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ISLAMIC TERRORISTS' NEW ATTACK ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Islamic terrorism has increased dramatically with the murder of Professor Hitoshi Igarashi, the 44-year-old Japanese translator of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. He was stabbed to death at the university where he worked shortly after a similar, but unsuccessful, attempt was made on the life of Ettore Capriole, the Italian translator of the novel.

Frances D'Souza, a representative of the London-based International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie and his Publishers, said the attacks could herald a new campaign against the writer. It is believed that Salman Rushdie's friends could also be in danger.

In a statement, Salman Rushdie said he was "extremely distressed by the news of the murder of Hitoshi Igarashi." And Bob Gregory, a spokesman for Penguin, publisher of *The Satanic Verses*, said they are "very sad that a distinguished translator in Japan should lose his life."

Hesham El-Essawy, founder of The Islamic Society for the Promotion of Religious Tolerance, condemned "the small but blood-thirsty, power-seeking fanatical elements in the Muslim world. . . It is from Iran that the infamous fatwa came and it is from Iran that it must be rescinded if that country is to shed its links with international terrorism. As long as the fanatics can smell blood, they will never let go."

It is not only blood, but money, that the fanatics can smell. An organisation in Tehran has put out a £2 million contract on Rushdie.

Meanwhile, Kalim Siddiqui, director of The Muslim Institute, has repeated his endorsement of the death sentence imposed by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. In a newspaper interview, Siddiqui declared that the fatwa "must stay". He said that "the West's war is not against Islam alone, it is against all religions. . .

"*The Satanic Verses* is the eye of the global storm raging between two views of the world and the future of

mankind — the religious and the secular. This conflict cannot be settled in the terms of the 'national' laws of one or more nation-states. In this conflict, as recent events in Japan and Italy have shown, there are no frontiers of time or space."

Siddiqui has also called for another book burning in Bradford. Speaking at a meeting in the city, he urged Muslims to burn copies of A. N. Wilson's forthcoming "biography" of Jesus, as they did *The Satanic Verses*.

He told the meeting: "We revere Jesus Christ as a prophet just as we do Mohammed. We find an imaginative biography of Christ just as offensive as Rushdie's book, because it challenges all orthodox views of Christ. I call on people to burn the book in the streets."

Bradford is a hotbed of Islamic fanaticism, so it is not particularly surprising that Sayed Abdul Quddus, president of a Muslim group, has described the killing of Professor Igarashi as "entirely justified". Sayed Abdul Quddus said that anyone connected with publication of *The Satanic Verses* is fair game.

"The attacks are justified, because people translating the book are also insulting the faith", he added.

There is growing suspicion that by selecting "soft targets", Islamic fanatics are seeking to terrorise writers and critics into silence. Translators, publishers' employees and others connected even remotely with "offensive" literary works, may be future targets for the Prophet's hitmen.

Firm Government action against those inciting to murder is clearly necessary if the enemies of free speech are to be defeated.

Mehrdad Koukabi, who was convicted in British courts of fire-bombing London and Manchester bookshops selling *The Satanic Verses*, has been appointed adviser to Iran's Minister for Culture and Higher Education.

THE FREETHINKER

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NEWS

JUSTICE DENIED

While the prospect of peace in the Middle East is not entirely remote, it is certainly not being enhanced by Israel's intransigence. Even the most dutiful supporters of Uncle Sam's client State are losing patience with its hawkish leaders, particularly Prime Minister Shamir. There is a growing recognition that if Israel is not restrained, conflict will continue and another generation of Arab refugees will spend their lives wandering from camp to camp.

Israel's expansionist policies are the root cause of trouble in that part of the world. The State of Israel was conceived in injustice, created by terrorism and maintained by outside powers for their own ends. Its origins go back to the end of World War 1 when Britain and France divided up the area into artificially created States.

In 1919, Balfour promised Lord Rothschild, the Zionist leader, that Britain would support moves to establish a Jewish "national homeland" in Palestine, although Jews accounted for only eight per cent of the population. Most of the land had been in Arab ownership for centuries. Britain therefore encouraged Jewish immigration and purchase of land. This policy eventually led to riots on which an official commission reported: "The Arabs have come to see in Jewish immigration not only a menace to their livelihood but a possible overlord of the future." Twenty years later that prediction was realised with the creation of a Western puppet State and an influx of Jewish immigrants, large numbers of them from the United States.

For more than forty years, Israeli forces and bands of armed settlers, often urged on by religious fanatics, have driven thousands of Palestinians from their homes and land. After the 1967 conflict, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza and continues to do so in defiance of the United Nations. While it was "United Nations now" when Iraq invaded Kuwait, there is profound silence in Western capitals when Israel cocks a snook at UN resolutions. Ringing denunciations of Saddam Hussein are not matched by condemnation of highly-placed Israelis — including Shamir — who operated in the Stern Gang and other terrorist groups.

Palestinian Arabs are the victims of the same imperialist divide-and-rule tactics that were used in Ireland, India and other colonies. It is not a question of "United Nations now" but "Justice now".

AND NOTES

LESS THAN POPULAR

Pope John Paul II's authoritarianism, hostility to dissent and implacable opposition to reform, guarantee he will be remembered as one of the 20th century's most reactionary pontiffs. One example of his fierce conservatism is his steadfast admiration for the ultra-Right Opus Dei ("God's Work"). As Archbishop of Cracow he was a frequent visitor to the organisation's headquarters, and one of his first acts on becoming Pope was to pray at the tomb of its founder, Josemaria Escriva.

That was the first of many expressions of John Paul's support for the secretive "church within a church". In 1982 Opus Dei made a significant advance when he granted it a personal prelature. This made it an autonomous diocese, not under the jurisdiction of any national hierarchy and answerable to the Pope alone. Any lingering doubts about his wholehearted support for Opus Dei were, to the consternation of "progressives" within the church, finally dispelled.

The latest boost for Opus Dei is recognition by the Vatican of a "miraculous cure" attributed to Josemaria Escriva. This is another step on the road to canonisation, a procedure that was initiated ten years ago. No doubt the Spanish priest who was an ardent supporter of the Franco regime will eventually join the company of saints.

While political leaders and heads of other churches pay fulsome tributes to John Paul II, he is becoming decidedly less popular with those close to him. Vatican employees bitterly resent his high-handedness and double standards. Unions are no longer recognised, and there is growing suspicion that the Pope intends to replace paid staff with nuns and priests. One employee recently declared: "It makes me sick. In his encyclicals, the Pope slams capitalism when it hasn't got a human face, and repeats ad nauseam the right of a man to be able to earn a decent wage to look after his family. Instead, he is acting like a coal baron."

John Paul II's tirades against the "immorality" of birth control and unmarried couples living together have embarrassed his advisers and annoyed the Italian people. Claudio Martelli, deputy Prime Minister and an outspoken critic of the Vatican, has told the Pope in so many words to mind his own business. And a survey has revealed that over 49 per cent of the population feel the same way about the occupant of the papal throne.

There was much huffing and puffing at the recent Church of England General Synod during the debate on infant baptism. On one side were those who want the water-on-the-brain ritual confined to children whose parents and godparents are committed Christians. Their degree of commitment could range from taking religious instruction to regular attendance at church services.

The hardliners are heavily outnumbered by those who favour retaining the flexible policy on baptism. Although unspoken, no doubt the thought uppermost in many minds was that nowadays the dear old C of E cannot afford to be too choosy. "We don't want to turn away from those who come to us at this highly significant moment in their lives", declared the Archbishop of York. He is evidently unaware that about the only significant moments in a baby's life are feeding time and when it gets rid of the wind.

A theme common to the debate in Anglican circles is that the church should not deny a child the privilege of baptism. But the church cannot deny something that has not been requested. A baby does not as a rule request to be taken to a gloomy building where a strange man in outlandish garb mutters magical words and sprinkles water on its head.

In recent times there have been highly publicised claims — dismissed by the police and the courts — about widespread ritual abuse of children. Perhaps Dianne Core, Maureen Davies and Geoffrey Dickens, MP, will concentrate their attention on assaults like ritual circumcision, baptism and indoctrination. Unlike the Orkney and Rochdale cases, there is abundant evidence that such offences are committed against hundred of thousands of children every year.

All over the country postmen are delivering plain, sealed envelopes to the homes of clergymen. But the contents would not bring a blush to Mary Whitehouse's cheek. At least two agencies — one in Oxfordshire, the other in Devon — are running a sermons mail order service. They cost £2 each, and a bargain pack is available at £48. One of the agencies estimates that over 10,000 churchgoers listen to their sermons every Sunday. Clients are from a number of denominations. They try not to supply neighbouring churches with the same sermon.

So many condoms are discarded in Dublin's Phoenix Park that the authorities may introduce a ban on late-night parking. The favourite bonking spot is near to where the Pope prayed when he visited the city.

PROGRESS IN SCOTLAND

At a time when the secularist and humanist movement south of the Border is in a state approaching terminal lethargy, it is certainly encouraging to read the *Scottish Humanist*, a 24-page magazine edited by Eric Stockton and published by the Humanist Society of Scotland. It aims "to enhance the content and influence of Humanism in Scotland". Judging by the current issue, together with the Society's steady growth, it is making good headway.

Back in 1978, when it looked as though Scotland might have its own Assembly, groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh decided to form the Scottish Humanist Council, consisting of four members from each group and four appointed at the annual conference. During the 1980s it became apparent that there was a need for a wider organisation.

The Society has developed into an enterprising organisation, exploiting opportunities for promoting its principles and policies. An education network liaises with the Scottish Education Department. It has submitted comments on the Department's paper, Religious Education and Religious Observance, and on the proposed syllabus on Higher Religious Education. There have also been discussions with the Educational Institute of Scotland, the main teachers' organisation.

The HSS has also put its views on the Scottish Law Commission's reports on marriage and cohabitation. It has also taken steps to ensure that notices concerning affirmation in court are available in waiting rooms.

Press releases and leaflets keep the Society's existence and views in the public arena. This important aspect of its work will develop with the appointment of A. S. Edwards as press officer.

Appropriately a new group has been formed in Aberdeen. It was in Aberdeen that the revered Margaret Knight (1903-83) planned her famous "Morals Without Religion" broadcasts, which caused consternation in religious circles and encouraged large numbers of unbelievers to come out of the closet.

The *Scottish Humanist* is published quarterly and available to non-members of the HSS at £5 per year from Alice Atkinson, Flat 16, Minerva Court, 16 Elliot Street, Glasgow, G3 8EB. The honorary secretary of the Humanist Society of Scotland is Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone 0563 26710.

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 CRITIC ANSWERED

Having completed ten years of my third editorial stint, I have been giving serious thought to the possibility of relinquishing the post before too long. But a strong Puritan streak has deterred me from taking a step that would cause much pleasure in some quarters. That feeling was reinforced by an item in the British Humanist Association's *Humanist News* (July).

Unsigned, so presumably written by the editor, Meredith MacArdle, the piece refers to *The Freethinker* as "the newsletter associated with the National Secular Society." While not emulating those who over-egg the BHA pudding with grandiose claims and inflated membership figures, I submit that "the newsletter associated with the National Secular Society" is hardly an accurate description of a monthly publication with a world-wide readership, and the contents of which include articles, reviews, national and international news.

During the debate on the Gulf War and formation of the Humanist Peace Council, *The Freethinker*, which appears regularly rather than intermittently, was a forum for discussion in which prominent BHA members participated. Meredith MacArdle chose not to do so. But she has been making a fuss about a short *Independent on Sunday* comment on the exchange of views. I do not subscribe to the view that "all publicity is good publicity", but suggest that the supposed damage inflicted on the movement by the *Independent on Sunday* piece is a figment of somebody's imagination. She appears to entertain the odd notion that the BHA should be cocooned and protected from the slightest breath of controversy.

The Freethinker allegedly "enjoys criticising other groups and individuals in the Humanist movement." In fact *The Freethinker* enjoys publicising the activities and freely advertising events organised by groups (but without exercising a proprietorial claim on them).

The Freethinker is accused of attacks "so vitriolic that subscribers might wonder if the BHA is in imminent danger of collapse." I sincerely hope and believe there is no such danger. Its veterans and dedicated voluntary workers up and down the country are made of sterner stuff than the procession of paid "professionals" who have traditionally occupied key posts in the organisation.

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Pretentious Piety

FRANK FODEN

Piety by its very nature tends to be pretentious and self-serving, being connected with the need to demonstrate one's worthiness for salvation and as an example to others. This article is from a series of "Letters From Orkney", which deal with various aspects of Christianity.

Stern piety is much favoured by Christian Protestants. Indeed, Protestantism itself emerged among churchmen essentially as a moralistic movement. It saw itself as a process reformatory of the abuses and breaches of the rules and principles of good Christian behaviour, though soon (in fact, right from the start) it reflected political powershifts in mediaeval Europe. Since a central element of the movement was rejection of the rule of the Pope, there had to be alternative, more reliable and more accessible references available against which to check right belief and right conduct. This was the Scripture, now becoming available to priests and laity alike in the form of printed vernacular versions of the holy text. Bible reading — and more general education of the laity to enable this — became a common form of religious activity, with constant and much heavier emphasis on the explicit signification of the text than might have seemed necessary to preachers whose audience was incapable of reading, much less in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Pious behaviour, which might have taken the form of joining a monastic order in the earlier regime, now inevitably took on a form of frequent and familiar quotation and repetition from the Scripture itself.

Puritanism, though it had its priestly leaders, is essentially a popular movement, within a scripturally literate and knowledgeable laity, especially contemptuous in its more extreme forms of priestly and pontifical pronouncement. Calvinists set their whole programme in terms of the literal validity of the Bible, in its entirety; and priests were brought under the direct jurisdiction of the literate laity. The Presbyterian rite which came to prevail in Scotland in the wake of the fulminations of John Knox, was fearsomely "democratic" in the sense that the "Elders" of each individual congregation became top dogs, their authority deriving from and always immediately referable back to the Scripture. Piety, demonstrable devotion to God's law, ostensibly became enforceable in communities which often cultivated a merciless intolerance of other sects and creeds.

Such communities developed in various parts of the Protestant world, sometimes with benefit to the whole community but also often with unfortunate results for the "non-conformists". Once they gained power, or captured the interest of rulers, pietists were apt to clamp down on secular amusement of all kinds, insist on stern

measures to curb the sins of the flesh, enforce very strictly Sunday observance, discourage the use of strong drink of all kinds. Total abstinence in most countries where it has been wholly or partially introduced, has been very much associated with the rise of pietist influence, especially in Scandinavia and in the United States of America.

Teetotalism in Britain has been very much a campaign prerogative of pietists, Primitive Methodists in particular, usually ready with quotations from the Bible — "look not on the wine when it is red", "wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging"; though usually they ignored the texts which commended drink (especially if there was a hint of pleasure) "eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart", "a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry". Notoriously pietists are spoil-sports and great selectors of their texts. Pietists of Denmark and Norway in the eighteenth century, a movement which had considerable influence on the Kings of Denmark, were responsible for much enterprise in public education, but also for the depressing and ambiguous attitudes (and laws) of Danes and Norwegians (both hard drinking peoples) to wine, beer and spirits.

Ambiguity there is, too, in the attitudes of Scots to the religion of piety and the religion of drink. On the whole, however, this hard-headed race, with unmatched skills in distilling the "Water of Life", have kept the two matters separate, still retaining in some places a severity of view on morals and theology that would have gladdened the heart of John Knox, while at the same time maintaining a staunch loyalty to John Barleycorn.

Perhaps the group in Scotland best known for their pietistic ideas, are the Covenanters of the seventeenth century and their nineteenth-century successors, the "Wee Frees". Without going into the particular and essentially political influences that gave rise to the Covenanters' movement, the Covenanters became especially noted for their pietistic devotion and utterance, especially after the Restoration in 1660, partly as a result of persecution by their erstwhile brethren in faith, those of the Scottish Kirk. They were much resented for this, for people in general can stand only so much of nagging reminders, day in, day out, of their sinfulness and backsliding. To a point "ranting" and "conventicles" become fun, then a subject for ridicule, regarded as very punishable by the pietists themselves. Some idea of the pietistic self-righteousness of the Covenanters and their later apologists may be gained from that remarkable book, *Scots Worthies*. Nowadays it can surely be acceptable only to those who are utterly convinced of the textual certainties of the Bible on which

"Covenanting" pietism is based, interesting though the slant may be. To say this is not in the least to excuse the vile treatment meted out to the remnants of the Covenanters' Rebellion by the Privy Council of Scotland on behalf of King Charles II and his bigoted brother, King James, and recorded, sometimes eloquently, in this "Book of Martyrs".

Ridicule is to be found, if not in Scotland, yet in the pages of Dickens among others, and nowhere more tellingly and amusingly than in *The Pickwick Papers*. The Reverend Stiggins, the red-nosed "friend of the family" of Tony Weller, Esq., landlord of the Marquis of Granby and parent to Sam, is "shepherd" to the flock of the Brick Lane Branch of the United Grand Junction

Ebenezer Temperance Association. He is devoted to clichés derived from Holy Scripture, especially on the subject of "the man of wrath", Tony Weller himself, and to the "grateful labours" of converting the drinking classes to the ways of "Temperance". He combines this with an enthusiastic partiality for pineapple rum. His final discomfiture, happens when Mr Weller boots him out of the bar and "after a powerful struggle" immerses "Mr Stiggins' head in a horse-trough full of water, and holding it there until he was half suffocated." It is not to be supposed that devoted readers of *Scots Worthies* or the whole tribe of Jehovah's Witnesses and the like will find such a description all that funny. Generally speaking, the pious ones do not greatly value humour.

A Forgotten Anniversary

KARL HEATH

In June the national press virtually ignored the fiftieth anniversary of an event that transformed all our lives — a truly pivotal point in this century's history. On Sunday, 22 June 1941, a beautiful summer morning, my wife Grace and I heard the electrifying news on the radio which lifted a burden from our hearts. For the first time we knew that Hitler would be beaten. German troops had invaded Russia: Hitler had made the colossal blunder which cost him the war. Until then all had seemed grim. No-one was defeatist, but Hitler controlled "Fortress Europe", Britain was isolated and the future precarious.

I had just been discharged from the Army with a heart condition and had joined the local Home Guard. I was not exactly a Private Pike since I had served with the BEF in France and, after the evacuation, had joined one of the newly-formed Bomb Disposal Sections of the Royal Engineers. There had been little to cheer us. I was still in France when I heard one piece of good news, the end of the Chamberlain Government. I was no lover of Churchill's politics, but he had always stood up against the Tory appeasers, the hundred MPs who belonged to the Anglo-German Fellowship and The Link, the Tories who drank Ribbentrop's champagne and attended the parties at Cliveden. It is strange that Burgess, Maclean, Philby and Blunt are called traitors for giving information to an ally, while those Tories from Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax downwards, who supported our eventual enemy and tried to deal with him even after we were at war, are considered patriots.

I went to my Sunday morning Home Guard parade. Some old soldiers were sitting on a grass bank. "He'll go through them like a knife through butter", "I give them three months"; were typical comments. Next day the *Daily Express* said the same and other newspapers said it would give us a breathing space until the Russian

winter. Only the *News Chronicle* anticipated serious Russian resistance. My wife and I knew better than the pessimists. What we did not know was the cost to Russia. That night Churchill spoke on the radio. He repeated his hatred of Communism but welcomed the Soviet Union as an ally.

During the four years that followed seven million Red Army soldiers were killed. The total American casualties against both Germany and Japan were 250,000. The total British and Commonwealth casualties were 350,000. Twenty-eight Russian soldiers killed for every American, twenty for every British soldier. During those four years the Germans maintained more than 250 divisions on the Russian Front. Rommel's Afrika Korps in the Western Desert consisted of four German divisions plus eight or ten Italian divisions. In the Italian campaign the Germans fielded about thirty divisions. Even after the Normandy landings in 1944, the much-delayed Second Front, von Rundstedt could only be spared fifty divisions. More soldiers died in the battle for Stalingrad than all Western deaths put together. Nearly twice as many Russian civilians died in the siege of Leningrad than all Western deaths put together. Hitler sent the great German army into Russia and it was mangled and defeated there.

Who has heard of Kursk? Everyone knows of Agincourt and Waterloo, but they were skirmishes compared with Kursk. There, in July 1943, was fought the greatest tank battle in world history, involving thousands of tanks and tank-busting planes. It was Hitler's desperate throw and it failed. Thereafter there was only retreat.

Sad postscript: a recent poll has suggested that forty per cent of adult Americans think that their country fought Russia in the Second World War.

The Paradoxes of Thatcherism

T. F. EVANS

I am a conviction politician. Margaret Thatcher

Like Marxism, Thatcherism is, in fact, riddled with contradiction. Julian Critchley

Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister for over eleven years. This compares with Gladstone's somewhat longer total period in office, although he formed four separate administrations which spanned almost a quarter of a century. There is another similarity. Lord Blake, the Conservative historian, has said that Gladstone "could seem on occasions the very embodiment of moral fervour" and, that in one great controversy at least, he stood for what he believed to be "the higher moral law". It is not unusual for politicians to identify their own or their party's policies with the higher moral law, but it may come as a surprise to some observers to discover that Margaret Thatcher conceived her policies to be based on firm and, indeed, religious principles.

Thatcherism, as has been pointed out by Peregrine Worsthorne, the High Tory guru who was not always a whole-hearted admirer of Margaret Thatcher, began as an "economic crusade". The purpose of the government that came into power in 1979 was to reverse the policy of post-war Governments of both parties to move towards the goal of a more nearly equal society. This, according to the Thatcherite philosophy had the effect of impoverishing the nation by stifling enterprise rather than enriching it by the encouragement and provision of greater opportunities for the exercise of individual choice and initiative. What is surprising, however, is to discover that Margaret Thatcher believed herself to be acting on moral and religious principles throughout. An easy response — and it has been made — is that she disguised this so well as to create the impression among friends and foes alike, that even if releasing energy and initiative, she was also encouraging greed and self-interest to an extent that had rarely been done so blatantly before. Examination of some of her own statements presents a strange picture.

In numerous biographies of Margaret Thatcher, readers are always told of the beginnings in the shop owned by her father, Alderman Roberts of Grantham. In that shop, we are informed, the young Margaret Thatcher realised the great virtues of hard work, thrift and enterprise. Later to preside over the greatest expansion of credit in the history of the country, she was taught that it was wrong to buy anything that you could not pay for in full on the spot.

She was taught other lessons also. The family was strongly attached to the Christian religion and regular attendance at Sunday services, together with other

church activities during the rest of the week, were part of her life.

The Roberts were Methodists, and Margaret Thatcher has written and spoken of the influence of her Methodist upbringing. In later years, she laid emphasis on Wesley as the capitalist who knew the importance of using his God-given gifts to bear rich fruit. As do many other people, she took from her teachers what she wanted to learn, and paid less attention to other parts of the doctrine. Thus it was an earlier Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, who paid tribute to the influence of Methodism on the English Labour movement which he believed owed more to Methodism than to Marx. The social implications of such comments did not appeal to the later enthusiast for the spiritual message of the founder of Methodism.

Although in accounts of her early years are to be found remarks like "Margaret was strongly religious, even at university", or "the hallmark of Mrs Thatcher's leadership is her strong and fundamental belief in the Christian ethic", it is only comparatively recently that anyone has tried to take a close look at her religious beliefs. The best account is in the detailed and most valuable biography, *One of Us*, by the political journalist, Hugo Young. He devotes several significant pages to an examination of Margaret Thatcher's moral and religious code, and its effect on her politics. One of the crucial incidents during her incumbency of 10 Downing Street was the Falklands war in which, according to her admirers, she showed herself to be a great war leader. Others found it one of the least edifying episodes in modern history, one more example of the propensity of Conservatives to claim for themselves a monopoly of patriotism and to wrap themselves in the Union Flag whenever it is profitable to their cause.

Allied with this propensity there has always been a readiness by Conservatives to claim, as a matter of course, that Almighty God was always on their side; if the deity was not in fact a paid-up member of any particular local Conservative Association, he was accepted as an honorary member of them all. Not without cause had the Church of England come to be regarded as "the Tory party at prayer".

The Falklands episode helped to change this. The then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, showed himself less than triumphant in his references to the war at the St Paul's Cathedral service of thanksgiving. His remarks of a sympathetic nature about the Argentinian dead were thought in some quarters to be distinctly out of place. Those quarters almost certainly included 10 Downing Street. By this time, Margaret Thatcher had changed from the Methodist

church to the Church of England; but, in the careful words of Hugo Young, "as with many others who have drifted along the same path, the shift was more informal than formal, and probably happened more for social than spiritual reasons."

Another source of disagreement with the Established Church was over the emphasis placed — or rather misplaced as Mrs Thatcher thought it — on social matters. This was shown in the report, *Faith in the City* (1985). Its clear implication was that the State, that is the Government of the day, had neglected the cities and their inhabitants in the past and ought to do more for them in future. It was about this time, according to Hugo Young, Mrs Thatcher recalled that very many of her Finchley constituents were Jewish. This was a factor which led her to look kindly on some Jewish attitudes, notably to family life and the community. Young concluded that Margaret Thatcher, who failed to see spiritual leadership in the Church of England, found it elsewhere; this "marked out the Chief Rabbis, in effect, the spiritual leader of Thatcherite Britain, a role for which Dr Runcie was clearly ineligible."

The most sustained account of Margaret Thatcher's religious views was given in an address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, at Edinburgh in May 1988. Whether the reader of the text of the address is impressed or not, it cannot be denied that it is carefully thought out, with a firm and unequivocal emphasis on the central theme which is that the distinctive marks of Christianity "stem not from the social but from the spiritual side of our lives." From this is developed an insistence on the God-given fundamental right to choose between good and evil, thus following the example of Christ himself who "chose to lay down his life that our sins may be forgiven." The practical consequences of this vital obligation to choose include the need to choose to use our talents in the most productive way; that is to create wealth in order that we can respond to the many calls for financial support by worthy causes.

This can be seen as the spiritual justification of the practice of what has sometimes been called the "trickle down" theory of the Thatcher years. By this is meant that if the creation of wealth is encouraged at the top end of the economic scale, it will eventually trickle down to those at the bottom who have not been so successful. This theory is highly thought of by those at the top who derive great benefits from reductions in taxation and similar measures. It has not so far found great support in the lower ranks of society who, lacking both spiritual vision and practical economic understanding, have not been able to see how the theory works to their advantage.

The Edinburgh address contains several other interesting revelations. Margaret Thatcher stresses the importance of the family, admitting cautiously that

there must be some public help for the less fortunate, but never to such an extent that it removes personal responsibility. On democracy she suggests that in his Gettysburg address Lincoln overlooked the fact that "nowhere in the Bible is the word democracy mentioned." The purpose of Christians, she contends, should not be to follow the mind of the majority, but the mind of the Holy Spirit which "may be quite different".

As Margaret Thatcher entered 10 Downing Street after her 1979 victory, she gave a special slant to the traditional desires of the victor to put conflict aside and to work together for the good of the entire country. She found — or had found for her — words from St Francis of Assisi calling for harmony, truth, faith and hope. In the months since she left office, not many confident voices have been raised to declare that she brought these desirable things about.

More than her predecessors, Margaret Thatcher tried to make, or at least present, her party as one of "conviction". Edward Heath, her immediate predecessor as party leader and Prime Minister, has criticised "a decade of dogma", while John Biffen, one of the many Ministers she dismissed, said that under her leadership the Conservative Party "has become the ideas party." During the "decade of dogma", Margaret Thatcher tried to be both action man and ideas woman, or the other way around.

Paradox was piled upon paradox when religious justification was put forward for some of the more striking features of the Thatcher regime. Not all readers of this journal are able to see substantial virtues in Christianity, but some might admit that one feature of the religion can command sympathy; this is the professed concern for the poor and afflicted. Despite telling Hugo Young that she "read quite a lot of theological work", Margaret Thatcher's theology tends more towards that of the character in the film, *Wall Street*, who believes in the virtue of "greed" and its value for the good of society. During the Thatcher years, greed in the form of taking over another company was approved; greed in the form of trade unionists combining to put up wages was dismissed as "the politics of envy."

However, in the conflict between the practical and the spiritual, Margaret Thatcher did not press her paradoxes as far as did some of her supporters. For tenacity and strength, it may be uncomplimentary to describe her as a Rotweiler in human form. One of her most faithful lieutenants, Norman Tebbit, who might be described as a Rotweiler in Rotweiler form has now called for the disestablishment of the Church of England (thus, on this issue, becoming an unlikely ally of Tony Benn). Not even Margaret Thatcher's propensity to radical solutions to problems drove her to such treatment for turbulent priests.

Final verdicts may be necessary in courts of law, but

history is a different matter. We are too near the Thatcher years to assess the final effect. There are some, however, who might say that nothing has greatly changed. In 1979, the eve of the Thatcher era, Peregrine Worsthorne said that "the great social revolution that was meant to have got under way as far back as 1945" had had little effect; the new Government was "encouragingly full of hereditary peers, self-made and hereditary millionaires, wealthy landowners, scholarly products of Oxbridge, headed by a lady who married money."

When Margaret Thatcher was told to go, because she

was no longer thought certain to win another General Election, she was replaced by a comparative unknown one of whose earliest announcements was that he would work for "a classless society". Whether the party itself, which remains the same, despite the changes at the top, is fully dedicated to the classless ideal, is another question.

The past eleven years, despite the reference to St Francis of Assisi, have seen the rich grow richer and the poor poorer. So far, however, under the new leader, any change of direction has been unsupported by quotation from religious sources.

In the Realm of the Censors

DAVID GODIN

With amazing and monotonous regularity, news hounds seem to demand a story with a sexual angle so that they might convey to readers all the sordid details whilst maintaining a righteous tone. Sex, it would seem, is always dangerous in the hands of other people.

The annual degree show of Sheffield Polytechnic's College of Arts, contained four pictures which depicted human beings in sexual situations. The fact that they were created by a female shouldn't impinge upon our consciousness, but in the sexist times we live, it is worth noting. Trouble began when the catalogue went to the printers, who, expressing pious concern, said they could not bring themselves to reproduce such filth. (Oh for a truth drug to administer to these people to see if never, ever in their lives they've not said either to themselves or aloud: "Look at the size of her's", or "Look at the size of his" — irrational thoughts which have probably flashed through all our minds at some stage or other. . . and what's the harm since the thought is not the deed?)

So, the catalogue went out with four blank spots — white rags no doubt to the prurient whose fetid imaginations probably did a sort of Devilish Drawing by Numbers to make up for the loss of the actual, and before one knew it, the police (not, apparently, having enough to do with their time), were paying a visit on the complaint of one individual, looking at what the local newspaper so quaintly described as "steamy drawings". The Polytechnic Authorities, no doubt bearing in mind that it now seems clearly established in Britain that the police can beat you up, stitch you up, break truncheons over your head and not even face a whiff of a disciplinary charge or any such nastiness, were instantly intimidated.

The "offending" pictures were removed. Nobody seemed to mind or care particularly, so brainwashed are we now in the Mother of Democracies to seeing civil liberties bent and contorted to suit the moment, and,

with a nod and a wink, the "British Way" of mealy-mouthed compromise wins again. And to think we are smugly proud of it, and laud it as an example to the rest of the world! But of course Political Pornography is not yet on our agenda!

Sect Teenager in Court

An 18-year-old Jewish student, described as "shy and immature", has been sentenced to six months' youth custody at Southwark Crown Court. Phillip Eli Cohen was found guilty of indecently assaulting a five-year-old girl. He was cleared of other charges, including indecent assault on the girl's brother.

Cohen said his actions resulted from "evil impulses" for which he blamed an oppressive upbringing in the strict Jewish Yekers community, based in the Stamford Hill area of north London.

The children gave their testimony on video. But Ann Curnow, QC, said the evidence had been orchestrated by their mother and was unreliable.

During the trial, which lasted two months, the court heard what life is like in the orthodox community. Members are required to obey 263 commandments. Every day prayers are said several times at a place of worship. Each hand must be washed three times every morning to ward off evil spirits. The community has its own rabbinical courts. Television sets are banned.

Above all, sex is a taboo subject. Cohen told the court that 22 is the marrying age and he had no outlet for normal, adolescent sexual urges. After reading an 18th century religious work, he believed that masturbation was worse than murder.

Judge Laurie said the accused "richly deserved" a custodial sentence. Others will conclude that Phillip Eli Cohen's life had been spent in religious custody.

BOOKS

ATHEISM, AYN RAND AND OTHER HERESIES, by George H. Smith, Prometheus Books, £14.50.

George H. Smith warns us in his preface to *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies* that there should be something in the book to offend everyone. It's not offence so much in my case as boredom, especially in essays like "Justice Entrepreneurship in a Free Market"; and I could raise little enthusiasm for the 50-page defence of Objectivist Ayn Rand as "a humanist in the best sense", who has been misrepresented by her religious followers.

More interesting is a vigorous defence of Herbert Spencer (does the RPA still have his gloves, I wonder?) against vilification, particularly over his theory of "survival of the fittest". "The traditional interpretation of Spencer on this point is so fundamentally wrong", Mr Smith writes, "... that one must wonder if any of Spencer's critics bother to read him".

I don't think we need to wonder long over that — Spencer does, after all, present a formidable challenge — but all credit to Mr Smith for placing that famous quotation in context; and for pointing out that Spencer was never a Darwinist (social or otherwise) but a Lamarckian, "firmly convinced that acquired characteristics are transmitted to later generations". The reader needn't share Spencer's and, it seems, Mr Smith's politics to welcome this attempt at rehabilitation.

But it is the first (175-page) section of the book that contains Mr Smith's specifically atheist and freethought essays. He describes his own path to atheism, explains how he came to write *Atheism: the Case Against God* (which I haven't read but which, according to the present book jacket, was greeted enthusiastically by *The Freethinker*), and advises on how to argue with a theist. He also has a piece on definitions in which he follows d'Holbach, whose *System of Nature* was "perhaps the best defence of atheism ever written", and Bradlaugh, "Britain's most important crusader for atheism". Mr Smith concludes that the term may cover either denial of God's existence or lack of theistic belief.

For me, though, the best essays are in the centre of the book, on philosophies of toleration, deism and the literature of freethought, where Mr Smith reveals the width of his reading and reminds us of some of the often forgotten freethinkers of the past.

Charles Blount, for instance, "one of the most radical and influential Deists of the seventeenth century" who, along with John Toland, "sparked the great Deistic controversy that would dominate English theology well into the next century", Toland himself being

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"perhaps the first to argue that many traditional Christians doctrines are literally meaningless".

Recalled, too, is the determinist Anthony Collins, author of *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, which he defined as "the use of the understanding to find out the meaning of any proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming force or weakness of the evidence."

Then there are those two deists who went to prison for blasphemy, Thomas Woolston, who called Jesus "a strolling fortune teller", and Peter Annet (subject of a Pioneer Press pamphlet many years ago) who, in 1749, called for the legalisation of divorce, unmarried cohabitation and prostitution.

So there is a lot of good stuff in *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies* but not enough to enthuse over.

COLIN McCALL

THE SECRET WORLD OF CULTS, by Jean Ritchie. Angus & Robertson, £4.99

Freethinkers are already well aware of the harm caused by the never ending stream of cults and sects that peddle their "beliefs" in Britain and abroad. Our smug amusement at the incredible gullibility of their members has, however, always taken second place to our enthusiasm to unmask the cult leader who runs their belief as a business and does not care who suffers. Consequently, we usually enthusiastically welcome any new revelations concerning cult activity from whatever quarter; this time, I am not so sure, for Jean Ritchie's new offering, *The Secret World of Cults*, is more than a disappointment.

Give or take the personal testimonies used to illustrate many of the fifteen chapters, and the brief coverage of the insidious therapy cults, we learn nothing new about the Children of God, the Moonies, and the other discredited Sixties cults which make up fifty per cent of this tame exposé. What are they doing here? And why does Jean Ritchie have no qualms about bundling in the other groups like the Jehovah Witnesses and the numerous New Age babblers who hardly fit a cult definition.

My growing suspicion that this work is an evangelical softsell, denouncing any and everything that does not fit in their definition of a dangerous cult, is heightened by the (hackneyed) revelations regarding contemporary

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satanist conspiracies, and confirmed by the list of help organisations supplied in the final pages; all but one is a blatant Christian mission! Is Ritchie's aim anti-cult awareness or evangelical proselytisation?

Either way, for freethinkers, this book has few redeeming features. The first chapter fails to deliver its promise of revealing the "anatomy of a cult", demonstrating the author's lack of knowledge of any of the hundreds of studies completed in the last two decades. The final chapter, supposedly a guide to help cult members' families and friends take action, amounts to a feeble Cult Information Centre "spot your cult-kid" check list and a whitewash of the discredited cult-rescue fanatics.

Where is the hard hitting analysis of common cult features, practices and ability to recruit? At first I was tempted to believe it had been sacrificed for the prurient attention paid to the well-worn and well-known cult scandal that may entertain a lay readership. Then like all good beliefs it came to me in a flash: irrespective of each cult's own unique and bizarre feature, Ritchie's examples and criticisms of how cults recruit and keep their members bears a remarkable similarity to the methods employed by the "good guys" — the Christians.

Rebecca joined and stayed with the perverse Children of God, because she believed that it was God's will. When first confronted with the task of "flirty fishing" (sex for potential perverts), she prayed all night and was told, by God no less, that Moses Berg's new revelation was a must for believers. Jane joined the Moonies, because she was bored, broke and wanted something to do, and found the initial hospitality and fellowship welcoming. She stayed because she was convinced that when you decide to do something for God, you always get opposition, and she knew where that comes from: Satan. Peter turned to the Hare Krishnas after failing his A-levels and having wasted his time dabbling in a range of different faiths in a desperate search to find meaning for life. Jon fell for the Scientologists' money-making training scams in a desperate search for "emotional equilibrium" after losing a girl-friend and seeking to achieve enlightenment. Julie felt marvellous and loved by all when she joined the Central London Church of Jesus. Don't people join the March for Jesus for similar reasons?

Likewise, the core complaints regarding the cults can be found in most Evangelical denominations. While you are unlikely to be asked to become a prostitute or a drug smuggler, most "respectable" faiths also

encourage blind obedience to their leadership and engage in moral blackmail; to doubt is to sin, to leave is to be damned.

Though I would rather take my chances with a House Church, than The Mind Development Institute, the fact remains that only the more salacious and scandalous activities of some cult leaders separates their version of religion from many in the "respectable" camp.

Freethinkers' knowledge of cults, and what makes them a greater threat than over-enthusiastic evangelicals, will not be served by this crypto-Christian account. I advise all serious students of cults to start with Beckford's classic *Cult Controversies*, and move on from there. Those who wish to understand the psychology of ALL religious belief can do no better than consult L. B. Brown's *The Psychology of Religious Belief*, published by Academic Press, and leave *The Secret World of Cults* to where it belongs — with the Christians who wish they had recruited cult victims first.

JOHN JOHNSTON

LETTERS

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

Mat Coward (Letters, July) describes Humanism and Rationalism as quasi-religions. But "religion" is generally recognised as a belief system incorporating a supernatural power, or powers, governing our universe. I admit to being an elderly person who chooses the designation "Rationalist", because this implies a view of life which rejects the irrational. (I was not raised to be either religious or anti-religious, but by parents who had little interest in the subject.)

Atheism, which is apparently Mat Coward's chosen label, is not in itself a safe shield against non-religious irrationalities such as astrology which he does not waste his time in opposing. But why is it a waste of time to challenge superstitious absurdities which obscure reality? Such fanciful notions — including the rag-bag of so-called New Ageism — must be opposed, not only because they are false but because they are a fruitful field for charlatans who prey on the gullible.

Most of all I take issue with Mat Coward's claim that "it is the theory and practice of organised religion that causes most of the evil on earth." Whilst it is true that organised religion has given, and continues to give, a theoretically "legitimate" outlet for the bigotry and cruel intolerance of mankind, no fair-minded non-believer can deny that very many altruistic persons express their positive instincts in the name of their religious faith.

Wildly exaggerated statements about religion do our cause no good and parallel the dogmatism of bigots who aver that all wickedness stems from unbelief. They also mirror the tunnel vision of political dogmatists who declare that "it is all rooted in economics." Nor can we forget that secular fanaticism is every bit as dire as the supernatural kind — for example, Hitler's nationalism and Stalin's ruthless manipulation of huge populations. Can anyone seriously believe that if religion had never been conceived in the mind of man all would be sweetness and light. A realistic view of humanity's darker aspects must take account of the evolutionary drive and subsequent complete social interactions which have made our species what it is.

JESSIE BOYD, Llanyravon, Cwmbran, Gwent

AN ANGLICAN VIEW OF HELL

I read your magazine always with interest, but often with exasperation and puzzlement too. The July leading article, "Holy Terrorism" is a case in point. From which church, for example, have "the large number of priests who have already left the church and theological colleges" actually departed? Certainly not from the Church of England, to which the three clergy you mention (John Hapgood, Don Cupitt and David Samuels) and I belong.

And how many Anglicans would today express themselves in the colourful, though outdated, imagery about Hell which you assert, no doubt correctly, to be still employed by Dr Samuels? For my own part I can only say that, with a wide experience of the Church and the world it serves, I have never met one personally, though clearly such does exist. For me, and I dare say most Christians, hell is however a reality, despite the fading of that fire-and-brimstone picture language.

Separation from God is a choice we all have the right to make — though I would say at our peril, having tasted a little of its reflection in human relationships. Separation from a loved one can be hell on earth; separation from the all loving God must be hell in Hell.

CANON JOHN HESTER, Chichester

HELL: A MAJORITY BELIEF

As is rightly pointed out in your editorial ("Holy Terrorism", July), the doctrine of Hell is one that is held today by the majority of Christians. The question of whether the flames are literal is surely irrelevant. That Hell in biblical terms is a place of judgement and of eternal regret is beyond dispute. That it is a place where all the embers of God's mercy are extinguished and all hope of being reconciled to God is lost, is perhaps the most alarming thought of all.

Contrary to popular caricature, Christians do not generally believe that unborn children and others who have diminished responsibilities are cast into outer darkness. Hell is a judgement for sins committed in the body, so they cannot be culpable. Fulgentius's belief, as quoted, is definitely a minority one.

The reason why Christians speak of Hell at all is only because the judgement of Hell is avoidable. Surely it is better to think about it now rather than when it is too late. Through the Mediator that God himself has provided, it is possible for sinful man to be reconciled to a holy God and begin a new life seeking to please him with fear of judgement removed.

The real reason why people reject the doctrine of Hell is that they refuse to accept that man is a fallen and depraved creature — a fact that is written across the face of history as well as the Bible.

S. J. NICHOLLS, Horsham, West Sussex

SURVIVAL OF THE GODS

Charles Ward ("A Confession of Ignorance", July) will continue to write in circles as long as he uses ideas like "discussions between highly intelligent people" in such a loose way.

It is obvious that the human species is highly irrational. Should Mr Ward have in mind discussions between highly qualified and knowledgeable people, and dealing with concrete achievements, he and they would get somewhere.

Because someone is a brilliant engineer or chemist, or has an exceptional memory, we are misguidedly inclined to expect that they are reliable in the abstract — including religious. Religion and semi-religions are abstract concepts, and the source of the most obvious examples of irrationality. There are hundreds more abstractions to generate controversy.

Our irrationality was essential for evolutionary survival. What if that enlarging brain began to think?

Surrounded by the complexities of nature, concepts of gods

would have come in the earliest efforts at communication; and the inherent irrationality has assured the survival of legions of gods ever since. It has also assured the many mental antics of the "highly intelligent", as well as of lesser mortals, that are to be found everywhere.

JIM LITTLE, Bristol

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Mr Charles Ward's defence of agnosticism (July *Freethinker*) has certainly caused me radically to rethink my position.

From the age of five to 61 I did not believe in him, but I now realise that this was on insufficient evidence. After all, the Arctic circle covers a pretty wide area and who would say categorically that there is not, somewhere in those icy wastes, a jolly, rubicund, beaming, white-bearded gentleman who is inclined to say "Ho, Ho" a lot and possesses a herd of reindeer.

ALAN DENT, Birmingham

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

I was sorry that Mike Howgate should blemish a well-deserved tribute to Beverly Halstead by a gratuitous insult directed towards the Bishop of Oxford. He wrote that Beverly "trounced" an "equivocal" Richard Harries.

The fact is, that Beverly and I agreed on a very great deal and it seems odd to describe this shared sense of truth as "equivocal". There is no conflict between a scientific account of evolution and a belief in God. Modern science is noticeably hospitable towards religious belief, particularly at its higher mathematical and physical levels. A good number of the ordinands I see have doctorates in science.

Reputable historians know that the original account of the encounter between Huxley and Wilberforce, my distinguished predecessor, was largely a myth spread thirty years later by Huxley. The real encounter was very different. It would be a pity if a similar myth was engendered about my debate with Beverly.

I utterly respect atheism and there are many major questions against the possibility of religious belief. But these have mainly to do with the problem of suffering and the moral acceptability of the kind of God the great religions put before us. There are enough real problems for religious belief without dragging science in.

THE RIGHT REVEREND RICHARD HARRIES, Bishop of Oxford

VARIED OPINIONS

Eric Stockton (Letters, July) distinguishes between "a humanist opinion", which inevitably derives from humanism, and "an opinion of a humanist", which is incidentally held by a humanist. I agree. He then decides that opinions about the Gulf War belong in the latter rather than the former category. I disagree. Humanism may not be a complete system of belief and behaviour, or "lifestyle" (as we agree), but it is surely broad enough to give rise to opinions about a major war. Thus the opinions about the Gulf War held by Harry Stopes-Roe and myself are not incidental to but derived from our humanism.

The problem is that "humanist opinions" about war and other important and central matters differ as much as "opinions of humanists" about less important or relevant matters. The fact is that such pluralism is an essential feature of humanism. The solution is to emphasise the specifically humanist aspects of such opinions, as the Humanist Peace Council did in its founding statement (February 1991), and to conduct the discussion in a way which is also derived from our humanism, as I have done at every stage.

Harry Stopes-Roe's letter (July) doesn't affect the two points about the Gulf War which were made in your News and Notes (April), questioned in his letter (May), and documented in my

letter (June) — that the war was not conducted according to the United Nations Charter, even if it may have been sanctioned by Security Council Resolution 678 (the fact that no war has been interesting but irrelevant), and that the war was opposed by the United Nations Association, even if they didn't call for an immediate cease-fire (I too have spoken to the UNA information officer).

The key point, however, is the place of the Humanist Peace Council in this context. I didn't misquote the letter in *Humanist News* (March) because I didn't quote it. I shall now do so: "The choice set before us by the formation of the Humanist Peace Council is between 'Peace now' and 'the United Nations now'." Since the HPC supports both peace and the United Nations, the letter presented a false choice between the UN and the HPC — as I said. Humanist opinions about the United Nations differ, too.
NICOLAS WALTER, Humanist Peace Council, London N1

HUMANIST VALUES

Harry Stopes-Roe (Letters, July) has not taken up the points made in my letter in the June issue. If anyone cannot make a case without being gratuitously offensive or divisive, then so much the worse for his case.

Dr Stopes-Roe seems to feel that he has the right to set the terms of the debate. It is not just a matter of who has got their facts right and who hasn't. First, facts involve interpretation; to quote J.R. Ravitz's *Scientific Knowledge and Its Social Problems* (Oxford University Press, 1971), "practical experience and history show that even the hardest facts are not quite impenetrable." Secondly, what value-judgements are being made, and are these values particularly humanist?
COLIN MILLS, Amersham

HEALTH WARNING: UNPROTECTED SEX AND PREJUDICE - POSITIVE

I have rarely seen a letter so teeming with nonsensical fallacies as E.F. Crosswell's (July).

"The love that dare not speak its name" is homosexual (i.e. same-sex) affection, whether or not and however physically expressed: the term does not refer specifically to sodomy. And sodomy can and often does have to do with love, and also with heterosexual activity — it is not a specifically homosexual practice. Where health risks are concerned, unprotected anal sex with a partner who is HIV-Positive is of course dangerous; so is unprotected vaginal sex. If E.F. Crosswell knows a better answer to the AIDS problem than "safer sex" in the present state of knowledge, perhaps he will tell us (and earn himself a fortune).

As for "understandable revulsion", there are plenty of things which arouse revulsion in me — understandably or otherwise. Although I am a gay man, I find anal sex physically and aesthetically unappealing; I also puke at spring onions, tobacco smoke and Dame Edna Everage. But I believe, as a rationalist and a democrat, that others have the right to indulge in these bizarre tastes so long as they do not involve unwilling others (including me); I don't require them to desist if they wish to be generally accepted in society.

If it's only because he is a pacifist that E.F. Crosswell sees no good reason for gay-bashing, I wonder how he copes with his barely repressed homophobic urges. Or maybe his letter was just a huge joke? I certainly hope so.
ANTONY GREY, London NW2

HITTING BACK AT HOMOPHOBIA

It seems inevitable that whenever an article on homosexual issues appears in Humanist periodicals, a "Humanist" homophobe comes crawling out of the woodwork.

This had happened within the last year or two in the Rationalist Press Association's *New Humanist* and the British Humanist

Association's *Humanist News*, as well as *The Freethinker*.

Ironically, Terry Sanderson, whose article "Not an Ealing Comedy" in the June issue prompted the unpleasant letter from E. F. Crosswell (July), was one of the speakers at a recent symposium on prejudice organised by the Birmingham Humanist Group. His subject was homophobia and he cited the tabloid press as a regular source of this irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals.

E. F. Crosswell's letter is typical of the sort of copy featured by the *Sun* and the *Daily Star* and his references to sodomy and AIDS would, I'm sure, be warmly applauded by the likes of Mrs Mary Whitehouse, Rev Ian Paisley of Save Ulster from Sodomy fame, and retired Chief Constable James Anderton, to name just a few of our best known Christian bigots who base their views of homosexual practices firmly on biblical texts.

Sadly, from my own experience over the past twelve years as a committee member of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA), E. F. Crosswell will probably also be applauded by a few other like-minded homophobes who have the effrontery to call themselves Humanists — and this despite the repeated publicly declared support for the homosexual lifecourse as well as homosexual legal and social equality on the part of both national and international Humanist organisations like the British Humanist Association, the Nation Secular Society and the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

There are those in the Humanist movement who claim to be unprejudiced but who have expressed doubts about the need for such an organisation as GALHA, one of whose aims is to further an awareness and understanding of homosexuality among Humanists. Reading such ignorant and irrational drivel as E. F. Crosswell's, can they still remain in doubt?
GEORGE BROADHEAD, Kenilworth, Warwickshire

EXPLOITING TOLERANCE

Gay apologists and sexual liberationists seem to have shifted the main purpose of the freethought organisations away from pointing out the absurdities and combating the harmful effects of religion. Time and again, in the presumed name of liberty, we are obliged to accept the exhortations of non-heterosexuals who use tolerant organisations to promote their particular life styles. This is an embarrassment to straight freethinkers who wish to further the main purpose of the movement, which is to free society from religious domination.

Over-scrupulous preoccupation with the protection of each and every wounded minority is proving to be the Achilles heel of secularism. It puts people off.

By all means maintain tolerance, but let us avoid promoting life styles which cannot become the norm in ongoing society. The majority will have the deciding voice in this matter.

D. REDHEAD, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear

THE ORKNEY CASE

Like John Broom, and unlike most readers, I am an Orkney resident of long standing and, like John, I am unhappy about your treatment of the Orkney Alleged Ritual Abuse affair. My guess was, and remains, that the parents are essentially innocent and that, consequently, I guess that the children have suffered "system abuse". In the absence of a clear outcome, those guesses remain just that — guesses.

It is rather more than guesswork that the children and their parents have likely suffered "media abuse". The publicity, often sensational and tendentious, surrounding the case must have had some effect upon the families in playground and pub alike.

We close public bystanders have seen more than a few local publicity seekers batten off this sorry affair.

John Broom (I surmise) and I have no time for the somewhat

Orwellian simplicity of "parent — good: social worker — bad" that seems to have crept even into Freethought.
ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

GOD'S TOOTHLESS PIT BULL

Is God or Darwinian evolution responsible for the dreaded pit bull terrier? Readers of an article in the July issue of *Evangelicals Now*, "Pit Bull Terriers a 'Darwinian Nightmare'", might well be confused. The author, David Tyler, is secretary of the Biblical Creation Society, so we might expect a thorough-going defence of God as the culprit. But while Tyler wants a peg to hang his anti-Darwinism on, he also feels obliged to defend God from being placed in the dock as the breeder of killer dogs.

The answer is, of course, to have it both ways. Tyler must follow the creationist dogma that all domestic dogs and their wild relatives "belong to a single *created* kind." But he adds a rider of his own: "We also recognise that, in the case of domestic dogs, some of the breeds carry mutant genes and exhibit characteristics which go beyond the limits of *created variability*."

A case of dog breeders outdoing God, maybe.
MIKE HOWGATE, London N21

NOT THAT SCEPTICAL

In the second paragraph of my piece on Anthony Burgess (July) I referred to "the Platonic Socrates' pathetic 'proofs' of life after and indeed before death..." It should have read "life after death, and indeed before life..."

Even my scepticism doesn't extend to denying life before death.

COLIN McCALL, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire

Freethinker Fund

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When a Muslim gentleman pops out to strain the greens he must point Percy in a westerly direction. So councillor Khali Ahmed, a Labour member of Bristol City Council, wants public lavatories designed so that Muslims do not face Mecca when they spend a penny. "It's considered disrespectful for them to do so when they go to the toilet", he says.

A Bill for the

On 20 May 1991, Tony Benn, MP, published his Commonwealth of Britain Bill. In the present reactionary British

political climate it has no chance of getting onto the Statute of Book(s). Even most of the Opposition Members will be hostile because the Labour Whips are trying to enforce a policy of avoiding controversial issues until after the next General Election, to avoid jeopardising the Party's lead in the opinion polls. (That is why Labour MPs have been told not to support the move by Liberal Democrats and some Tories to make the Royal Family pay Income Tax.) The Bill is nonetheless important as a basic blueprint and discussion document, illustrating how this feudal and theocratic country can legally be transformed into a secular republic. To this end, Benn has stated that he welcomes suggestions for improvements, so he can prepare a second Bill which he intends to present to Parliament after the next General Election.

Copies of the Bill are obtainable from Her Majesty's Stationery Office (price £4). Basically it proposes that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland be transformed into a federal, secular Commonwealth of Britain consisting only of England, Scotland and Wales. (Northern Ireland would cease to be part of the country.) The title "Commonwealth" is an interesting reversion to the official designation of this country before the Restoration of 1660. It was then called "The Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland," the word "Commonwealth" being an English translation of "Republic" necessitated by the abolition in 1649 of all Latin legal terms. (They were readopted after the Restoration.) The dropping of the designation "Great" would cause confusion to Francophones, as the country's new name in their language (Bretagne) would be the same as that of Brittany.

The House of Lords would be replaced by an elected House of the People in which half of the seats are to be reserved for women. The Monarch (but not the Prime Minister) would be replaced by a President, elected by a two-thirds majority of both Houses of Parliament jointly. He or she would serve for a three year term of office, renewable only once. The Bill abolishes the Privy Council, personal titles of rank and State honours.

In addition there would be three National Parliaments, one each for England, Scotland and Wales. They would be empowered to legislate on all matters except defence, foreign affairs and Commonwealth finance. However, if any of their enactments on other matters conflicted with laws passed by the Commonwealth Parliament, the latter would prevail. A person would become eligible to vote in Parliamentary elections at the age of sixteen. The constitution could only be changed by both Houses

Common Weal TED GOODMAN

of the Commonwealth Parliament, followed by a referendum.

The Church of England would be disestablished, but not the Church of Scotland. The Bill also abolishes the crime of blasphemy. There would be an entrenched Charter of Rights, the observance of which would be monitored by a Commissioner for Human Rights responsible to the Commonwealth Parliament. In addition there would be a National Legal Service providing free representation in Court to enforce these rights. Magistrates and County Court judges would be directly elected, while High Court Judges would be appointed by the President subject to the approval of a Select Committee of the House of Commons. All judges would have to retire at the age of sixty.

The present closed nature of British society would also be reformed. The period of thirty years, during which official documents are restricted under the Public Records Act 1958, would be reduced to four. In addition the wide-ranging Official Secrets Acts are repealed and replaced by a new criminal offence of disclosing narrowly defined "protected information". The security services are made accountable to Parliament.

The Bill is an admirable first draft. The most glaring omission is the failure to disestablish the Church of Scotland. The most dangerous and unnecessary provision is that for separate English, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. It is a recipe for conflict between them and the Commonwealth legislature. It is only desired by the small minority of voters in Scotland and Wales who vote for Nationalist Parties. As for a separate Parliament for England, this is duplication which no one has heretofore requested.

Sikh Murder Plot

Gursharn Sarkiria was jailed at the Old Bailey for her part in a plot to assassinate the secretary of a Sikh temple. She also pleaded guilty to possession of explosives. Two men, Suptal Binjie and Parmjit Sidhu, were sent to prison for ten and eleven years respectively for their part in the plot.

The three defendants contacted two men and offered them £100,000 to kill six people. But the "hitmen" were in fact undercover policemen.

Mr Justice Wright said that the accused planned to murder the temple secretary, Beant Singh, because of his views. Sikhs in Britain were involved in the campaign for Khalistan, a separate Sikh State. This campaign included acts of extreme violence. Last year Mahraj Das, a religious leader opposed to separatism, was murdered at a prayer meeting in Southall, Middlesex.

EVENTS

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists. Waverly Day Centre, 65 Waverly Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 16 September, 7.30 p.m. for 7.45 p.m. Annual General Meeting.

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.

Humanist Holidays. Cambridge, Tuesday, 24 December until Saturday, 27 December. Information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 239175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Saturday, 12 October, 2 p.m. Michael Newman: Blasphemy is Good for You.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 September, 8 p.m. Barbara Smoker: To Hell With God.

London Student Skeptics. Please send stamped addressed envelope for autumn programme to Mike Howgate, 71 Hoppers Road, London N21 3LP. Meetings at University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1.

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, 11 September, 7.45 p.m. for 8 p.m. George Mephram: Why Humanists Should be Concerned About Animal Rights.

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

Freethinker readers looking for reasonably priced holiday accommodation should note that there are still vacancies at Leicester Secular Society's holiday chalet in Mabelthorpe. Full details are obtainable from Rupert Halfhide, telephone Leicester 813671.

C of E's Faith in the Stock Exchange

Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough.
Isaiah, Ch 57 v 11

The Church of England reports, *Faith in the City* (1985) and *Faith in the Countryside* (1990) attracted much praise as responsible and sensitive documents. But it would seem that their proposals have had little influence on the Church Commissioners and some senior churchmen. Cases of decisions taken on purely commercial grounds, with little or no thought about the consequences for individuals and the community, are frequently cited. Two more examples have been in the news.

Small businesses in the Surrey town of Redhill are in serious danger of going under because of exorbitant and ever-increasing rents imposed by landlords. One shopkeeper said that if rent increases continue, the High Street will become a graveyard.

Another trader told how suppliers were holding down prices in order to help retailers over a very difficult period of economic hardship. But the landlords are not so considerate.

"The rents are doubled every five years, even if our revenue doesn't double in that time", he said

"The landlords want to introduce a three-year rent plan so the rents will go up more frequently. They're getting greedier and greedier."

June Halliwell, secretary of the Reigate, Redhill and District Chamber of Commerce, said: "It will be very serious for Redhill if the greed of some landlords drives the small shops out of business. It tends to be these shops which provide variety and attract customers to the town."

The greedy landlords of Redhill are the Church Commissioners.

Further west the sixty parishioners of Buckland, Herefordshire, are in danger of losing access to the village's most important and valuable amenity. A Grade One listed building, which has served as rectory for 600 years, has a mediaeval Great Hall. It has been unoccupied since 1987, but when the Landmark Trust, an architectural conservation charity, tried to acquire it for £375,000 last year, the offer was turned down by the diocese.

The building has been put on the open market with an asking price of £400,000. The Landmark Trust has asked for more time to raise the extra money. It plans to furnish the rectory in the appropriate style and rent it out for holidays. But the Great Hall would still be available for parish events. However, the Bishop of Gloucester is

adamant; tenders must be submitted by next month.

Parishioners fear they will be denied access to the rectory if speculators move in. A spokesman for the diocese dismissed their views as "sentimental nonsense".

Michael Birt, a sidesman at Buckland Church, says that even Grade One listed status "may not deter the ruthless and the greedy." But as far as the diocesan money-grabbers are concerned, Buckland Rectory can go to a City of London financier or a Middle East oil sheik.

Sunday Shops: "Sensible Legal Framework" Call

"The law on Sunday trading is now in a chaotic mess. It is an unhealthy state of affairs if the law becomes unenforceable, falls into disrepute or diverges from changing public attitudes." That is the view of Michael Hirst, president of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Association, prospective parliamentary candidate and an Elder of his church.

Writing in the current issue of the Shopping Hours Reform Council's newspaper, Mr Hirst says it is increasingly clear that the only solution is Government legislation to repeal the 1950 Shops Act. There should be a sensible legal framework for commercial activity which reflects changes in public attitudes and expectations.

But any hint of Government action would generate "sackloads of mail to legislators threatening the withdrawal of electoral support if a Member votes for a measure to repeal the 1950 Act . . .

"Some opponents of change in the law often portray the issue as being a choice between Sunday observance or an extension of commercial life, as though the two were mutually exclusive. They are not, and never have been . . .

"Scots have lived with Sunday trading for years and there is no authoritative evidence that commercial activity on a Sunday has a detrimental effect upon church attendance or Sunday observance, both of which should be a matter of personal choice."

While organisations like the Keep Sunday Special Campaign frantically endeavour to hold off reform, vast sums of taxpayers' money and many hours of court time have been wasted because local councils have been pressurised into seeking injunctions against Sunday traders. One example is that of Kirklees Council which was landed with a bill for £250,000 when it lost a legal battle with a major retailer of builders' supplies.

Bookmakers William Hill have taken a £60 bet at a thousand to one on Jesus Christ returning to earth this year.