPEALS

Religious local radio channels have been authorised by the Radio Authority to commence operating. And groups which use them will be allowed to broadcast appeals for money.

The Authority's code stipulates that religious groups which ask listeners for money must show that money raised in this way is intended for charitable purposes or to benefit a body with "satisfactory bona fides". But it does not spell out what will be regarded as "satisfactory bona fides". All the code says is that the group's services must be accessible to the public.

Under the guidelines, programmes broadcast by licence holders "should reflect and proclaim the worship, thought and actions of the mainstream religious traditions in the UK, recognising that they are mainly, though not exclusively, Christian.

"Programmes may not contain claims by or about living individuals or groups suggesting they have special powers or abilities which are incapable of being substantiated in the context of legitimate investigation."

This restriction, if applied, would put the kybosh on hucksters of mainstream and assorted brands of religious superstition.

A spokesman for the Radio Authority refused to say if Scientologists and Moonies will be allowed to advertise or run their own broadcasting stations.

"There is no list of acceptable groups", he commented.

"If their services are open to the general public and they don't advocate or practice illegal behaviour, they would be allowed."

The Authority declares that advertisers must not improperly exploit listeners. But there has been disagreement in religious circles on the ethics of broadcasting appeals for money. The first religious advertisements on local radio have already been broadcast. They were on behalf of an Anglican diocese and a Church of Scotland parish church.

The advertisements did not include an appeal for money.

Although the broadcasters may "propound and propagate religious belief", they will not be allowed to denigrate other faiths. No doubt this restriction will be irksome to many Christians. But there appears to be no restriction on what may be said about unbelievers who, of course, will have no right of reply.

It is unlikely that the new religious radio channels will halt the decline in religious belief and observance in post-Christian Britain. But with a dramatic slump in their ratings and income, American televangelists are already looking in the direction of Europe for new opportunities to spread the word and swell their bank balances.

Pat Robertson talks about "a couple of very difficult years" following sex-and-money scandals involving some of his brethren in Christ. Jimmy Swaggart was unfrocked by the Assemblies of God after being found with his trousers down. Jim Bakker is behind bars for swindling his disciples to the tune of 158 million dollars.

Maurice Cerullo has acquired the Bakker empire for 52 million dollars. It has been given another name, The New Inspirational Network. But Americans are becoming less responsive to televangelists' appeals for cash and it is likely that Cerullo will expand his operation to Europe.

Even those radio and television preachers not touched by scandal are feeling the pinch. Jerry Falwell, the ultra-Reaganite Moral Majority leader, has been forced to discontinue his yukky "Old Time Gospel Hour" which was broadcast from 200 stations.

In Britain the Radio Authority's directive that religious broadcasters must not make profit from appeals may deter the money-grabbers. But the real test will come in 1993 with religious advertising on television.

THE FREETHINKER

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NEWS

HOLY TERRORISM

Over sixty years ago, Bishop Barnes, a modernist in his time, wrote: "The local Heaven and Hell of mediaeval fancy has passed away." Of course it had not and it has not. Bishop Barnes simply allowed his humane feelings to take precedence over unpleasant reality. So, too, did the Archbishop of York recently when he publicly rejected the doctrine of everlasting bliss or blisters. And like Bishop Barnes, Dr John Habgood provoked the evangelical wrath of the Fire and Brimstone Tendency by asserting that "hell is not a place or state created by God as a means of securing his justice".

The Archbishop's chief critic is Dr David Samuels, a leading if not kindly light on the Rock Bottom wing of Anglicanism (officially known as The Church Society), who was quick to denounce His Grace's "anaemic liberalism". He reminded modernist faint-hearts: "The Bible clearly says that hell is a place of eternal torment. People will suffer there and their suffering will not be metaphorical, it will be real." And to avoid any misunderstanding, Dr Samuel added "with flames". Presumably microwave furnaces have not yet been installed in the nether regions.

While the Archbishop's heart is in the right place, Dr Samuels has him over a scriptural barrel. The Bible represents Jesus himself as clearly saying that hell is a place of eternal torment, "with flames." For nearly two thousand years this hideous doctrine has been proclaimed by the Christian Church, preached by the clergy and taught by theologians. According to scripture, they proclaimed, not only the most evil villains imaginable, but honest doubters and confused half-believers "shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." Even children were doomed. Fulgentius, a disciple of Augustine, enunciated a doctrine that prevailed for at least eight centuries: "Be assured and doubt not that not only men who have obtained the use of their reason, but also little children who have begun to live in their mother's womb and have died there, or who, having been born, have passed away from the world without the sacrament of holy baptism administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, must be punished by the eternal torture of undying fire." (The anti-abortion Society for the Protection of Unborn Children please note.)

The Protestant churches and preachers were just as eloquent as the Romanists in their descriptions of hell and the fate awaiting the "fearful and unbelieving".

AND NOTES

John Wesley asked: "What will it be to have the whole body plunged into a lake of fire burning with brimstone?" C. H. Spurgeon, the great 19th-century preacher, told his vast audiences: "In hell there is no hope, not even the hope of annihilation."

The Archbishop of York is right when he repeats (albeit late in the day) freethinkers' long expressed contention that "we are well rid of those horror pictures of souls in torment which have blighted the lives of millions." But as Dr Samuels recognises, that would mean getting rid of a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith. There would be little point in God sending his son into the world and to crucifixion just to save man from what Dr Habgood describes as "an internal experience caused by people's unwillingness to open themselves to love."

Dr Habgood is being somewhat disingenuous when he asserts that traditional ideas of hell result from "biblical mistranslation". He claims that hell is "a subjective reality" and "about the seriousness of moral choice." Such word-spinning is all very well at theological colleges and vicarage sherry parties in 20th-century Britain. But the countless victims of religious superstition whose lives were blighted by fear of hell knew nothing about "biblical mistranslations". Millions — indeed the vast majority of Christians now living — still believe that the Christian terrorists' handbook is literally true from the first letter of Genesis to the last of Revelation. Fundamentalist Protestant missionaries at present flooding Africa and South America are not explaining — even if they could — the difference between a hell which is "a subjective reality" and one which is a place of everlasting torment with "real flames".

The highly educated John Habgoods and Don Cupitts of this world should refrain from indulging in sophistry and verbal gymnastics. They would serve humanity better by joining the large number of priests who have already left the church and theological colleges, putting their talent to far better use.

A Roman Catholic priest, Fr Peter Houlihan, and Sister Elizabeth, who belongs to a religious order, have left their parish in Donnybrook, near Dublin, after developing a close relationship. Their bishop, Dr James Kavanagh, confirmed that they told him they were going away together. "They were very good people", he added. A colleague said the general reaction in the parish is to blame celibacy.

Although the Brooke talks on Northern Ireland were originally intended to end this month, it now seems likely they will continue into 1992. So God's little outpost across the Irish Sea will be much in the news, as indeed it has been for over twenty years. In that time, around two thousand men, women, and children have been killed, civil liberties (such as they were in the Unionist mini-statelet) ruthlessly suppressed, vast resources squandered on maintaining a geographical absurdity, and Britain shamed by gross miscarriages of justice.

The partitioning of Ireland along religious lines was a catastrophe that is still taking its toll. The island was divided into two church-ridden regions, the 26-county Republic and the Six Counties (Northern Ireland). The latter, granted all the trappings of a sovereign State, was in effect run by the Orange Order. James Connolly had written in 1914: "Filled with the belief that they were defeating the Imperial Government and the Nationalists combined, the Orangemen would have scant regard for the rights of the minority left at their mercy." Tied to a chair and executed by a firing squad two years later, Connolly did not live to see the fulfilment of his prediction. But generations of Irish and British people inherited the nightmare that followed the creation of "a Protestant State for a Protestant people".

During the years that followed partition, religious fanaticism polluted the north's social and political life at every level. Repression and discrimination drove the substantial Roman Catholic minority ever closer to the church and its fiercely reactionary hierarchy and priesthood. Protestant Orangeism was the comic opera face of terrorism.

There is growing realisation in Britain that religion is indeed a basic factor in the Northern Ireland troubles. This has prompted Christian apologists to start a damage limitation exercise, with statements and articles purporting to show that religion is blameless. An example of such misleading flummery appeared recently in a national daily. Mary Kenny wrote: "Anyone with the most cursory experience of actually going to church in Ulster knows quite well that the religious folk are the peaceable ones."

Declarations of support for union with Northern Ireland are becoming less emphatic as the financial cost increases. Furthermore, Westminster politicians and civil servants find that their opposite numbers in Dublin haven't got horns and cloven hooves. At the same time they are irritated by the intransigence and ranting of Unionist leaders. It may not be too fanciful to say that a piece of the Border falls away every time the Rev Ian Paisley opens his mouth.

THE OATH: A SUITABLE CASE FOR ABOLITION

A new call by the Magistrates' Association for abolition of the oath is the latest development in a long campaign to get rid of a piece of religious mumbo-jumbo. Needless to say, the proposal is welcomed by secularists. But it will also command wide support within the legal and ecclesiastical branches of the acting profession.

However, the Association's sensible recommendation is not approved by Lord Denning. Now living in retirement, the former Master of the Rolls took up his quill and composed an epistle, published in the *Daily Telegraph*, admonishing magistrates for allowing the oath to become "a casual and meaningless affair."

"When I was a judge", he wrote, "I insisted on the importance and solemnity of the oath. . .

"I saw that the witness had the right book — whether it was the New Testament, the Old Testament or the Koran — according to his own religious belief. By that oath the witness is not only making an affirmation to the judge, he is also binding himself to his God that he will tell the truth."

Did the meticulous Judge Denning also inform the witness of his right to make a non-religious affirmation? But perhaps that is an academic point, the Oaths Act 1888 notwithstanding, for until recent times many an atheist or agnostic had little choice but to place his hand on the Bible and swear by an Almighty God he did not believe in. Purists may regard that as a betrayal of principles; but it is understandable at a time when the judge's or magistrate's seat was almost certainly occupied by a prejudiced Christian bigot.

Lord Denning's concern for truth and integrity is well known. When the Birmingham Six took action against the West Midlands police for assault, the learned Judge declared: "If the Six win, it will mean that the police were guilty of perjury, that they were guilty of violence and threats, and that the convictions were erroneous. . . It cannot be right that these actions should go any further." The reason why he disallowed their actions to go any further may be ascertained from his later statement: "It is better that some innocent men remain in jail than the integrity of the British judicial system be impugned."

Gladstone once said that those who wish to retain the oath "cling to a narrow theistic ledge." Lord Denning is not clinging to a ledge; he is fossilised in a theistic quagmire.

The United States Supreme Court has upheld a ban on federal funds being allocated to Third World family planning agencies which offer advice on abortion. The ban, introduced in 1984, was challenged by the Planned Parenthood Federation.

SPAGHETTI SAVIOUR IS FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH

In the unlikely event of Jesus returning to earth in a forkful of spaghetti, it would be appropriate if he touched down in some Italian village where pious peasants gorge on the stuff. But no; he has been spotted in a small town in the United States.

Dozens of people in Stone Mountain, Georgia, have seen him shrouded on a large forkful of spaghetti and tomato sauce. Not walking down Main Street, you understand, but on a large Spaghetti Hut billboard. Right in the middle of the unappetising mess — it looks rather like the creepy crawly thing that frightened the wits out of Thora Hird in *The Quatermass Experiment* — is The Face, complete with deep-set eyes, a beard and a crown of thorns.

One resident, Joyce Simpson by name, could not decide if she should continue singing in the church choir. But passing the billboard she felt compelled to look up. "And I saw the face of Christ!" she exclaimed. Of course she has decided to remain in the church choir.

Dozens of pilgrims have been turning up to gaze in wonderment at the billboard. But like so many others who have seen images and moving statues, Stone Mountain visionaries who fancy they can see the face of Jesus draped in spaghetti and tomato sauce will end up with egg on their faces.

THE PRICE OF FAITH

Leonard Mei, a 23-year-old South African evangelist, has died of heart failure on the 37th day of a 40-day fast he undertook "to be like Jesus".

The evangelist belonged to a fundamentalist Christian group in the town of Prieska. He gave up his job as a bank clerk to dedicate himself to evangelising. His wife, Jacqueline, who is pregnant with their first child, supported her husband's fast. After he died she said: "I know we're going to pick the fruits of his sacrifice."

Announcing that she plans to dedicate their house as a place of worship, Mrs Mei added: "I know God will provide. I trust him in everything I do."

Another group member, 65-year-old Jan Bankies, said Leonard Mei "wanted to be in the presence of God." His decision to fast was widely supported in the community. At his funeral, a line of cars over four miles long followed the hearse.

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.

“Saints” on Your Doorstep

R. J. CONDON

Next to Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons are the most avid doorstep missionaries in Britain today. They are, for the most part, pleasant and squeaky clean young Americans. Yet from its earliest days, the Church of Christ of Latter-Day Saints has had its share of dissension, corruption and murder.

Whatever their doctrinal differences, the mainstream churches are agreed on one point — every year their congregations get smaller. The reverse is very much the case with certain way-out religions, and none more so than the grandly-styled Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or the Mormon Church. Its expansion has been dramatic in many parts of the world. In 1945 Britain had about a thousand Mormons. By 1970 there were 86,000 attending 213 chapels, and the numbers of both continue to increase. Indeed the Church boasts that a chapel is completed every working day somewhere in the world. The main reason is intense proselytizing. Male Mormons — women count for nothing — may at any time be sent, at their own expense, on missionary tours which can last for years, knocking on doors in an effort to make converts. The missionaries are invariably young, personable, friendly and persuasive. Yet Mormonism is a modern cult whose origins and early history are known beyond doubt.

In the early nineteenth century the State of New York experienced a wave of revivalism. Crazy sects battled for souls, with at least two prophets claiming to be Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith, junior took advantage of the excitement to declare that he had seen a vision. Two heavenly personages had appeared to him, saying they were God the father and God the Son. They bade him no religious sect then existing, for they were all in error. The story met with ridicule and for four years Smith led an idle and disreputable life. Then he announced that an angel called Moroni appeared one night to inform him that God had a great Work for him to do.

The angel said that the Bible of the Western Continent was buried in a hill called Cumorah, near Joseph's home. Thither he went and duly unearthed it, but his want of holiness prevented his taking possession of it for another four years. In 1827 he was allowed to take from Cumorah a stone box containing a volume made up of thin gold plates covered with writing in what the book itself called “reformed Egyptian”, together with a pair of spectacles, the Urim and Thummim of the Old Testament, by means of which the mystic characters might be read.

Smith could write only with difficulty, so he dictated his translation, from behind a curtain, first to Martin

Harris and then to Oliver Cowdery. This was published in 1830 as the Book of Mormon, together with sworn statements by Harris, Cowdery and another that an angel had shown them gold plates, which statement two of them later withdrew. Subsequently eight other men swore they had seen the plates. Of the eleven witnesses, six were members of one family and the rest included the father and two brothers of Smith himself. Most were to hold offices of profit within the Church.

The translation finished, the gold plates mysteriously and conveniently vanished. A copy of the characters on one of them was submitted by Harris to a Professor Charles Anthon. The Mormons assert that Anthon declared the writing to be Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyrian and Arabic (!). In fact Anthon said that he at once saw the engraving was a deceit and warned Harris against becoming a victim of roguery. Smith also used his magic spectacles to translate some Egyptian papyri, producing what he called the Book of Abraham. Properly deciphered, they turned out to be commonplace funerary texts, something the Church still finds embarrassing.

The Book of Mormon really originated with Solomon Spaulding, a former preacher and failed business man. The discovery of some remains of an ancient race led him to write a romance connecting these people with the Jews and the American Indians. Arrangements were begun to publish the book, but Spaulding died before they were completed. His publisher employed a compositor, Sydney Rigdon, who later became a close accomplice of Joseph Smith. There is little doubt that he gave Smith a copy of Spaulding's manuscript. It was this far from golden volume that Joseph transcribed, with such amendments and additions as suited his purpose. The Church denies it, of course, but several persons including Spaulding's widow, his brother and his business partner recognised his work in the Book of Mormon. The same names, incidents and peculiarities of style were found in both.

The Book purports to give a history of America from its first settlement by a colony of Jewish refugees from the dispersion of Babel, who had crossed the ocean by submarine! Later on two groups arrived from Jerusalem. The colonists fought fiercely among themselves, so much so that the “goodies”, the Nephites, were wiped out apart from Mormon, who buried the gold plates, and his son Moroni, who returned to tell Smith where they could be found. The “baddies” were punished by having their skins darkened, becoming the Red Indians.

Written in a bad imitation of King James English, the Book makes tedious reading, being liberally sprinkled with “And it came to pass”, “Behold” and “Yea”. Jesus makes an appearance, for no better purpose than to

repeat the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer. He seems to have become addicted to the word "verily", using this affirmation of truthfulness even in statements where it makes no sense. The characters bear names the Jews never had before and have never used since, Zeezrom, Gidgiddoni and Coriantumr (*sic*) being a fair sample. These things are articles of faith even today.

The Mormon Church began to grow, though trouble was never far away. There was much opposition to its teaching and jealousy at its success. In March 1832 Smith and Rigdon were torn from their beds by a mob and tarred and feathered. Smith started a bank which flooded the country with worthless notes. He and his colleagues were often charged with crimes including murder, but packed juries invariably acquitted them. In 1844 Joseph and his brother Hiram found themselves in prison at Carthage, Missouri. A mob broke in and shot them both.

Brigham Young succeeded Smith as head of the Church, and he soon removed his followers to what later became Utah, where they founded Salt Lake City. Once a persecuted people, by 1857 they were strong enough to do the persecuting themselves. In that year a party of Mormons and Indians, led by Bishop J. D. Lee, attacked a group of 150 non-Mormon immigrants and massacred them all. It was twenty years before Lee could be tried, convicted and executed for this mass murder.

The Church could be just as savage towards its own dissidents. At that period it had what were called Avenging or Destroying Angels, its hit men. One of the most notorious, Porter Rockwell, claimed to have killed more than a hundred men in forty years — anyone who spoke against the Church or disobeyed orders.

In 1843 Smith had begun to teach "celestial" marriage or polygamy. After he died this was vigorously promoted by Brigham Young, who left 17 wives and 56 children at his own death. This naturally led to much trouble with the federal authorities. By 1890 some 1,300 men and women had been jailed for polygamy. In that year it was formally renounced by the Church — the practice but not the doctrine. A breakaway sect of Mormons still contract plural marriages, and every year people are fined and imprisoned for it.

Some of the tenets of Mormonism have strong sexual overtones, giving a plausible excuse for polygamy. The Celestial Kingdom will have much in common with life on Earth. God has a man's body and lives in a house with his wife, as will the Mormons when they join him. Indeed they will be gods themselves. Their wives perform their normal domestic duties and will continue to bear children in the familiar earthly manner, for one purpose of the heavenly state is to produce new souls for this and other worlds. The more children a man has the more his merit — bachelors cannot enter the Kingdom.

Jesus practised polygamy, and it was he who married at Cana. Mary, Martha and others were his wives, and he begat children.

It is not easy for a Mormon to repudiate or even criticise the faith. A church court sits in judgement on any who try, and its sentence of excommunication is something to be feared. Despite its claims to uphold the sanctity of marriage, the Church does not hesitate to separate husband and wife and split up families.

The missionaries, called "elders" despite their invariable youthfulness, have an instruction book. It tells them what to do from the first knock on the door until a conversion is completed. There is nothing in it about polygamy or the other discreditable facts of Mormonism, nor is the requirement of tithing mentioned until conversion is well forward. "Smile and keep it simple" says the instruction book. All too often it works — simple people, like the poor, are always with us.

Freethinker Fund

From the start, *The Freethinker* has been closely associated with the National Secular Society which also promotes secularist principles. But it is not a house journal; it is an independent publication endeavouring to serve the whole movement which consists of national organisations, affiliated and unaffiliated groups.

Recognition of the need for an independent and forthright *Freethinker* is evident in the wide and consistent support it enjoys. This is reflected in the list of donations to the fund which is published every month. The latest list of contributors is, as usual, extremely varied: it includes a Chelsea Pensioner who sends £ 5 every month, Glasgow Humanist Society (£ 50) and a reader in Luxembourg (£ 80). Our thanks to them and to everyone whose generosity keeps *The Freethinker* solvent.

M. C. Ansell, J. Carberry, M. E. Nottingham and C. A. M. Sellen, £ 1 each; J. A. Flashman, J. D. Groom, M. J. Phythian, A. Rudding, K. P. Shah and J. D. Verney, £ 2 each; K. H. Bardsley and D. J. Pye, £ 2.50 each; D. A. Thompson, £ 3; P. Rowlandson, £ 4; J. A. Blackmore, J. W. Carter, M. B. Clarke, J. B. Coward, N. Fish, J. Forbes, A. W. Gibbon, J. Gibson, J. F. Glenister, R. E. Ison, E. J. Little, E. J. McCann, S. D. McDonald, H. L. Millard, A. Negus, R. K. Prothero, C. Richardson, W. H. Sefton, C. Sparrow, L. Stapleton, N. S. Thompson and R. Tutton, £ 5 each; R. J. M. Tolhurst, £ 6; R. Lawton, £ 7; N. G. Baguley, M. Hill, M. A. Shaikh, R. G. A. Stubbs and C. Williams, £ 10 each; T Akkermans, £ 15; Anonymous, £ 15; Glasgow Humanist Society, £ 50; N. Moia, £ 80.

Total for May: £ 386

A Renegade Catholic

COLIN McCALL

I have been reading *Little Wilson and Big God**, the first part of the "Confessions" of novelist Anthony Burgess (whose real name is John Burgess Wilson) largely because, like me, he spent his childhood and youth in Manchester. But his education, unlike mine, was Roman Catholic, at the Jesuit Xaverian College.

It is this aspect of his autobiography, and particularly his "loss of faith" that is of interest here, though it only takes up a few pages and doesn't really make clear how he stands today. When, for instance, he says that Plato and Socrates, "who were entering our lives" had "proved the immortality of the soul", I am not sure whether this is what his teachers told him, or whether he accepts it now. I can't think that if he re-read the *Phaedo* he would be convinced by the Platonic Socrates' pathetic "proofs" of life after, and indeed before death, (1) from "opposites" and (2) from recollection.

Sleeping is the opposite of waking, each comes from the other; life is the opposite of death, so life must come from death, runs the first argument. The second rests on the alleged knowledge at, and therefore before birth, of absolutes such as equality, beauty and goodness. Neither argument stands up to the simplest analysis, but if either does still appeal to Anthony Burgess it is likely to be the second.

I say this because he accepts at least one absolute, evil. The Jesuit brothers implanted that idea in him and it appears to be the main tie that binds him to the Roman Catholic Church.

"In old age", he says, "I look back on various attempts to cancel my apostasy and become reconciled to the Church again. This is because I have found no metaphysical substitute for it. Marxism will not do, nor will the kind of sceptical humanism that Montaigne taught. I know of no other organisation that can both explain evil and, theoretically at least, brandish arms against it." Give me the child. . . Whatever else can be said of the Jesuit teachers at Xaverian College — and Burgess isn't particularly complimentary to them — they got him, at least partly, for life.

Perhaps he gives a clue to this "lifelong" attachment when he says that his "growing disillusionment with the Catholic Church had more to do with aesthetics than with doctrine". Logic played a subsidiary part.

He recounts how, on May Sunday, at the Holy Name church in Manchester, "A highly intellectual Jesuit preached about the immorality of Liszt and Wagner and the incapacity of the glory of their music to redeem their habitual sinfulness — a sermon irrelevant to the occasion and not well understood by the congregation". This disturbed Burgess, a highly accomplished composer as well as novelist, at a time when he was beginning to

appreciate fine music. It made him think that "God hated art", or at least His church did.

"I had just read about Sir Edward Elgar's response to the atrocious first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*. God had been against it." And "Good Catholics sang an atrocious mass at St Edward's. . . A detestable little church, in which people always seemed to be farting. . ." Equally detestable were "the canon and his gormless curate", not to mention the girl who "crooned" the *Agnus Dei*.

All very upsetting to a sensitive boy, no doubt, but hardly sufficient to shake the faith. More importantly a lay graduate was teaching him about the Reformation, "not from propagandist primers but from disinterested historians like H. A. L. Fisher", and the effect was dramatic. Burgess' "heart warmed to Martin Luther", who "was right to thunder for reform. I also wanted reform. The basic Christian tenets were unassailable, but the superstructure had gone wrong."

When the young John Wilson innocently took his troubles to a Jesuit priest at the Holy Name, the reception was far from sympathetic. The priest "blew up" and later referred to the matter as "little Wilson and big God", the title of the book.

The more sympathetic lay graduate recommended James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* but, not surprisingly, the sermons on hell terrified the boy and sent him running to the confessional. But it was only a temporary reconciliation.

"I suppose the pattern of apostasy usually runs in this manner", Burgess says, "One doubts openly, is scared back to conformity, and then at a purely unconscious level, is slowly divested of the peel of faith. . . Soon I would be able to tiptoe back to *A Portrait* and take it entirely as a work of literature."

"Entirely"? Surely not. Though a novel, *A Portrait* is autobiographical: the story of childhood, sexual awakening, intellectual development and revolt against Catholicism. And it ends with Stephen Dedalus' decision to leave his country for good (as Joyce did), no longer to "serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church".

A path not altogether unlike Anthony Burgess' own.

*Penguin £5.99

"Pro-life" campaigners in the United States who have been picketing clinics are releasing the names of women who have undergone an abortion. Their action has been condemned by Bishop Daly of Brooklyn.

“Whatever Happened to Gentle Jesus?”

Tom Dowting asks NEIL BLEWITT

I don't mind telling you, Neil, that I'm disillusioned with religion. Not that I could ever be an atheist like you — it doesn't seem decent somehow — but I've come pretty close to it. If there were an organisation for disillusioned Christians who don't know what to believe, I'd join it tomorrow. And don't recommend the Unitarians or the Quakers. I've already tried both of them and, as far as I can see, the Unitarians haven't even made up their minds whether they don't know what to believe yet; as for the Quakers, — twice I've been to their services and each time the vicar failed to turn up. We all sat there like lemons looking at one another for an hour and then, suddenly, everybody decided to go home. And not a soul spoke. Unorganized and stand-offish if you ask me.

Everything was all right with religion for me until I started to grow up and read the Bible; but when I was five years old and went to Sunday School it was all so jolly and uncomplicated. We learned about Jesus and we were told we would meet him one day and there were lots of pictures of him on the walls so that we should recognize him. Then we were given little cards with the things he used to say printed on them. And they looked so important with all their blessed and verily-verilies.

We prayed to him every Sunday although I must admit I didn't take to that. I felt such a fool standing there with my eyes closed talking to somebody I couldn't see; but the teacher assured me Jesus could hear me. I believed her, of course, but I never could make out why, when I asked him a question, he didn't answer. And I used to give him plenty of time before going on to the next one.

Still — there was always the singing, and that was the best thing about Sunday School. We had hymns about gentle Jesus being meek and mild; how he wanted us all to be sunbeams, fishers of men and little candles shining in a corner and how we had to be brothers and pull for the shore. We learned a lot from those hymns too; Jesus loved us, he never cried when he was away in a manger, he was kind to his mother, he helped his father in the shop and he sent his angels to guard us at night. I used to ask my mum to leave the light on so that I could see them but she never would; she said they only came when it was dark. My favourite hymn was one about Jesus being a friend of little children and living above the bright blue sky. And hanging on the wall at the Sunday School we had a picture of him going up into the sky with his proper father sitting on a cloud. Jesus was

saying goodbye to his disciples and I used to think it was rather rude because his arm was raised and his fingers formed into what looked like a V-sign but, of course, it was only an old-fashioned blessing.

By the way, my brother was keen on the Wild West and he had lots of pictures of cowboys and Indians and soldiers; and I said, one day, that Jesus looked just like General Custer in a night shirt. He told my dad what I'd said and he got angry with me and said that the devil would come for me if I repeated things like that. Actually, I did say it again when they were out of earshot — but nothing happened.

I loved religion in those days. I already believed in Father Christmas, Winnie-the-Pooh, Mr Toad and Larry the Lamb, so it was natural that I should believe in Jesus too, though he wasn't half so funny; in fact, he wasn't funny at all. But the odd thing was that when I stopped believing in all the others, for some reason I went on believing in Jesus. Mind you, I was a bit suspicious about him by the time I got into the senior Sunday School, and I started to ask the teachers some of the questions that had been puzzling me — like why hadn't the astronauts seen Jesus above the bright blue sky; why did he live there anyway; what did he do for food and air and sanitation; how could he hear at that distance what we were saying in our prayers; and how could he make out what each of us was saying anyway if we were all going on at him at the same time? Well, the superintendent took me on one side and told me I just had to have faith and I'd believe anything. He said faith would move a mountain. And, do you know, I had a go at that! Well, not a proper mountain; I thought I'd practise on a little hill first of all. I did, too, but nothing happened except that I got some funny looks from passers-by, and when one of them said that there were some big men in white suits coming to take me away, I gave it up and went home.

Another thing I remember the superintendent telling me was that I shouldn't question things that were in the Bible, because God had written it, and everybody knew he had written it because it said so in there. To be honest, I still wasn't sure even then; but what finally convinced me was when the vicar told my dad and he threatened me with a damned good hiding if I made a nuisance of myself again. But I still had doubts about prayers being answered. The vicar and the superintendent never did get run over.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, when I got older I bought a Bible and decided to read it all for myself. And

it gave me quite a shock I can tell you. In the first place, there was nothing about gentle Jesus being meek and mild, nor about him wanting me to be a sunbeam or pull for the shore. And as for that stuff we used to sing about him helping his father with chisel, saw and plane, and being obedient to his parents and never crying in the manger, there wasn't a word.

Then, when he grew up, it seemed to me that he became a sort of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. One minute he'd be healing all the sick people and telling everybody to love one another and the next he'd be withering fig-trees, putting demons into pigs and saying he'd come to bring war, to set families against one another and to send whole cities to hell because they wouldn't repent. I found one place where he said that nobody can be his disciple unless he hates his family; then another where he said that anybody who hates his brother is a murderer and it's no use him thinking about eternal life because he wouldn't get it.

Then he told his disciples that they had to forgive everybody 490 times, although a bit earlier he'd said that he wouldn't forgive anyone who blasphemed the Holy Ghost. Well that was unkind as well as inconsistent, I thought, because he didn't say what the Holy Ghost was — so how were they to know when they were blaspheming it? I asked the vicar what it was and he just said it was a spirit and he wouldn't say any more. I don't think he's got a clue himself, to be honest.

But to come back to forgiving; Jesus said anyone who sinned against a child would suffer worse than if he'd had a millstone put round his neck and dropped into the sea — and the deepest bit of it too! No forgiving there even once — let alone 490 times. The people who listened to him really couldn't have known what to do for the best.

But there was one chapter in Matthew which, frankly, put the wind up me. Nearly all of it's taken up with Jesus cursing the scribes and the Pharisees up hill and down dale. He called them fools, blind, hypocrites, whited sepulchres and vipers and then he said — not surprisingly I suppose — that they'd all be damned and end up in hell. And from what he said later on I suspect they'd be weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth and living for ever with worms. I don't mind telling you that by the time I'd finished the chapter I was glad I wasn't a scribe or a Pharisee!

Now as if reading all that wasn't shock enough, a little while ago I came across a book called The Apocryphal New Testament and in there I found a Gospel which isn't in the Bible proper. It's called the Gospel of Thomas. It ought to be in the Bible because it's got all the biblical characters in it — Jesus, Joseph, Mary, Zacchaeus, James, Herod and some of the angels; but, best of all, it tells what Jesus did as a child. Now I'm not going to say that he was completely bad. He

wasn't. Some of the things he did were harmless enough — making sparrows from clay, then clapping his hands so that they flew away singing hymns; raising the odd dead person here and there; and once stopping somebody from dying of snake-bite. He just breathed on the bite, apparently, and that was sufficient to cure it — oh, and to kill the snake at the same time! But apart from those examples I must say that he doesn't come across as being particularly pleasant. He withered a boy to death because he was stirring a pool with a willow-twig; he struck another boy dead for brushing up against him; then he turned a whole group of children into goats — though, to be fair, he did change them back again, but it must have been pretty traumatic while it lasted. He even struck his schoolteacher dead when he clipped him around the ear for dumb insolence. But worst of all, I found he was cursing when he was still a boy; practising in readiness for the scribes and the Pharisees I thought. *And*, by the way, he was striking people blind who argued with him. His father nearly caught it on one occasion — Joseph I mean, not his proper one.

Well, that's it, Neil. That's why the disillusion. What I ask myself is — what ever happened to gentle Jesus, meek and mild? I saw the vicar several times on this, but whenever I raised the matter he always changed the subject and talked about the weather. Well, I wouldn't let him get away with it, so I kept on at him for a proper answer and eventually he said that the stories in The Apocryphal New Testament shouldn't be taken literally; that's what apocryphal means. But when I said there were stories in there that were in the Bible as well — like the virgin birth, the wise men, the flight into Egypt, the crucifixion and the resurrection — he just scratched his head and told me God moves in a mysterious way and that books like that shouldn't be on general sale. That's all very well, but the religious book-shop where I bought it didn't mind selling it to me nor putting my thirty quid in their till. Lay not up for yourself treasure on earth, I thought.

I got the impression that the vicar hadn't read it, so I couldn't resist telling him that the edition I had was edited by M. R. James. He asked what the significance of that was, so it was obvious he hadn't heard of him and I told him he was the same chap who'd written those stories about the supernatural, so he ought to have felt at home with The Apocryphal New Testament. But he turned nasty at this point and said there was a devil in me and it ought to be exorcised. I had a good mind to ask him if I could get it done on the National Health, but I thought that might be going a bit too far!

I don't blame you for keeping out of religion, Neil. It becomes so terribly complicated when you're an adult. Frankly, I wish I were a child again; gentle Jesus meek and mild was so comfortable. And I really did want to be a sunbeam.

BOOKS

AGAINST RELIGION, by A. N. Wilson. Chatto, £ 3.99

The Chatto CounterBlasts are a series of attractive and ambitious pamphlets, elegantly produced and extravagantly publicised, nineteen of which have appeared during the past couple of years. The tone is set by the blurb: "In CounterBlasts Britain's finest writers and thinkers confront the crucial issues of the day. . . CounterBlasts offer new perspectives, fresh ideas and differences of opinion. . . CounterBlasts are a forum for voices of dissent, they challenge the dominant values of our time. . . CounterBlasts are written to question, to surprise, to stir up debate — and to change people's minds." Long extracts from them have appeared in the *Observer*, raising the readership to well over a million. In practice, however, they have been pretty disappointing. They are overpriced, at £4 for a 10,000 word essay printed in large type on thick paper. They are overpraised, most of them being superficial squibs by fashionable intellectuals, all of whom perform in many other places, few of whom are very impressive as either writers or thinkers, and most of whom follow predictable left-wing lines. As a deliberate reaction, the right-wing philosopher Roger Scruton has begun a rival series of Blasts.

When the CounterBlasts were launched, the publishers declined to consider a contribution criticising the present position of religion on our society; but now A. N. Wilson's new CounterBlast has done just this and has caused a splendid fuss. Andrew Wilson is a very successful writer, who was at one time included among the Young Fogeys of the intellectual right but has since caused some consternation by turning first against the Thatcher Government and now against religion. This deconversion has been all the more dramatic because he was previously known as a rather pious figure. He has frequently taken religious themes for his fiction and journalism, he has written biographies of Milton, Tolstoy, Belloc, and C. S. Lewis and is now working on one of Jesus, he wrote a long essay on the clergy in a book on *The Church in Crisis* (1986), and he wrote a whole book called *How Can We Know?* (1985) in defence of traditional Christianity on practical grounds — especially those of "miracle, martyrdom, sanctity, the quality of good Christian lives, and the sheer sanity, when further examined, of the words of Jesus". However, a warning might have been taken from the reference to his previous acceptance of Evangelical Christianity, adolescent atheism, Maoist Marxism, Tolstoyanism, Anglo-Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, High Anglicanism, sentimental agnosticism, and Tolstoyanism again, and from his statement: "I am not

FREETHINKER

a particularly rational person, and I am easily swayed by my emotions." Since then, apparently swayed by emotional rather than rational factors — especially the *Satanic Verses* affair — he has produced this pamphlet *Against Religion*, which was published in June (long extracts appearing in the *Observer* in 26 May).

There is little to say about the pamphlet itself, since it isn't so much a reasoned argument as a series of rhetorical insults, but two points are worth mentioning. One is that Wilson is much more extreme than most freethinkers. We might hesitate to claim that "the love of God is the root of all evil", that "religion in societies does more harm than good", that "religion is the tragedy of mankind", that "it is much deadlier than opium", that "all religious people find themselves having to believe in six impossible things before breakfast", and we might hesitate to proclaim: "The Pope is a very powerful goose. The Ayatollah Khomeini is an even greater goose. Mrs Whitehouse is a minor goose. The Reverend Tony Higon and Ian Paisley are noisy little ganders. Boo, boo, boo to them all!" The other is that the pamphlet's content is less interesting than its impact. You will certainly enjoy reading it, but it says nothing new, and you will probably learn more from what has been said about it.

In the event the whole affair has caused a remarkable advance for free thought. If a known freethinker had written such a pamphlet, it wouldn't have been published; even if it had been, it wouldn't have been noticed by the media. Instead, *Against Religion* has been widely published and even more widely publicised, and Wilson has appeared in all sorts of papers and on all sorts of radio and television programmes to tell millions of people what after two centuries we still have the greatest difficulty in saying beyond our own circles. Wilson hasn't joined the freethought movement — indeed he included an unfavourable picture of it in his novel *Gentlemen in England* (1985) — but on 23 June he gave an impressive and instructive talk to the South Place Ethical Society, where there was much joy over one sinner who had repented and a renewed feeling that perhaps we haven't been wasting all our time and energy after all. Wilson said in *How Can We Know?* that "pure religion remains untouched by the flood of atheist writing that has cluttered the bookshelves"; we may hope that it has been worn down a little more by this addition to the flood, and we must do what we can to make the most of the new opportunity we have been given.

NICOLAS WALTER

REVIEWS

Angus Wilson, 1913-1991

EDWARD BLISHEN

A TOLERANT COUNTRY? IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND MINORITIES IN BRITAIN, by Colin Holmes. Faber and Faber, £5.99

Edward Blishen remembers the distinguished novelist, critic and humanist who has died at the age of 83.

Ian Mikardo, the Labour MP who recently represented the Bow and Poplar constituency, wrote a few years ago: "The majority of East Enders are kindly and tolerant towards those around them whoever they are and wherever they come from." He suggested that this toleration stemmed from "a sense of solidarity among people struggling to earn a living and maintain decent standards."

This comfortable view is not shared by the black Labour MP, Diane Abbott, who has criticised Britain as being "one of the most fundamentally racist nations on earth."

Both these statements are quoted in *A Tolerant Country?* and are indicative of the even-handed approach taken by the author, Colin Holmes, to the question of the treatment of immigrants in this country.

The book looks at contemporary issues, including the notorious "river of blood" speech by Enoch Powell in 1968, which led to his dismissal from the Tory Shadow Cabinet by Edward Heath, and — rather more seriously — a stepping up of physical violence towards blacks and Asians. The remarkable progress made by the National Front in the 1970s is also described, though mercifully it failed to gain any ground in the 1979 General Election. But perhaps this is because, as the author asserts, "the NF found itself outflanked by the Conservative Party on the immigration issue."

A Tolerant Country? is a scholarly work, with all the solid objectivity one would expect from a distinguished academic — Professor of History at the University of Sheffield, and the author of a number of publications on immigration.

However, whilst reviewing the book, my attention was drawn by chance to a statement in the *Guardian* that around 24 per cent of women prisoners in this country are black, although the total black female population is only two per cent. And I was reminded of the figures I have also seen (which in a thoroughly non-academic way I cannot find) of the disproportionate number of young blacks in the ranks of the unemployed.

It seems a pity that none of these issues is addressed in *A Tolerant Country?*; such an examination would have brought an immediacy and a resonance to a deeply important subject which the author's measured and controlled analysis fails to provide.

TED McFADYEN

I remember my last encounter with Angus Wilson. ("Sir Angus" never seemed quite right: he himself said he'd known what that would lead to — they'd call him "S'rangus" — and they did.) He'd just published *Setting the World on Fire*, which turned out to be his last novel, and we were to discuss it in front of a BBC World Service microphone. On the way to the studio he vanished. He'd noticed he was passing the little Sri Lankan office, and there we found him, addressing an astonished solitary Sinhalese in a typical brilliant gabble: expressions of delight in the island, a favourite place of his, jostling rapid ironies as to the political situation, all seasoned with characteristic murmurs of agreement or severe disagreement with what he himself was saying. He joined us again only to exclaim: "Oh, my God!" and dart back. "Awwfully sorry!" we heard him crying. "The name's Wilson!"

I'd enjoyed *Setting the World on Fire* as I'd enjoyed all his fiction since those wicked short stories that appeared in 1949 as *The Wrong Set*: comic, explosive, malicious, and deeply interested in the confused, often abject, roots of our moral conduct. The novel was in that late vein of his, somehow as if George Eliot had been laced with *The Tempest*: there was this great house in the centre of London, representing three hundred years of English history: and there were two brothers, the artist who must take risks with his wits, and the orderly brother whose instinct was to limit the damage done, though also the glory achieved, by the risk takers. At the end, a real *coup de foudre*, the house was invaded by terrorists. I said it was, of course, a vigorously symbolic Gothic fantasy: but I'd read it, in the end, as I'd always read his novels (even the terrifying *The Old Men at the Zoo*), as a novel of domestic conflict. Well, yes, he said: he was basically a domestic writer. "Conflict within a family has always represented to me the excitement of life!" But increasingly he'd felt that ours was a world in which "the domestic front is constantly imperilled by things happening from outside". He'd been a bit *chuffed*, he said (a favourite word), when readers complained that he'd given no hint that the story was to end with that act of terrorism. "If the terrorists could be seen coming, they'd be useless as terrorists!" he cried. And yes, in their different ways the brothers did attempt to lay the life around them under control. Well, that had been what he himself and his brothers had done in their own household, needing to set some bounds to the effects of

their parents' behaviour. "My parents were what I suppose you could call. . . *hopeless!*" But of course the artist was inclined to overdo it — that was *bad*, very bad, life could become quite nasty if you tried too bossily to shape it. "Oh" he cried, "you know, creative writers are like domineering mothers!" And yes, the novel was partly about the plight of the artist, as someone who needed to be involved with people and yet to be absolutely on his own. "There's a lovely period when you're going to spend your time on some lonely beach in Sri Lanka, and suddenly you think: 'Oh my God, I need to be involved in cocktail parties in Rome!'" And finally yes, yes, there was in his view a type of order that lay underneath and was greater than civilised order: it was an order dictated by the heart. "Any romantic novelist, *and I am a romantic novelist*, must put the heart above the head!" The interview was over. Great Scott, said S'rangus: that was that, then! And how was my writing coming on? And my producer had clearly been in the sun. Venice, ah! *Venice!* Now, what had often struck him about Venice, he didn't know if she'd agree. . . We were swept out of the studio on a full stream of thought, minutely interrupted when we passed another producer coming in. "Uncommonly *uneasy* face!" Angus Wilson murmured, and begun at once to disagree with what he'd just said about Venice.

He was a man of the rarest bustling frankness, which was what fuelled the novels. He wrote marvellously of women. *Late Call* is surely one of the greatest novels of the past half century. He was enormously kind to young writers (and, sometimes, I have to say, to ageing ones): and in a field where teaching is barely possible, a great teacher. Much that he wrote reminded me oddly of watching Punch and Judy as a child.

In the last cruelly sad years he fell out of fashion: which, since he is bound to remain important quite beyond fashion's reach, matters only in that it would have hurt a generous man who, for all that keen eye and candid tongue, was himself intent on giving hurt only when it seemed morally or artistically useful or necessary to do so. And if that big novel was essentially about a domestic scene, and that specifically the setting of his own childhood and youth, it was always so. I remember his saying of Kipling (of whom, as of Zola and Dickens, he wrote so well, in such busy biographies) that he understood the character of his imagination because he, too, Angus Wilson, had known what it was as a child to set up your imaginative kingdom in the space underneath a bungalow in India.

The name of Catholic novelist Graham Greene, who died recently, was due to be removed from the US State Department list of "political undesirables". He was no longer considered a threat to national security.

A Confession of Ignorance

CHARLES WARD

T.H. Huxley, the scientist, coined the word "agnostic" in 1869 from a Greek prefix and verb that, taken together, implied "not knowing".

The term matches the position I have come to hold. I realise now that I know a great deal less than I once thought I did.

I now try to approach all debatable questions with impartiality.

Just to make a firm assertion gives a boost, as it were, to one's self-confidence. Nothing much wrong with that, if the assertion is soundly based.

But, quite often, vanity takes precedence over accuracy when people air their opinions on topics concerning which they have less knowledge than they suppose.

Knowledge is power, we have been told, and we believe it. So, to appear powerful, we try to give the impression that we are "in the know".

The worst effect is not that we manage to persuade others that we know more than we actually do. That is quite easy. The worst effect is self-deception.

There are those who feel that to call oneself agnostic on the subject of God, for instance, is a mealy-mouthed alternative to describing oneself more robustly as an atheist. But, although agnosticism and atheism involve lack of belief, they are not the same thing.

An atheist, as defined by a dictionary, is one who disbelieves or denies the existence of God. In practice, atheists express no doubts on the subject. So far as they are concerned, the question is closed. In other words they have a belief, albeit a negative one.

Agnostics renounce belief in all unproveable statements and would readily concur with atheists that theological arguments belong to that category.

However, the absence of proof that there is a God, whatever that word may be taken to signify, is not proof to the contrary. Theists and atheists who profess to be able to establish their position philosophically are merely trying to justify an assumption already made.

Conclusive proof on either side is totally lacking. If such did exist, discussion between highly intelligent people on this topic would have to end. Concord would be reached at last.

That this agreeable condition has nowhere materialised does not indicate, as fiercer debaters sometimes infer, that those on one side are bound to be rather less intelligent than those on the other.

It merely shows how strongly a great many people are addicted to beliefs that represent nothing more than a choice of stance or interpretation going beyond anything

that reasoned argument may produce.

Opposing someone else's belief because one has a different belief does not seem to me to be a useful undertaking when what is the crux of the matter is the validity of belief itself.

Why believe at all? Why not just stick to verifiable facts and accept that on some questions insufficient is known on which to base a reliable assertion.

That is not to make agnosticism a halfway house between belief and disbelief — a position welcomed, I daresay, by those who cannot make up their minds, or whose philosophies are a mixed bag of preferred superstitions and pet aversions.

Nor is it to view agnosticism as an olive branch extended to one's opponents (believers or unbelievers as the case may be) suggesting that some compromise might be reached.

In fact it is the end of the line for both types of believer. The unbeliever — if that is all that he or she is — in my opinion is a mirror image of the believer. Unwillingness to question one's conclusions, insupportable claims to consistency, or knowledge... these are seen at both extremes.

As an agnostic I do not reject or disparage knowledge. Quite the contrary. I am all for its advancement and

extension in every conceivable way. But with reference to some issues the most valid piece of knowledge I possess may be that I am too ignorant to reach a final comprehensive unavoidable conclusion.

Do not imagine that this reduces me to a state of chronic indecision. In situations which demand it, being decisive is an act of will which may have to override intellectual inconclusiveness.

In years gone by I was a victim of belief, not least in the sense of feeling that I had to justify in terms of belief all that I did. I was also an exploiter, though not perhaps more consciously dishonest in that regard than the smoker who persuades himself, and possibly others, that the addiction is harmless.

I am now, however, a reformed character. Agnosticism, hopefully, has made an honest man of me. Consequently I plead for mental honesty. I should like to see more of it in every quarter. Some other highly-prized objectives may be sacrificed in its favour. Certainty on ultimate questions, for example. That can be done without.

If we bring ourselves to do without mental honesty, we are indeed no better than our fathers were. A lot worse, I should say, considering what we know. And don't.

Rajiv Gandhi: Victim of Unreason

G. N. DEODHEKAR

The assassination of the former Prime Minister of India during an election campaign may be the turning point for political affairs in India, but it is first and foremost a tragedy for his Italian-born wife and their two children. For Rajiv Gandhi was indeed a reluctant politician; it was the accidental death of his younger brother Sanjay, the political heir being groomed by their mother, Indira Gandhi, that forced Rajiv to enter politics to stand by her side. Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguard put him precipitously (and rather undemocratically) in the position of a successor; the wave of sympathy and the need for stability gave him a land-slide victory in the December 1984 elections.

Starting as Mr Clean who would take India into the 21st century with technology and modernism, things went promisingly for a while, but terrorism based on minority religions continued in the Punjab and Kashmir. The Congress Party culture of authoritarianism and adulation prevalent in Indira Gandhi's days made its return. The Bofors corruption scandal, which was evasively handled, did most damage to Rajiv Gandhi's image. From the secularist point of view, the appeasement of Islamic fundamentalists on the question of divorced Muslim women's rights to maintenance showed clearly that while he talked about taking India into the 21st century, he was prepared to leave Muslim women in the seventh, in order to ensure the Islamic

vote.

The intervention by the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the Sri Lankan conflict (primarily ethnic with religious tinges) was at the invitation of the Sri Lankan Government and with the general agreement of the country's Tamil population. The compromise formula gave Tamils autonomy rather than sovereignty and was the optimum that India could obtain for them. The Tamil Tigers have refused to lay down their arms as required by the compromise and resumed conflict, including massacres of moderates among their own people and attacks on the Peace Keeping Force which was later withdrawn. The Tigers denied complicity in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, but all the evidence has pointed to them as the perpetrators of a suicidal outrage in which they must have known that in addition to their target, many innocent people would be killed.

At home Rajiv Gandhi lost the support of his Finance Minister, V. P. Singh — the new Mr Clean — and also lost the December 1989 elections to him. V. P. Singh's precarious Government lasted barely a year and was replaced by an even more precarious one led by Chandra Shekhar — an adroit politician who did better than expected — supported by the Congress Party. The failure of this arrangement and the inevitable elections were to give Rajiv Gandhi the much longed for second chance of which he has now been deprived, not by

internal violence but by an external force with a base in Indian Tamilnad.

One outcome of the outrage is that the determination of the vast Indian population not to yield to secessionist terrorism will be multiplied tenfold. The Congress Party itself will be at a new cross-roads. Its pathetic reliance on the Nehru-Gandhi "dynasty" is at an end. There may be a coming together of various factions and even of dissidents who left to form the various Janata groups. If factionalism breaks out again, and even more if the appeasement of Islamic fundamentalism persists, the rattled Hindu masses may be driven further into the arms of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Paradoxically, this Hindu-oriented reformist/conservative/non-socialist coalition has a few Muslim members. It has adopted the slogan of "positive secularism" as against what it terms the "pseudo-secularism" of the Congress Party. It has even picked up the secularist slogan of a "uniform civil code" for all citizens, irrespective of their religion. It may, with wisdom, persuade the Muslims that their happiness lies not in confrontation with the Hindus or under Islamic fundamentalist leadership, but in co-operation and amity with the Hindu majority.

Regardless of the outcome of last month's elections, this central problem, apart from that of over-population, remains to be solved. The end of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty will mean that elections must be won by real progress, not by the misuse of "charisma".

Priest Bans Daughter of Unmarried Couple

A Roman Catholic priest has said he would resign the chairmanship of the governors of St Edmund's Primary School, Waterloo, Merseyside, rather than allow the five-year-old daughter of an unmarried couple to be admitted.

Fr Micheal Ryan said: "I do not feel it would be appropriate to have a child at the school whose parents don't feel that marriage is part of their faith." Apparently it is appropriate for Fr Ryan to be a priest and not feel that marriage is part of his faith.

The girl's parents, Brian Kimmance and Susan Pomeroy, have lived together for eleven years.

Miss Pomeroy said the headmaster, Brian Birkby, had no objection to her daughter coming to St Edmund's.

"He said it would be fine", she added, "but he had to clear it with the priest.

"When Fr Ryan learned that Brian and I are not married he refused point blank to accept her. We are very upset."

But Fr Ryan is adamant. He said: "Our church school still holds to traditional principles. It is a question of the beliefs we have."

LETTERS

THE LEGALITY OF THE GULF WAR

Nicolas Walter's letter (June) on the Gulf War, criticising mine of May, is wrong at every key point.

Nicolas Walter's one argument concerning the legality of the Gulf action which might seem to have some cogency is his claim that it was not conducted according to the UN Charter Articles 43-47. These Articles seem to require military action to be conducted by UN forces, and under the control of the Military Staff Committee. But these provisions have never in fact been implemented. There is no UN military force, and no effective means of setting one up; so the Military Staff Committee is a committee of Generals without an Army. (Article 51 was irrelevant as it deals with other situations.)

What actually happened was that the Security Council used Articles 42, 48 and 49 to delegate the necessary action of the coalition of forces cooperating with Kuwait.

The UN Secretary General, Pérez de Cuéllar, explained the true situation very clearly, speaking to the European Parliament on 17 April: "the multilateral action was authorised and therefore legitimised by the United Nations", though it was not itself a UN action. This quote also deals with Nicolas Walter's absurd claim that Security Council Resolution 678 does not authorise military action, on the ground that the Resolution did not use those words.

Nicolas Walter is also wrong in his statement "Yes, the UN did oppose the Gulf war for the reasons given." I have discussed the matter very carefully with their Information Officer, and she is quite explicit that the UN never claimed that the Security Council decision 678 was not valid, nor that it did not legitimise the action taken. When the war started, they still regretted that sanctions had not been continued; but they did not call for an immediate cease fire.

Nicolas Walter also refers to the letter from myself and others in the March *Humanist News*; but he misquotes it. The letter did not set a choice between the UN and the Humanist Peace Council. I will take up this misunderstanding in the September *Humanist News*.

If Colin Mills thinks he can put up a better argument he should do so: it is a case of "put up or shut up".

E. F. Crosswell has an extraordinary understanding of logic if he thinks that a US statement in 1980 renders invalid a UN Security Council Resolution of 1990.

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

HUMANIST OPINION

The domestic squabble (about who wrote what or who meant what) among humanists, on the subject of the Gulf War, exemplifies a chronic affliction among us. The difficulty is "how to stick to the humanist point".

There is a difference in kind between a humanist opinion and an opinion of a humanist. A humanist opinion is one that is derived from a general view termed "humanist". This view is that human beings, inspired by hope, informed by enquiry and chastened by scepticism, can identify and solve their common problems without faith in, or fear of, something or someone "out there" whom others postulate and have invited to act "in here".

To favour free expression as against censorship is properly humanist opinion; how can people actually identify and solve problems in this the real world unless they listen to one another and learn from one another and how can they do this if facts and ideas are arbitrarily denied them?

It is, for example, merely an opinion of a humanist (or anyone else) that the Gulf War was, or was not, justifiable.

I happen to be one who thought that particular war to be ill-advised, at the time, and to think that, now, its various sequels bear out that view. That is the opinion of a humanist but I do not claim that it is humanist opinion (although I do claim that it is compatible with humanist opinion).

We really should restrict ourselves, as exponents of humanist opinion but not of course in our other capacities, to saying things that *both* need saying *and* cannot be expected to be said so emphatically by non-humanists.

The alternative to this discipline is to think of humanism as a wall-to-wall life stance or all-purpose belief system from which all thought should be derived. This is pretentious in principle and a licence to waffle and quarrel in practice. Our humanist job is not to chase the shadow of triumphant ideological universalism but to identify the substance of what contribution we are best fitted to make *by reason of our being humanists*.

If anyone claims more than that then he or she should watch out for custard pies.

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

THINKING FREELY

I don't know whether Benny Green is unusual (May); he's certainly not unique. I too was born an atheist, and was raised agnostic. I suffered some persecution as a result at school, and have ended up violently anti-religion.

There is, I think, a significant difference between cradle atheists and converts. Most of the adherents of the quasi-religions, Humanism and Rationalism are, I suspect, elderly people, raised in Catholicism or Judaism. When their faith abandons them, they still need the *structures* of belief; certainties, revelations, priesthoods, and so on. That's why they turn to worshipping Scientism (as opposed to scientific method), or that unnecessarily-developed alternative faith, Humanism, a more theologically sound version of the C of E.

The Freethinker's obsession with Sunday opening, a sort of counter-Sabbatarianism, is a good example. You seem uninterested in the welfare of shop workers, or anything else, provided your unreligion's unholy day goes unobserved by the unfaithful.

Many younger atheists like myself never needed to be cured of the world's most dangerous mental illness, and consequently have much greater intellectual freedom. I don't waste my time opposing astrology or advocating evolution or fuming at superstition; it is the theory and practice of organised religion alone that causes most of the evil on the earth, and which must be militantly opposed at every opportunity.

I get great pleasure and entertainment, not to say comfort and inspiration from *The Freethinker*, partly, perhaps because I read it in tandem with my other favourite FT, the *Fortean Times*. Together they make the perfect mixture of scepticism, passion and bloody-minded dissent. I would urge any freethinker who has never seen the *Fortean Times* to send £2 for a sample copy to 20 Paul Street, Frome, Somerset, BA11 1DX. Don't let the bishops of Rationalism tell you it's a banned book.

MAT COWARD, Pinner, Middlesex

OFFENDING THE PUBLIC

Terry Sanderson, like other gay apologists, has written yet another defence of homosexuality ("Not an Ealing Comedy", June) without referring to a practice which causes understandable revulsion among the general public. This practice, sometimes euphemistically referred to as "the love that dare not speak its name", has no more to do with love than heterosexual activity, and is so dangerous physically and hygienically that health authorities have recommended "say 'No' to anal sex". So much for Terry Sanderson's advocacy of "safer sex", which is no real

answer to the AIDS problem.

Whilst I agree that gays should not be ostracised for feelings they have no control over, I see no reason why the general public should accept the practice of sodomy. It is up to gays to publicly dissociate themselves from that dangerous practice if they wish to be generally accepted in society.

A pacifist, I see no good reason for gay-bashing, and thoroughly abhor it. I am sure it will disappear when gays renounce sodomy.
E. F. CROSSWELL, Slough

THE ORKNEY CASE

I hold no brief for the Orkney Social Work Department, but feel strongly that the writer of "News and Notes" (*The Freethinker*, May and June), should have awaited the outcome of the current enquiry into the Orkney alleged child abuse case before sounding off so strongly. I refused to sign a petition on the parents' behalf because I had heard only one side of the story, and hope *The Freethinker* will give as much publicity to the recent severe criticism of Sheriff David Kelbie's remarks on the case by Scotland's Chief Justice, Lord Thomson, as it has to the remarks themselves. I wonder if the author of "News and Notes" has studied the Social Work Department's version of the events?

Incidentally, South Ronaldsay is no longer an "Island", having been joined to the Orkney mainland by the Churchill Barriers, erected by Italian prisoners during the Second World War.

JOHN L. BROOM, Stromness, Orkney

TAKING THE OATH

Colin Hulme chides me for three errors in one sentence (Letter, June). Unfortunately two of them are his own. Contrary to what he says, there was indeed a letter about Abigail Wright in the April *Freethinker*. It was from Georgina Coupland of Preston. And I did not suggest that Abigail's mother was responsible for Abigail's refusal to take the Guide oath; though presumably Abigail had learned posturing from someone. I am sorry for my carelessness in writing Woodland, instead of Woodcraft, Folk — the one minor error in my letter; though Mr Hulme evidently recognised to what I was referring from my description of it as an organisation of the loony left.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

BARBARA'S BLOOMERS

Having dashed off my review for your June issue in too much of a hurry, I made some bloomers, and would like to put the record straight. The correct title of the book reviewed is *Holy Faces, Secret Places* (not *Sacred Places*), difficulties in the author's quest being a major theme; I misspelt the word "sindonist"; and the gap between 1204 and 1355 is approximately 150 years, not 250 as in my arithmetic!

BARBARA SMOKER, London SE6

Congratulations to our contributor Neil Blewitt, who has won second prize in the poetry section of the 1991 Coalville Open Writing Competition. His poem, "Billie", concerns his uncle, Lister William Beagles, and a rescue he carried out under fire during World War 1, for which he was awarded the Military Medal. Neil Blewitt has had other work broadcast and published in poetry magazines. He is a member of Norwich Humanist Group.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Auybys, Hove BN3 2TL. Telephone 0273 733215.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031-667 8389.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA). Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB (telephone 0926 58450). Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 6 August, 8 pm. Eugene Levine and Julia Pelling: Report on the BHA Annual Conference.

International Humanist and Ethical Youth Conference. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. 22-28 July. Information from Matt Cherry, BHA office, 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH, telephone 071-430 0908.

Norwich Humanist Group. The Mischief Tavern, Fye Bridge, Norwich. Thursday, 15 August, 7.30 pm. Social Evening.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 14 July, David Murray: Marxism and Religion (11 am). Nicolas Walter: Anarchism and Religion (3 p.m). Thursday, 18 July, 7 pm. Paul Kurtz: Scepticism and the Paranormal. Sunday, 21 July, Ross Cranston: Ethics in Law (11 a.m). Muriel Seltman: Is Quantity a Straightjacket for Science (3 pm).

National Secular Society

ANNUAL OUTING

to Arundel, Sussex, Sunday, 8 September.
Cost, including coach fare from London, admission to Arundel Castle and the Wildfowl Trust, £11.50
Information from the NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL. Telephone 071-272 1266

The volcanic eruption in the Philippines is God's punishment for the Government not allowing the body of Ferdinand Marcos to be brought back for burial, according to the dictator's widow.

Worshippers at a drive-in church in Florida, USA, listen to the service sitting in their cars. They honk the horn once for Amen and twice for Hallelujah.

Church Hit by Scandal

When last month he appeared before a court in Virginia, USA, Fr Thomas Chisboski pleaded guilty to sexually molesting a 13-year-old boy. He was sent to prison for 22 years.

This case is one of many being reported in newspapers all over the United States where the Roman Catholic Church has been badly shaken by sexual scandals involving priests and members of religious orders. The prestigious *National Law Review* predicts that in the next few years the church will pay out one billion dollars to victims of sexual assault and their families.

The church makes strenuous efforts to prevent incidents of sexual abuse by clergy from becoming public knowledge.

Police official Stephen C. Lee wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Times*: "Time and again I read articles wherein a deviant's home is searched and 'satanic artifacts' are reportedly uncovered, apparently testifying to the suspect's inherent immorality.

"Yet as law enforcement officer with 20 years of experience, I would find the presence of 'Christian artifacts' much more indicative of aberrant behaviour, since child molesters are almost always those who represent themselves as God-fearing pillars of the community

"Satanic crimes' attract morbid interest due to their scarcity.

"Christian crimes', on the other hand, occur regularly, but are ignored."

Call for Oath Ban

Writing in the journal of The Magistrates' Association, Ronald Bartle, a Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate, has urged the abolition of oath-taking in court.

Referring to the off-hand way in which the words of the oath are often spoken, he writes: "Frequently they are gabbled at a speed or in an indistinct manner which makes it abundantly plain that they mean nothing at all to the speaker. . . The witness may in fact be truthful, but this has little to do with the swearing of an oath."

Mr Bartle asserts that the case for abolishing the oath "is based upon the acceptance of a simple but blatantly obvious fact of life. Witnesses go into the box intending to speak the truth or determined to tell lies. In very few cases does oath-taking make any difference."

He suggests that the oath be abandoned and replaced by a simple undertaking to tell the truth in the knowledge that telling a lie will make the person liable to prosecution. "This formula, which threatens human as opposed to Divine justice to the perjured witness, is better suited to the age in which we happen to be living".