

# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 111 No. 9

SEPTEMBER 1991

40p



## RELIGIOUS CON ARTISTS INVOLVED IN FINANCIAL SCANDALS

Financial rather than sexual shenanigans have been a major factor in recent scandals involving religious individuals and institutions. Small investors and business people who have put their faith in and money with the godly are paying a heavy price.

Members of an ultra-Orthodox and insular Jewish sect in Golders Green have lost vast sums, running into millions of pounds, which they had entrusted to David Rubin, the "scrupulously religious" son of their Rabbi. The Sassow community is reported to be "outraged" by the collapse of Mr Rubin's company, Benzion & Solomon Freshwater. Investigation of the company's affairs is extremely difficult because of the victims' reluctance to discuss the matter. Investment regulatory authorities have been unable to establish the exact nature of Mr Rubin's business, but it is known that he insisted on a minimum investment of £300,000 by his clients.

One investigator declared: "We are hampered by the fact that no-one is prepared to talk about it. It is extremely hard to get information because it is such a closely-guarded community."

A Scotland Yard spokesman said: "We have no power to start an investigation unless there is a complainant who can furnish us with details of alleged fraudulent activities."

The Sassow congregation, of which David Rubin was a prominent and extremely pious member, are descendants of a sect that was established in Poland 400 years ago. There are groups in Antwerp, New York and Israel. The London congregation is noted for its strict orthodoxy and secretiveness.

Lincoln Basoo, a Jehovah's Witness and top investment salesman, has been found guilty at Southwark Crown Court of defrauding investors of £99,000. Although he legitimately earned more than £100,000 in commission over an 18-month period, his crooked

dealings left some clients considerably out of pocket.

The chairman of an office flooring company was persuaded to invest £9,000 in an airline. Promised repayment plus substantial interest within three days, his money and Basoo disappeared.

A Walthamstow woman who runs two glass companies did not "see through" Basoo. She entrusted him with £65,000 to be invested in "Pegasus Airlines".

Terry Davies, a self-employed chauffeur, put £25,000 in to a London Docklands scheme promoted by Basoo. Together with another investor, he caught up with him at a Jehovah's Witness meeting in the Paddington district of London. Basoo agreed to meet them the next day. But when confronted by a television interviewer and invited to explain his dealings, he cleared off. Basoo was driving a mini-cab when the police caught up with him five months later.

A former member of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International's regional inspection department in the United Kingdom has publicly declared that religion was used to hoodwink and retain the loyalty of staff.

Vivian Ambrose, who joined the bank in 1977, said its executives "emphasised the bank's commitment to the Islamic religion to create blind faith among their overwhelmingly Muslim staff."

Speaking on BBC Radio 4, Mr Ambrose said that religious enthusiasm was fostered in various ways by the bank. Staff members were required to complete a form on which the first question was: "Do I serve a particular master, and if so, who is my master?" The correct answer was "God, the Almighty." On Fridays and Islamic holy days, employees were expected to visit a room on the bank premises where prayer mats were provided.

"Everything was geared to the fact that by far the biggest majority of the bank's staff and customers were

(continued on back page)

# THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: William McIlroy

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

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

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

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

## ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

Printed by Bristows Printers, London.

# NEWS

## CAPTIVE AUDIENCE FOR THE CHAPLAIN

"Over the last 16 years many sick patients in Dulwich Hospital have been comforted by listening to their favourite hymns, like *Onward Christian Soldiers*, transmitted by their own radio station", trilled a recent *Daily Mail* editorial. But the *Mail* was very cross because of a decision to stop playing hymns on the hospital broadcasting system after protests had been received from other sick patients, "most of them unbelievers". Station manager Vic Short confirmed that he had been "inundated with complaints".

No doubt some patients do derive comfort from listening to hymns, although it is unlikely that many of them would cross a church door to do so. But it is obvious that at least an equal number are annoyed and irritated by them. One favourite, apparently, was *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, although it would hardly be appreciated by patients afflicted by things dark and ugly, like malignant tumours.

Hospitals are popular places for the dissemination of religious propaganda. Chaplains and freebooting evangelists usually enter wards without so much as a by-your-leave. Mgr Joseph Phelan, a Roman Catholic chaplain in Nottingham, put it very well in the weekly *Universe* when he wrote: "Many are a captive audience for the chaplain... What other place or secular foundation provides the chaplain with so much opportunity of sharing in its widest sense, the Good News of the Gospel?" And, he could have added, being paid out of the public purse at a time when staff and facilities have been greatly reduced through financial restrictions.

Mgr Phelan's article is one in a series dedicated to the Decade of Evangelisation. He wrote it to stimulate "discussion and debate amongst priests and people so the call to evangelisation may be heard and witnessed more effectively in every ward and hospital department." This is the general knee-jerk reaction by Christians unable to halt the decline in church attendance and religious commitment. They can no longer "compel them to come in", so exploit every opportunity to inflict their superstitious beliefs on captive audiences in the classroom, institution and hospital.

More serious, though, is his strong hint that the clergy should dabble in matters outside the "spiritual" domain. After a reference to "the secular humanist approach to abortion, euthanasia, embryo experimentation", he writes: "I am certain that high up on the criteria for

## AND NOTES

assessing the spiritual health of the nation must be the position it takes on medical ethical issues. . . The almost unlimited opportunities that our nursing and medical schools have for propounding secular humanism, must somehow be challenged if we are really going to take to heart the Holy Father's call to evangelisation." Being unaware that nursing and medical schools propound secular humanism, we thank Mgr Phelan for the enlightenment.

Of course he made no reference to the fact that in addition to an army of chaplains, there are active Christian groups — many of a decidedly fundamentalist bent — in almost every nursing and medical school and hospital. Patients seeking advice on abortion, sterilisation or contraception could not be certain of receiving sympathetic and realistic advice from such quarters.

Unbelievers who become hospital patients can also make their mark during the Decade of Evangelisation. They should refuse to be classed on admission forms as being C of E, Methodist or Muggletonian. They should politely decline unwanted visits or mini-sermons by chaplains or evangelists. And certainly they should protest if the ward is turned into a part-time church by the holding of religious services.

## "THE BIBLE SAYS. . ."

*In my name. . . They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.*

St Mark, Ch16 vs17-18

Jimmy Ray Williams, whose family fought a State ban on snake handling at religious services, has died after being bitten by a black timber rattler. Williams, of Hot Springs, North Carolina, was handling the snake during a service at the House of Power in Jesus' Name.

In 1973 his father and future stepfather's brother died after drinking poison at a church service.

Cathy Hancock, a Liverpool City Councillor, has criticised anti-abortionists who demonstrate outside Merseyside Nursing Home every week. She said they added to the patients' trauma and upset by harassing and intimidating them as they entered the building. LIFE spokesman Tony Green commented: "Catholics and other Christians say prayers and counsel pregnant women."

Scotsman Tom Watson was prevented by guards from entering St Peter's Basilica in Rome because he was "improperly dressed for a man". Instead of trousers, he was wearing a kilt.

"I could not believe my ears when the guards said I was improperly dressed", declared the exceedingly annoyed Mr Watson. And Fr John McIntyre, Scotland's official contact with the Vatican, has sent a strong protest and asking why a person should be turned away because he was wearing his national dress.

However, not all good Catholics share Mr Watson's indignation. Writing in the *Catholic Herald*, a London reader, Margaret White, asks: "Is it so much of a sacrifice, in deference to local custom, for a Scotsman to choose to put on a pair of trousers when visiting St Peter's if a man wearing a skirt is likely to be an object of curiosity?"

Perhaps Margaret White should be asked if she has ever seen an assembly of church dignitaries in Rome. If so, she will have noted that it looks like a reunion of superannuated drag queens, all frills and flounces, lace-trimmed capes, skirts to their ankles, but not a pair of trousers between them.

Very curious.

## FROM CHURCH TO CLINIC

The number of Irish women who came to England for an abortion during 1990 increased by 324 on the previous year's figure to 4,063. A survey carried out by Colin Francome of the Middlesex Polytechnic revealed that a third of the women questioned had attended church the previous week. An even higher proportion had attended during the previous month.

"It seems they were in church one Sunday, had a abortion during the week, and were back in church the following Sunday", Dr Francome commented.

Two hundred women participated in the Survey; 143 were single, 43 were married and 14 did not answer the question. An indication of the quality of family life in Catholic Ireland is reflected in the fact that of the 143 single women, only 16 had told their mothers they were pregnant.

A spokeswoman for the anti-abortion SPUC organisation said it would offer counselling to women with unwanted pregnancies. But as SPUC is Catholic-dominated pressure group, it is easy to ascertain the nature of such counselling.

Des McDonald, representative of Family Solidarity, another anti-abortion group, said women should not be getting information on how to obtain an abortion.

## JUSTIFIED SUSPICION

The recent call by Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate Ronald Bartle for the abolition of oath taking (see July *Freethinker*) is welcome, of course. One reason he advanced in support of reform is the danger that atheists and agnostics "may take an oath because they feel it will lend greater credibility to their evidence than an affirmation. The idea may well exist in the minds of some people that magistrates and judges are establishment figures and therefore take a more benign view of a witness who swears an oath as opposed to one who affirms. This absurd view has doubtless been encouraged by those who in recent years have been engaged in a spiteful and wholly misconceived campaign to denigrate the judiciary and magistracy of this country."

Such ideas may well lurk in suspicious minds, particularly after reading Ludovic Kennedy, David Yallop — and Ronald Bartle. The latter's book, *The Law and the Lawless*, comes from a religious publishing house. In it the reader will discover that "the Christian position must surely be that in combating crime and maintaining public order, the police are doing the work of God." Others may take the view that the police are doing the work that they are paid to do by the taxpayer.

Furthermore, an atheist or agnostic may come to the "absurd view" that he would not be treated on an equal footing with religious believers in a court presided over by a Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate who declares: "All authority, the Scriptures tell us, is from God, and I am in a position of trust to exercise it justly."

## Freethinker Fund

We thank all contributors to the Fund, including those listed below. Their generosity enables *The Freethinker* to play its part in the struggle against religious intolerance and privilege.

L. E. Meszaros, £1.40; M. A. Betts, E. Douglas, C. Jones, F. Walker and J. M. Woodman, £2 each; R. Bell, D. A. Hartley, O. Proctor and G. Williams, £3 each; Anonymous, £4.20; F. Hiorth, £4.40; R. Billen, R. Chadwick, M. Davies, H. N. Feather, G. J. H. Forest, A. Glaiser, R. J. E. Goldsmith, M. D. Hallet, K. Hudson, W. Irvine, A. T. Lambert, C. J. MacDonald, M. Mason, A. Negus, P. Payne, R. H. Pierce, C. I. Ward, S. M. Williams and R. G. Wood, £5 each; D. S. Austin, £5.20; V. D. Brierley, M. Pinkske and O. Thompson, £10 each; Anonymous, £35.

Total for July: £197.40

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**A decline in the number of vocations has forced the Sacred Heart Fathers to close St Bede's House, Gateshead.**

## BRIGHTON FOR FREETHINKERS

Last month the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group commenced a new programme of meetings at a new venue (see Events column, page 143). Formed in 1958 on the initiative of D. L. Hobman, author of *Go Spin You Jade: Studies in the Emancipation of Women* and a biography of Olive Schreiner (both published by Watts), the Group is well known in the Sussex resort through public activity and participation in community life. It continues a tradition of organised freethought in Brighton that goes back for more than a century. There was an active branch of the National Secular Society in the early 1880s; Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* was sold by several newsagents in the 1870s; freethinkers played a key role in the town's Co-operative movement and workers' organisations.

Brighton's reputation as a rendezvous for Mr and Mrs Smith's "dirty weekend", Kiss me Quick hats, naughty postcards and general sauciness, has long caused the pious to look down their disapproving noses at the town. Brighton has seen many a furore over Sunday observance. A sabbatarian hornets' nest was stirred up by freethinker Sir Rowland Hill, who, as chairman of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway, introduced Sunday excursions. The enormity of cheap Sunday travel, encouraging debauched pleasure-seekers to escape for a few hours from London's deleterious slums, horrified defenders of "our Lord and his (gloomy) Day". When 23 people were killed in the Clayton Tunnel crash on a Sunday in August 1851, the disaster was proclaimed by some of the godly, including Brighton clergy, to be an expression of divine disapproval of Sunday excursions.

Sir Rowland's sojourn in Brighton is commemorated by a plaque on his residence, number 11 Hanover Crescent. Other freethinkers who lived in the town include Grant Allen, a master at Brighton College and author of many works including *The Evolution of the Idea of God*. George Jacob Holyoake spent the last 27 years of his life at Eastern Lodge, Camelford Street; further along the seafront, Herbert Spencer lived and died at number 5 Percival Terrace. Adrian Brunel, pioneer film maker and world authority on Thomas Paine, lived in Brighton; also Peter Kropotkin, Ernestine Rose, Eleanor Marx and Henry Salt.

Fortunately, many of these eminent freethinkers are commemorated and their achievements recorded. But the spirit of freethought was kept alive by dedicated and unknown Brightonians who lived in the streets and terraces of "old Ocean's Bauble".

*Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Honorary Secretary: Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone (0273) 733215.*

# Last Exit to Brookwood

JOHN CLARKE

Between November 1854 and April 1941 funeral trains from central London served Brookwood Cemetery, in Surrey. The scheme began as a bid to solve the problem of London's overcrowded churchyards, and ended during one of the worst nights of the blitz.

The service was operated by the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company in conjunction with the London and South Western Railway and subsequently the Southern Railway. Nearly every day at about 11.45 am, the Necropolis Train left the private terminus just outside Waterloo Station, proceeded down the main line, and ran into Brookwood Cemetery to call at the two cemetery stations.

These stations reflected Victorian religious propriety: North Station was for Nonconformists, Roman Catholics, Jews, Parsees and other Dissenters; South Station, the terminus of the cemetery railway, was reserved for members of the Established Church.

Such religious niceties extended to the funeral train, for it was usually divided into two religious sections, each with its own carriages and hearses. One part was for Nonconformists' funeral parties, the other for Anglicans.

The coaches were no different from the ordinary passenger carriages used on the railway, but they were reserved for use by the Necropolis Company. The hearse vans were windowless and contained a series of "compartments" into which the coffins were secured

for the journey to Brookwood.

Special tickets were issued for the living and the dead. Mourners' tickets were usually endorsed "Available by Necropolis Train only", and were issued in three classes. Coffin tickets — singles of course! — were also available in three classes, although it seems unlikely that the dead perceived any benefit from travelling First, as opposed to Second or Third. (Incidentally, when the LSWR abolished Second Class travel in 1918, the Necropolis Company continued to offer three classes of tickets for coffins, a privilege now denied to the living.)

The fares were never revised until 1939, by which time the Necropolis Train had become the bargain way to travel to the outer suburbs. London golfers, disguised as mourners, used to travel via Necropolis Train to save money on their fares when playing on one of Woking's golf links.

Although the Necropolis service was not unique, it was the longest-running railway funeral service anywhere in the world. During its 87 years' existence, many thousands of Londoners (including Charles Bradlaugh) were carried to their final resting place by this train.

*John Clarke's book, The Brookwood Necropolis Railway, was published in 1988. It is obtainable from the author, 44 Marston Road, Crookes, Sheffield S10 1HG, price £4.95 plus 30p postage.*

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## Gulls Deluded by Mary's "Business Advice"

When the Virgin Mary makes an earthly appearance she gears her message to her audience. Unsophisticated Peasant visionaries, usually young girls, are implored to pray constantly, obey the priest and dedicate their lives to God. But when the Virgin touched down at a wealthy family's private chapel on the Avenue Victor Hugo in Paris, she imparted advice of a less spiritual nature.

As Bassam Assaf, employed as a valet by Michel Merhej's family who are Syrian Christians, was praying in their chapel, he beheld a vision of the Virgin Mary who poured scented sacred oil on his hands. His employers were overwhelmed by the news and believed it to be a sign that their affairs would flourish. Soon Assaf was being feted and acclaimed by Virgin Mary fans all over France.

During subsequent appearances the Virgin gave Assaf advice on business matters which he passed on to his employers. Her thoughtful suggestion that they should reward him for acting as middle man in their dealings

with the celestial tipster was also passed on.

Over a three-year period the Merhej family gave Assaf huge sums of money together with property and a sport car. No longer working as their valet, he spent all day in the chapel praying and receiving business guidance from the Virgin Mary. But he was collecting so much "commission" from his gullible Christian employers that they were nearly bankrupted. They eventually came to their senses and asked the police to investigate Assaf's claims. He confessed that the vision story was eyewash.

And the sacred fluid which the Virgin Mary poured on his hands? In fact it was olive oil he concealed up his sleeve in a wad of cotton wool.

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**Great Advances of Our Time: Feminists in Oxford have forced the owner of a cake shop to change the name of Gingerbread Men biscuits to Gingerbread People biscuits.**

# Joanna's Box of Tricks

R. J. CONDON

When Britain was really a Christian country, mental abnormality, as we might expect, sometimes took the form of messianism, the claim to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ or his mother, or a messenger from him. Usually the sufferers got no further than the asylum, but over the centuries a small number of them managed to make disciples and cause the authorities no little trouble. Few these days will have heard of the Quaker Christ, James Nayler, or of God Almighty's Nephew, Richard Brothers. Even the comparatively recent Reverend John Smyth-Pigott, who announced his Christhood in 1902 and was later unfrocked for immorality, is all but forgotten now.

But everyone knows about Joanna Southcott, or at least most people have read that she left a box of sealed writings which may only be opened by 24 bishops, and that until they do so "Crime and banditry, distress of nations and perplexity" will continue to increase. For many decades this message — the wording has varied but little — has appeared as a newspaper advertisement. It concludes with quotations from Revelation and an invitation to write to the Panacea Society.

Those who respond receive a wad of leaflets, some about Joanna Southcott and others detailing the curious beliefs and practices of the Society. Joanna, we learn, was a Devonshire woman born in 1750 who began to hear a "still small voice" at the age of 42. She recorded every word she heard, in 65 publications and many unpublished works. Certain of her writings were divinely ordered to be sealed up and placed in an ark or box, to be opened only in a time of national danger. This ark is the one mentioned in Revelation, and the 24 bishops who must open it are the "elders" referred to therein.

At least four such boxes have already been opened, though not with the required number of bishops, and found to contain nothing of consequence. In 1927, the last occasion, the Archbishop of Canterbury was petitioned but declined to act. A kindly suffragan offered to put the Southcottians out of their misery and attend the opening. The box contained no divine message but merely a horse-pistol, a lottery ticket, one earring, a dice-box, a child's night-cap and a novel entitled *The Surprises of Love or An Adventure in Greenwich Park*. The wrong box, says the Society — or perhaps the wrong number of bishops.

The Panacea Society believes in a literal Adam created 6,000 years ago, whose descendants have souls which return to Heaven at death. There were men before that, of course, but they had no souls and neither have their descendants, the Bolsheviks and Communists. A third class of humans have immortal bodies and will live for ever when Jesus Christ establishes his kingdom

here in England. "Few people understand that", the Society adds unnecessarily.

Why the Panacea Society? Another leaflet tells us. Their chief public activity is sharing with others their specific healing method "by Water and the Spirit". There is nothing to pay and you don't even have to be a believer. Just send your list of complaints in as few words as possible. The Water is to be added to your doctor's medicine. It is not stated if it has ever been tried on its own. It gives "slow but sure deliverance" from nerves, consumption, epilepsy, paralysis, rheumatism, eye, ear and throat troubles, mental anxiety, business worries, faults of disposition and the tribulations and perplexity that will precede the Lord's coming. Not credulity, unfortunately. Keep the leaflet carefully, it says, for you never know when you might need the Society's address.

For a near-illiterate, Joanna was an incredibly prolific writer, and her manuscripts still surface occasionally. As recently as 1970 a bunch turned up on the Isle of Wight. They included prophecies — she foretold "earthquacks" — and a story about a "great snake serpent" which "attact" a ship's crew and was eventually disposed of by "choping of his head" (her spelling was odd, to say the least).

Dire events she had foretold all came to pass, according to her. This she could safely claim, for many of her prophesies were written in a scrawl that only she could decipher. "This must be so", she said. "Every vision that John saw in Heaven must take place on earth. Here is the sealed book that no-one can read!"

Joanna's father was a small and unsuccessful farmer who had delusions of grandeur which were reflected in his daughter. At first poverty forced her to take menial jobs such as domestic service. Later she worked as a shop assistant. One day when sweeping the shop she found a seal bearing the initials IC, to which she gave the obvious interpretation. This seal was stamped on most of her writings, which when published attracted much ridicule but also a large following. Money and presents were showered on her, and no fewer than 14,000 paid up to a guinea each for sealed papers bearing the IC device and the written assurance that the purchasers were "The sealed of the Lord, the Elect precious". These seals were sought after by the dying, to be buried with them that they might "claim the promise" at the Resurrection. It was intended that the number sealed would eventually reach the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation. They could well have done so, but when a woman member of the Elect was executed for murder a storm broke about the head of the prophetess and personal sealing had to cease.

The storm intensified when Joanna announced, at the age of 64 and a virgin, that she was to bear a divine child, the Shiloh whose advent was promised in Genesis. She had already claimed to be the woman in Revelation "arrayed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars". Now it was time for her to bring forth "a man child who was to rule all nations". She allowed herself to be examined by eight doctors, five of whom agreed she was pregnant. Her ecstatic followers ordered an expensive cradle, which was put on show in its maker's shop window. The presents — now for Shiloh — became a deluge.

A doctor who had not been taken in warned Joanna that she was dying. Just before the end she realised that her whole career as a prophetess had been one of delusion, and said so, but her followers refused to believe it. An autopsy showed no child, of course, but the Southcottians were not downhearted. The child had been born, they said, and immediately caught up to God as Revelation said it would be. This is still a belief of the Panacea Society.

At the height of her fame, Joanna Southcott's sect had three churches in London and several in the provinces. Her followers numbered not a few clergy. What keeps interest alive is the mass of her scribblings yet to be published, stacked away in the sealed box. It was left in the custody of a Church of England minister and passed on from one clergyman to another until, early in this century, a group of Southcottians founded an organisation with the aim of guarding the box until the conditions for its opening laid down by Joanna are fulfilled.

The Panacea Society is wealthy and a registered charity. Many years ago it bought property in Bedford which not only produces income but has greatly increased in value. So the Society can afford its expensive advertisement. But it won't be appearing much longer. The Millenium will definitely arrive in the year 2,000 or even earlier, since the Bible says the days will be foreshortened. It will be like parting with a very old friend.

## The Chosen Phew

CHARLES WARD

Scanning the magazine's column of forthcoming events, a lecture notice caught my eye. An intriguing title. . . "The Psychology of Religious Relief". Since I have some knowledge of this subject, may I share a few ideas with those who, like myself, were unable to attend and hear what must have been a most interesting address.

Psychology, as is hardly necessary to explain, is a scientific study of behaviour and what lies behind it. Well, there are some who think it may not be all that scientific but, as Grandma says in the TV advertisement, "if you've got an ology you're a scientist", so let's leave it at that.

The behaviour of religious people may certainly give rise to a sense of relief. One could be the reflection, "Thank God I am not like that!" — a trifle Pharisaical perhaps. Moreover, if it were expressed by an unbeliever, gratitude to a deity could be considered surplus to requirements.

However, I surmise that the lecturer, in choosing his topic, had in mind the relief which religious people are eager to get — by means of the so-called consolations of religion. Only, that is, as a starting point, for the preamble to the heavenly insurance policy is what grabs the attention. . . the large and decorative print which tells the holder that he or she is okay with God and has an endowment with bonuses to come at an unspecified

future date.

Turning to the smaller print I should enumerate the main provisions as follows:

(1) Relief from having to decide all sorts of troublesome day to day details such as what food to eat and what to avoid (and sometimes also how to prepare food), how to wash in a satisfactory manner, how to do one's hair, or do without any, what clothes or headgear to wear, and when, on what occasions to look this way or that, where and how to do exercises (spiritual ones mainly, though various body movements and postures may also be required), what beneficial books to read or memorabilia to recite or hear, which worthy causes to support, whom to favour, whom to oppose, and much besides.

(2) Relief from having to endure and learn how to deal with perfectly natural but uncomfortable or distressful feelings like doubt, uncertainty, shame and guilt, one's stupidities and blunders, being lonely and unloved, fear of life and fear of death. God-pills can take away such unpleasant symptoms, even if leaving the cause of the trouble untouched.

Faith is inflated with euphoria to make it seem huge knowledge, sin is projected on a scapegoat so that the sinner may think to have escaped its consequences,

*(continued on page 140)*

During the early part of the nineteenth century many of those involved in the Chartist and other radical movements formed local freethought groups. They were organisationally weak and their activities fragmented until under Charles Bradlaugh's leadership the National Secular Society was set up in September 1866. In this 125th anniversary article, David Tribe, president of the NSS during its most productive post-war years, considers the society's achievements and its aims that are yet to be realised.

In 1966 I suggested the BBC do a centenary programme on the National Secular Society. At that time the corporation rivalled Old Nick as the "father of lies" and replied, in effect, "yes, well, great idea, thanks for bringing it to our attention, but centenaries are old-hat and we're discontinuing them". As there had been rather a glut of such programmes in 1965-66 this was an arguable proposition — except that, of course, they continued unabated and even extended to 85th birthday tributes to trendy writers.

This year is the society's 125th anniversary, and while the BBC may remain silent *The Freethinker* (itself 110 years old) deems it worth recording.

Not only is the NSS one of the oldest freethought organisations in the world, it's probably unique in having retained its original name and principles, though its immediate practical objects are, of course, constantly evolving.

Some years ago it was put to me that the society (and also *The Freethinker*) should "update" itself by changing its name. I replied that if anyone could think of a better name for an organisation that was a society, was — despite a few overseas members — essentially national, and that promoted secularity, secularisation and secularism, it would be sympathetically considered. Nobody came forward, and sundry lawyers, accountants and printers remained the poorer.

What are the society's principles that have endured for 125 years? Despite its public image and, indeed, the private beliefs of most of its members, not the advocacy of atheism. Originally the society's second principle was "that the religious teachings of the world have been, and are, obstacles to the proper attainment of human happiness", and "human happiness" featured in all the other principles. By 1867 this had become "human improvement and happiness" and the obstacles were "theological teachings". Later again, these became "supernaturalism". It was left to the individual conscience to interpret these words; so that, in the atheist ranks, there's always been a sprinkling of agnostics, pantheists, and even spiritualists, theosophists and liberal "Christians".

But how and why "secular"? The three nouns above, derived from this adjective, encapsulate the NSS principles.

"Secularity" is the separation of Church and State. While it clearly commends itself to freethinkers, in nineteenth-century Britain it appealed to a large number of Nonconformists and potentially almost anyone who wasn't a member of the Church of England or Church of Scotland. Even some Anglicans approved, quoting the Jesuine "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's".

"Secularisation", other than in its religious sense of converting regular (monastic) into secular (parochial) clergy, is of relatively modern usage. It's a consequence of the NSS principle to promote "a consciousness of the facts of existence" and "education... common cultural interests", whereby people become aware of natural causes and see less and less need to invoke the supernatural. Active secularists, however, don't believe religion will simply wither away through being shown to be intellectually irrelevant, as power and privilege are usually reluctant to self-destruct.

The noun that was unique to the NSS and made it a byword for hope or horror, depending on one's outlook, was "secularism". This was defined much earlier than 1866, viz, when a Central Secular Society came into nominal existence in 1851 with the principles: (1) science is the true guide of man; (2) morality is secular, not religious, in origin; (3) reason is the only authority; (4) freedom of thought and speech are basic rights; (5) owing to the "uncertainty of survival", man should direct his efforts to this life only. In the NSS principles (4) was expanded to "it is the duty of each member to actively attack all barriers to freedom of thought and utterance on political or theological questions" so that "perfect civil and religious liberty be attained."

These principles were derived chiefly from the writings of Thomas Paine, Robert Owen and Jeremy Bentham, by way of Richard Carlile and George Jacob Holyoake. Indeed, they might be thought to be a very restrained, not to say wishy-washy, essence of these teachings; and perfectly innocuous, until one remembers the furore created as recently as 1955 when Margaret Knight espoused (2) on the BBC.

And the "proposed programme" in Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* for 9 September 1866 was far from rabble-rousing: (1) to form an association for mutual help of all the freethinkers of Great Britain; (2) to conduct in the United Kingdom a more rigorous freethought propaganda, especially in districts where freethinkers are few and freethought lectures rare; (3) to establish a fund for the assistance of aged or distressed



freethinkers; (4) to promote Parliamentary and other action in order to remove all disabilities on account of religious opinion; (5) to establish Secular schools and adult instruction classes in connection with every local society having members enough to efficiently support such schools or classes. Indeed, it seemed to offer no more than a return to the original inspiration of Owenism before it was watered down to the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists.

Even that return was something. Holyoake, a sometime Owenite station-lecturer at Worcester and Sheffield, was — like many other radicals — disappointed with the activities (or lack of activities) of both Owenism and Chartism, and in 1851 coined “secularism” as the name of a new movement with similar goals. Various Owenite groups round the country — chiefly in Lancashire, which was also the home of the cooperative movement, the Anti-Corn Law League and Friedrich Engels, and Yorkshire — renamed themselves secular, and new secular societies — chiefly in and around London — came into being. But they lacked a central organisation and direction.

Numerous attempts were made by Holyoake and others to establish a national association — in 1852, 1855, 1860 and 1861 — but they came to nothing. In 1866, under the guidance of Bradlaugh, they succeeded.

In the *National Reformer* of 5 August 1866 it was suggested that an NSS should have its “headquarters and office-bearers either in London or Lancashire”. In the 9 September number, candidates for president were given as (1) Robert Cooper; (2) Bradlaugh; (3) John Watts; (4) Mrs Harriet Law. Apart from their personal qualities and association with London during their active years, (1), (3) and (4) were widely regarded as “provincial” representatives because of their origins. This was particularly true of (1), an unjustly neglected author today, who hailed from Lancashire.

The current “north-south controversy” in Britain (and the world) is nothing new, but has simmered for over a century. The north, which pioneered the inventions and socio-political changes on which was based the Industrial Revolution — which made Britain Great — and the protest movements against the curses of these changes, was understandably resentful of London. Not long before 1866 the national capital was not so much a metropolis as an area which included the aristocratic, Royal and Parliamentary City of Westminster, the bourgeois City of London centred on the guilds and the emergent “funny-money” men, and a number of villages. But by 1866 both London and Bradlaugh were already growing at the expense of their rivals, and by 23 September he had “emerged” as president pro tem, with Charles Watts, younger brother of John, as secretary pro tem. They were confirmed in office at a conference in Bradford in November 1867.

With the exception of Leicester, Chatham and a couple of others, all the old and new local societies joined the NSS. So too did the secularist lecturers, debaters, writers and editors, though Law declined office and Holyoake, who’d had major rows with Bradlaugh over a Fleet Street House and a fleeting involvement with the *National Reformer*, was an unofficial leader of the opposition and prime mover of a rival British Secular Union (1877-84).

Under Bradlaugh’s forceful leadership, any suspicion of wishy-washiness disappeared. Not only was freethought propaganda conducted with the promised “rigour”, but Bradlaugh injected a whole new agenda of political and social aims: a programme that, with greater or lesser enthusiasm and with necessary changes of detail to suit contemporary circumstances, has been followed by his successors till today.

The most notable of these causes in the “golden years” of secularism in the 1870s and 1880s were republicanism and neo-Malthusianism. In the early 1870s, when the proclamation of an English Republic was a distinct possibility, the NSS virtually became a quasi-republican movement, with many local societies spinning off republican clubs and Bradlaugh having a better-than-even chance of becoming the first president of any republic that might be declared.

The most controversial activity at that time was the promotion of birth control. Most of the respectable ex-Methodists and ex-Baptists who formed a substantial proportion of the society’s membership and leadership would have called themselves Malthusians, even neo-Malthusians, but didn’t want to do anything about it outside the privacy of their own bedchambers. So an enormous row erupted — the trigger for formation of the BSU — when Bradlaugh and his chief lieutenant, Annie Besant, republished a prosecuted contraceptive tract, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, and reconstituted a Malthusian League. It was touch-and-go whether the movement would support or reject them, but the bulk stayed loyal and grew more active.

A lot of political and social reforms in areas like the suffrage, affirmation, feminism, divorce, abortion and sexual activities have been achieved at the instigation of the NSS and other bodies in the last 125 years. But, in the fields of education, broadcasting, blasphemy, Anglican Establishment, social justice, penal reform, peace and many others, much remains to be done. Will the NSS continue to rise to the challenge?

#### THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Membership application forms are obtainable from the General Secretary, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, telephone 071 272 1266

**WONDERFUL LIFE: THE BURGESS SHALE AND THE NATURE OF HISTORY**, by Stephen Jay Gould. Penguin, £6.99

In 1909 American palaeontologist Charles Doolittle Walcott discovered some remarkable Cambrian fossils preserved in the Burgess Shale quarry in eastern British Columbia. He returned to the site in subsequent years, collecting more than 12,000 specimens of one species alone, which he referred to in his field notes as the lace crab, though it was not a crab.

It was, in fact, an "oddball", one of fifteen to twenty organisms so different from each other and so unlike anything living today, that Stephen Jay Gould, himself a palaeontologist, allocates each of them a separate phylum, the first stage division of the animal kingdom, which is divided in turn into classes, orders, families, genera and species.

No such drastic an idea occurred to Walcott, a practising Presbyterian, who "read life's history as the fulfilment of a divine purpose guaranteed to yield human consciousness after a long history of gradual and stately progress". For him, the Burgess Shale fossils had to be primitive ancestors of later (improved) organisms, and that was how he treated them in his first classification.

He always intended to study them in more detail but, largely owing to heavy administrative burdens, he never got around to it. The fossils remained in drawers in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, of which Walcott was secretary from 1907 until his death twenty years later. He also served as president of the National Academy of Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and certainly belied his middle name.

When Harry Whittington, Professor of Geology at Cambridge, set out to examine the Burgess Shale in 1966, he "expected to spend a year or two describing some arthropods", by far the most abundant phylum of animals on earth, including, as they do, insects, spiders, crustaceans, as well as the extinct trilobites. As it was he spent four and a half years on one species alone, *Marrella splendens*, Walcott's "lace crab", doing all the basic work himself, cleaning and exposing specimens, dissecting and drawing, rather than leaving it to assistants.

Walcott had called *Marrella* a trilobite but, as Whittington studied more and more specimens, he slowly discovered "consistent, and probably fundamental, differences between the appendages of *Marrella* and those of all known trilobites". In 1971, however, he was cautious in his classification as "trilobite

like".

A few years later he was studying the two-inch long, five-eyed *Opabinia regalis* which, in Gould's words, "belonged nowhere among the known animals of this or any former earth", and so couldn't be formally classified. As Gould sees it, this study "led directly on to a fundamentally revised view about the history of life".

Would the Burgess Shale yield any other surprises? Professor Whittington assigned other "oddballs" to Derek Briggs and Simon Conway Morris and by the time the latter had "completed his initial sequence of five papers on curiosities, the tentative and peculiar had become a Burgess norm". It was no longer possible to fall back on the notion of "primitive precursors".

"The whole atmosphere changed", Whittington told Gould. "We were not just dealing with predecessors of known groups. The whole thing was beginning to make a picture."

And the discoveries continued, curiouser and curiouser. Gould describes them with the enthusiasm of a fellow palaeontologist and friend of the team, in a style that makes him probably the best writer on science in English today. And the various animals are beautifully drawn by Marianne Collins.

But bizarre as they are, how do the Burgess "oddballs" affect our view of evolution?

"Contingency is both the watchword and the lesson of the new interpretation of the Burgess Shale," says Gould. "The fascination and transforming power of the Burgess message — a fantastic explosion of early disparity followed by decimation, perhaps largely by lottery — lies in its affirmation of history as the chief determinant of life's directions."

When you consider that from over twenty arthropod designs, only four survived, it reminds us of our own "fortunate" survival. "A replay of life's tape would yield a substantially different set of surviving anatomies. . . . Animals evolve their sizes, shapes and physiologies under natural selection in normal times, and for specific reasons (usually involving adaptive advantage)". But mass extinction follows "different rules". Mammals, for instance, may have survived the Cretaceous event (extra-terrestrial, Gould thinks) that wiped out the dinosaurs, not because of superior brain power, but because they were smaller.

Gould doesn't view the origin of life as chancy or unpredictable, but as a "chemical necessity" given the composition of the early atmospheres and oceans. "Contingency arises later, when historical complexity

# REVIEWS

enters the picture of evolution." And we ourselves are "an improbable and fragile entity, fortunately successful after precarious beginnings as a small population in Africa".

COLIN McCALL

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**EVENING ALL: 50 YEARS OVER A HOT TYPEWRITER**, by Ted Willis. Macmillan, £15.95

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Lord Ted Willis's latest "autobiography" — he will doubtless write others — is by no means an unlikable book, so far as it goes. The trouble is it doesn't go far enough in saying rather than hinting; many of his many "jottings" on show-biz are a bit long on the "tall" side. This makes for light subjects becoming heavyweight reading. And despite a good feeling for his early life and origins, he is none too reliable a witness in establishing true, rather than fancy, "facts" concerning the production of a few films and plays.

Perhaps I should declare an interest, having known the author since he was a drama critic for the old *Daily Worker*. Then, he visited a Manchester theatre I was running at the time, to review a number of my productions in the late Forties. A long time ago. Many of the plays had a "progressive" slant — *Home of the Brave*, *The Rising Wind*, *et al* — and I was gratified by his praise for what he saw. Since that time we have worked together spasmodically as writer and director, both on television and the West End stage. A serious enough chap in those days, it's doubtful whether much of the "small talk" to be found here would have won the approval, or even willing ear, of Citizen Ted, young-cum-middle-aged man of the Fifties and Sixties. Looking back, his memory falters — some of the incidents he recounts as factual are apocryphal — skating hither and thither and, it would seem, speciously omitting much that is central to his tale. The heart of the matter. It's a pity, too, that many of his most commendable early interests have been crowded out to make room for what could appear to be his less attractive features — name-droppings, half-truths and mushy adjectives — making for sloppy writing and wilting interest in the reader. These have all too much in common with other show-biz books, many of which have been "ghosted".

But, as we know from old, Ted can often write well, as the quite racy chapters at the beginning of this book will show. His highly amusing encounters with the impresario, "Gabby" Pascal, is a case in point, and other

cameos — of the agent, Rita Cave, and the film director, Brian Desmond Hurst — are very funny; revealing also that he is more adept at delivering honest brickbats than the artificial "bouquets" that abound and litter this book. There are other early episodes, too, when his memory serves him better than it does later on.

The pity of it here is that secularism, abortion law reform, equal opportunities, censorship battles and other matters dear to the heart of a progressive, appear now to have small place in the book that Ted Willis set out to write. Public lending, initially started as "Brophy's penny" by Brigid Brophy's father — the novelist John Brophy — is one interest, at least, that does get some sort of airing in the narrative. So much else of consequence, that must have affected the writer's past thinking, has been ignored, and those readers who may wonder why this is so should be warned that if they, as part of a "specialised" audience, expect much enlightenment they could be disappointed.

Stranger things have happened than that somebody else may write a biography of Lord Willis, himself, in due course. If this should transpire, any "Life" of such a subject might call for a blend of *fact* and *fancy* — as well as analysis. Those qualities so sadly lacking here.

PETER COTES

## Writer Demands Ban on Sade's Novels

The church and family lobbies have been calling for the suppression of the Marquis de Sade's novels, *Justine* and *Juliette*, which have been published as paperbacks by Arrow.

Writer Moyra Bremner, who have been leading the campaign for censorship, put her case in an article published in *The Times*. Nicolas Walter, managing director of the Rationalist Press Association and vice-president of the National Secular Society, was allowed to put some arguments on the other side in the paper's correspondence columns. Nicolas Walter wrote:

"Suppression will not work. Ever since the publication in 1797 of the final version of *Justine* and of its sequel *Juliette*, which led four years later to Sade's arrest and life imprisonment, these two most shocking of his books have been repeatedly suppressed but repeatedly republished, in English as in other languages. Even if the new editions are withdrawn or prosecuted, Sade cannot be silenced after nearly two centuries, and attempts to do so will only increase his audience.

"The situation should not be exaggerated. Sade is an unpleasant but serious writer, and he should be treated critically but seriously. His books are not as badly

written as is frequently claimed (or as well written as is occasionally claimed). And the episodes of sex and violence are so cold and dead that they are repellent rather than attractive. It is hard to believe that anyone, however susceptible, has genuinely felt either stimulated to or justified in perversion by reading Sade.

"If Moyra Bremner and I can read *Justine* and *Juliette*, why cannot other people? If other people should be able to get the old editions — including the American ones of 1965-8 which are reproduced by the new British ones — should not they be able to get the new editions too?

"Freedom for other people includes freedom for things we hate, just as freedom for us includes freedom for things other people hate. I hate much of Sade's work, but I fear that suppressing it does more harm than publishing it."

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### *The Chosen Phew*

important places in the scheme of things are promised to the pious, and you are sure to be greatly loved by your fellow members so long as you remain in line, co-operative and paid-up.

(3) Relief from the effort of having to think out for yourself what may, or may not, be worth believing. You are not necessarily expected to understand what you are believing. Just sign in the right places or say what is expected of you.

If you happen to be an intellectual and really feel you must delve into ultimate mysteries, just remember the parameters! Thus far thou shalt go and no further. Step beyond them and you are no longer a member of the club. Maybe that is why so many of the religious do not look relieved, although (since the cult of Positive Thinking became popular) they bravely keep on smiling, determined to show us how happy they are. Strain on the facial muscles must be considerable, particularly as they are obliged to reveal at the same time how concerned they are about all sorts of things, not least our eternal destiny if we don't join them.

All this, I agree, is superficial. For psychologists do not merely observe what people do; they try to understand why they do it. Some boil it all down to stimulus and response on the basis of Pavlov's dogs, but I'm inclined to think more of the horse that is led to water. Anyway it seems that there is some sort of hidden agenda to what we consciously think or experience. While this may be the Unconscious it is fatal to think of it as dead.

Like most creatures (lemmings maybe are an exception) humans are programmed for survival. In our case there are built-in reactions to various kinds of situations. "Innate motives", as they are called, are

common to the species. They are urges, all springing from the one life-urge, to find food and shelter, have sex, seek safety, take risks, assert ourselves, submit to authority, go with the herd, stand on our own, find things out, fight enemies, run for cover — I have not exhausted the list.

Some of these reactions do not always work satisfactorily because, as with the rabbit that "freezes" in the beam of my car's headlamps, they do not apply to the actual situation. To complicate matters each of us has "acquired motives" through affective experiences, many occurring during childhood. These are what create the conflicts in the Unconscious from which people suffer.

The truth is, to overcome we need power to adapt and that, of course, is just what religions fail to provide. Each one of them is in a sort of time warp. So long as we live in a world of delusion, defending ourselves against reality by fictions that, consciously or otherwise, we weave about God or ourselves, salvation of a genuine sort will elude us. So it seems to me.

But don't expect to slough off all your mental encumbrances at once (and don't expect me to believe that you haven't any). I think it could take us more time than we've got. Yet I remain convinced that it is worth every effort. Just to feel the relief. Choose to discard the phobias and fantasies, to be unafraid to shed all falsities that screen us from the facts, and you really will begin to appreciate the freedom of the chosen Phew!

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Maurice Cerullo, the American televangelist who has expanded his operation to Europe, has come into conflict with the Independent Television Commission over his show which goes out on Superchannel. The plug was pulled on his "healing service", seen by around 200,000 people in Britain, when it breached the ITC code. It states that "religious programmes may not contain claims by, or about, living individuals or groups stating that they have special powers or abilities which are incapable of being substantiated." A number of evangelical MPs and peers are pressing the Home Secretary to relax restrictions on televangelists.

#### THE FREETHINKER

Volume 110, 1990

Bound in dark blue covers with title and date.  
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G. W. Foote & Co., 702 Holloway Road  
London N19 3NL

# OBITUARY

## VICTOR ROSE

Victor Rose, who died on 15 July at the age of 80, was a veteran socialist, pacifist, and ethical humanist. He was born on 29 April 1911 and brought up in West London. He followed his father into the hairdressing trade, which he pursued all his working life. Before the war he was a keen member of the National Hairdressers Federation, and was especially interested in organising sporting activities for the young men. After the war he moved to Bromley and brought up a family. He was an avid reader and later an enthusiastic painter.

But his main outside interest was politics. He followed his father into the far left; indeed both his grandfathers had been leading members of the socialist movement in West London. He was himself a member of the Independent Labour Party for a long time, and an associate of the maverick agitator Guy Aldred for a short time. During the war he was a conscientious objector, and served a term of imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs. After the war he took part in several peace organisations in South-East London.

Towards the end of his life he was also active in the humanist movement, being a member of several organisations, and he worked especially hard for many years in the South Place Ethical Society. (His daughter Diane Murray has also been active at South Place.) In all his activities he was known for his transparent sincerity and total integrity. He remained alert to the end, and typically asked for any donations to go to the Humanist Peace Council. A well-attended secular committal ceremony was held at Lewisham Crematorium.

Dr Fred Sai, president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, has written to Pope John Paul urging dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and "those who believe that voluntary family planning is the best protection against abortion." In his message, sent on World Population Day, Dr Sai regretted that the church had chosen to be an obstacle rather than an ally of the birth control movement. He forecast that within the next half century "humankind must complete the demographic transition to a world where the small family is the norm, in India as well as Italy."

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.

# Letters

## HEAVEN, HELL AND LIMBO

One can only wonder how S. J. Nicholls feels entitled to speak on behalf of "the vast majority of Christians" (Letters, August) when he insists that "Christians do not generally believe that unborn children and others who have diminished responsibility are cast into outer darkness". The Roman Catholic Church, to which the vast majority of Christians in this as in every age have belonged, certainly teaches that all unbaptized babies — even those who have Christian parents — are destined to spend eternity in limbo, certainly seen as a place of outer darkness and unrelieved gloom, if without the undying flames of the orthodox Hell. The Hell in which Mr Nicholls believes seems to have much more in common with the Catholic Limbo than the traditional Hell.

The authentic Christian teaching about Hell is to be had from less squeamish Christians than Mr Nicholls, both Catholic and Protestant, among whom one could cite Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Jeremy Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, C. H. Spurgeon, J. H. Newman and David Samuels. The Hellfire sermon caricatured by Stella Gibbons in *Cold Comfort Farm* is pretty tame stuff compared with the truly blood-curdling obscenities uttered by those genuine pillars of the Church in their highly successful drives to frighten the gullible into mindless submission to the misnamed "Prince of Peace".

Hell hath terrors only for those who mistakenly believe that they will survive death, and may have to spend a conscious eternity, with or without literal flames, deprived of the vision of God, conceived as something wholesome which will be enjoyed by the "blessed". Freethinkers have seen through the basic fallacy that we, or any sentient part of us, will survive death to enjoy the imaginary bliss of Heaven or the equally imaginary torments of Hell. Nor do we believe in the imaginary God or the imaginary devil who are piously assumed to hold sway in those imaginary domains.

It might indeed be considered a terrible prospect to have to endure eternity without being able to engage in loving relationships of the kind which make life on earth worth living. But neither Mr Nicholls nor Canon Hester need worry: I can confidently assure them that they will not survive death either. And lest they should think that this doctrine cuts at the root of morality, I can assure them with equal confidence that there are much better, and more truly moral, reasons for seeking good and eschewing evil than the venal calculus of rewards and punishments which has ever been the chief recruitment officer of Christianity.

DANIEL O'HARA, London W7

## A DOCTRINE FOR SADISTS

Various Christian divines went to great lengths to impress on ordinary people, including children, the "reality" of everlasting damnation in Hell. One of the worst examples of their ravings comes from the aptly-named, 19th-century priest, Father Furness. With the Roman Catholic Church's approval, he wrote a pamphlet "for Children and Young Persons". It was entitled *A Sight of Hell*, and the following is an extract from its pages.

"Perhaps at this moment a child is going into Hell. Tomorrow go and knock at the gates of Hell and ask what the child is doing. The devils will go and look. Then they will come back and say 'The Child is burning.' Go in a week and ask what the child is doing, and you will get the same answer, 'It is burning'. Go in a year and ask, the same answer comes: 'It is burning'. Go in a million years and ask the same question, the answer is just the

same, 'It is burning'."

It is no good for Canon Hester and S. J. Nicholls attempting to water down the doctrine by pretending that it doesn't mean what many generations have been taught it means. The damage has been done. No wonder Bertrand Russell could say: "The basis of religion is fear."

DAVID YEULETT, London SE10

### ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

It is not surprising if the doctrine of Hell is still held by most Christians. In the first centuries of the Christian era such topics were discussed with more or less heat, but there were always decent and learned theologians — Origen and Pelagius for example — to oppose the vicious theory of eternal punishment. Unfortunately the arguments of "Saint" Augustine of Hippo, (died 430) were accepted as the official line of the Roman Catholic Church. This definitely *did* include the fiery damnation of unborn babies, who had to wait until the thirteenth century for Thomas Aquinas to postulate a tolerable Limbo for them.

One might ask why people who claimed to believe in a good just God should present him as ordaining such monstrous cruelty. However, when considering the treatment which the Church meted out to heretics, it can be understood why few dared to contradict. Meanwhile, the hierarchy enjoyed the wealth and authority a terrified population ceded them.

The whole idea of eternal punishment is abhorrent to any normal conscience, and to present God as inflicting it is to make him out a callous monster — strange behaviour by those who profess to honour him and exhort others to do so.

MARGARET McILROY, Sheffield

### VOICES FOR CHANGE

In summarising the content of Tony Benn's Commonwealth of Britain Bill (August), Ted Goodman, like so many English people, fails to appreciate Scottish politics.

In his penultimate sentence he states that it (a separate Parliament) is only desired by the small minority of Nationalist voters. It must be stressed very strongly to Mr Goodman that in opinion poll after opinion poll, two-thirds of Scots state that they want a Scottish parliament (devolution). In a recent poll, the greatest percentage opted for independence, followed by devolution, with the *status quo* in third place. It is only a matter of time before Scotland regains independence.

CAMPBELL BURNSIDE, Kirkintilloch

### SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE

In his article about Tony Benn's Commonwealth of Britain Bill (August), Ted Goodman makes statements about the Scottish political scene which could be misleading. May I explain why?

The most serious of these is that only a small minority of Scots voters want their own Parliament. All the Scottish political parties except the Conservatives have declared themselves in favour of a Scottish Parliament and opinion polls show that some Conservatives are also in favour.

Add to this the effects of the rapid changes in Eastern Europe and the thought of Scotland continuing to be ruled by a Scottish Secretary of State with no mandate from the Scottish people becomes enough to make any moderate, rational person a supporter of political change.

Ted Goodman is right to point out that the Bill does not disestablish the Church of Scotland and to argue that it should. It needs to be remembered, however, that the links between the State and the Church of Scotland are weaker than those which the State has with the Church of England; the two cases may be parallel, but they are not identical.

Scotland also has its own laws and its own legal system, at the head of which is the Court of Session. In proposing a single national court system, therefore, Tony Benn is contradicting his

own proposals for greater Scottish autonomy.

I suspect that neither Tony Benn nor Ted Goodman has studied the realities of Scottish politics; no better time than now to begin.

NIGEL BRUCE, Edinburgh

### CHILDREN UNDER PRESSURE

John L. Broom (Letters, July) has clearly missed the point. While the Sheriff was criticised by Scotland's Lord Justice, it was not for throwing out the case, but part of the method he used: eg technicalities such as insisting that children should be present, when the law says they do not have to be!

The real issue in the Orkney case is, ironically, Mr Broom's very quibble that he heard only the parents' side of the case. This is unique; in every other case the voice of the parents, let alone the children, is not heard. For once the parents, of mixed faiths and beliefs incidentally, were not prepared to let their children be interrogated day after day without protest. This was exonerated by the children who on their release made their views perfectly clear on television: they were being pressurised to support allegations that they knew were not true. The public should hear far more than we are given, and not accept the official view that the children "disclosed" without the evidence that they did. Whom does Mr Broom believe: the officials hell-bent on finding a case, or the children who revealed how they were constantly urged to confirm untruths and had their accounts of fancy dress parties turned into Satanic Abuse.

Incidentally, Orcadians refer to South Ronaldsay as the South Parish, barrier or no barrier.

JOHN WALL, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

### A STRANGE GOD

In his recent *Free to Believe*, the Rt Rev David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, wrote another piece of controversial assertion. I quote: "I do not believe that God could stop what happened at Auschwitz. He could not — or he would have. . . He is *not* omnipotent nor omnipotent." When I put this to him he replied that what he meant is not how we are to understand God's power. That is not as I read what he expressed.

I then asked the Chief Rabbi designate, Dr Jonathan Sacks, a man of vast erudition, what were the rabbinical teachings on the subject. He replied: "My own belief is that God is omnipotent and omniscient" and added: "The problem of Auschwitz (and the billions of the other atrocities throughout human existence) is a very difficult one." Indeed.

If one assumes that God is not all-powerful and all-knowing, he can hardly be the almighty, infinite author of the universe to whom Christians, Jews and Muslims pray daily million of times. If, on the other hand, according to the Rabbi and most believers, God has potency to intervene in human affairs, but chooses not to do so, say in Auschwitz or elsewhere, he can scarcely be one of love, compassion and help, praised and exalted in every prayer and entreaty.

I wonder why those highly educated and undoubtedly well-meaning divines do not recognise this.

WALTER STEINHARDT, Slough

### RUSSIA AND THE WAR

It was good to have Karl Heath's eulogy of the Russian response to the German invasion fifty years ago (August). It would have been even better if he had mentioned some of the other relevant factors — the Russian alliance with Germany, which meant that for two years Stalin worked alongside Hitler in conquering bits and pieces of Eastern Europe (half of Poland, Bessarabia, Ruthenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and part of Finland); the purge of the Russian military leadership, which meant that for

several months the Russian armies were able to offer little resistance and the German armies were drawn a thousand miles into Russian territory; the reign of terror over the whole Russian population, which meant that for several months the German armies were often welcomed in the areas they conquered; the military genius of Generalissimo Stalin, which meant that millions of men were killed instead of wasting valuable equipment; the aid freely given by the Western powers, so that the Russian war effort didn't have to ruin the Russian economy; the generosity of the Russian conquerors at the end of the war, which meant that the benefits of Communist dictatorship were extended to most of Eastern Europe for another forty years; and so many other little things which have continued to make the Russians so popular in Eastern Europe and the Communists so popular in Russia to this day. Long live Soviet power! Come back, Uncle Joell

ARTHUR FREEMAN, London E1

## Spiritual "Healing" Kills

The appeals court in California has upheld the convictions of a Christian Scientist couple whose eight-month-old daughter, who had meningitis, died when they tried to treat her condition by prayer. The convictions of Mark Rippberger and Susan Middleton were the first in California since a Supreme Court ruling three years ago that a belief in spiritual healing did not protect parents from prosecution for a child's serious illness or death.

Judge Robert Merrill said that exempting parents from prosecution in such cases "would permit a small segment of the community to endanger the lives of infants who are helpless to act on their own behalf.

"A sincere belief in the efficacy of Christian Science spiritual healing practises is not a defence to a charge of criminal negligence", he declared. The child's death was the direct result of her parents' failure to give her any medical attention, treatment or care.

The parents were placed on probation for five years and ordered to take classes in family health. The court also ruled that they must report any illness of one of their children lasting more than 24 hours.

The Rev Michael Quicke preached the sermon in a Morning Worship programme relayed by ITV from St Andrew's Church, Cambridge. His theme was how God looks after little people. During the service burglars broke into Mr Quicke's home stole £200. A case of God helps those who help themselves.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Saturday, 26 October, 2.15 pm  
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Members only. Current membership card to be presented.

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (Near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 6 October, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Peter Heales: Paths to Humanism.

**Cornwall Humanists.** Information about a new group obtainable from Beryl Mercer, Amber, Short Cross Road, Mount Hawk, Truro TR4 8EA, telephone Porthtowan (0209) 890690.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists.** Waverly Day Centre, 65 Waverly Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 29 October, 7.30 pm. James Beckford: Religion and Modernity.

**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 28 December. Information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 239175.

**Haverling and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 1 October, 8 pm. Richard Bloom: Curative Therapy.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Saturday, 12 October, 2 pm. Michael Newman: Blasphemy is Good for you.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 26 September, 8 pm. 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.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 19 September, 7.30 pm. Chad Goodman: Thomas Paine and the Rights of Man. Thursday, 17 October, 7.30 pm. Andrew Jay: Human Sexuality.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 29 September, 2.30 pm. Annual Reunion. Guest speaker: Eric Stockton, Editor, *Scottish Humanist*.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 October, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Roger Thatcher: William Godwin and Scientific Morality.

## “Offensive” Saints Come to Blows in Aberdeen

*And except ye have charity ye can in nowise be saved in the kingdom of God. . .*

The Book of Mormon, Moroni, Ch10 v21

The Mormons are officially known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but their behaviour, particularly towards erring ones in the flock, is occasionally less than saintly. British disciples of Joseph Smith have not been involved in forgery and murder as were their brethren in Salt lake City, the Mormon Vatican, six years ago. But the atmosphere in the Aberdeen congregation appears to be little short of murderous at the present time.

Tony Burgess, who joined the Mormon church in 1977, is a key figure in the venomous dispute that has split the Aberdeen congregation. Some of his fellow-worshippers are determined to be rid of him, and to make their feelings clear, the “All Welcome” sign outside the church had the words added “Except for Tony Burgess”.

Mr Burgess claims that he has been treated as an outcast by a church clique.

He said: “I have been punched and jostled as I carried my 19-month-old daughter in my arms. I have never seen such hatred and intolerance and I have feared for the safety of my family.”

Mr Burgess has committed two “offences” for which he and his wife have been branded “children of Satan”. He has been “speaking in ancient tongues”, a practice he claims to be in accordance with Mormon principles. He also received a “severe reprimand” after another member saw him giving £1 to a man who was in need.

“I was told we should give only to members of the church or to charities it approves of”, Mr Burgess declared.

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*(continued from front page)*

Muslims”, declared Mr Ambrose.

“When things went wrong, like publicity over the laundering of drug money, leading executives sent circulars to staff talking of their and the bank’s commitment to the family of the bank, its humility and its service to humanity. There was always talk about serving God and humanity, the divine nature of the bank’s destiny to serve the Third World.”

Mr Ambrose said he warned Government departments about what was going on at BCCI. But his warnings were ignored.

“I could see through what was happening and how BCCI executives were using the Islamic religion and philosophy to their own advantage.”

Three representatives of the North Europe Area President visited Aberdeen to investigate and placate the warring factions. In a letter to the leader of the congregation they described the situation they found “as deplorable as any we have ever seen in our years of church administration.

“Many individuals have been offended and have given offence. There have in some instances been physical confrontations, including blows struck or the threat of such.”

They added that more visits may be necessary in order to deal with “divisive and destructive activities” in the Aberdeen congregation.

## Boy Rescued From Sect’s “Robot” School

The grandparents of an eight-year-old French boy, Yoann Durand, have rescued him from a “school” in Dharamsala, a remote area of the Himalayas. It is run by the Sahaja Yoga sect, whose leader, Mataji, is known as “Divine Mother”.

The case has attracted considerable press, radio and television coverage in France. The boy’s mother placed him in the school at the age of seven. She believed that in addition to basic subjects he would learn the “science of life”. She did not visit him and he became ill and unhappy. A letter to his grandparents alerted them to his plight and they decided to take action.

Fortunately French law was on their side. Article 357-1 of the Penal Code states that the abandonment of a child by his family is an offence. Their lawyer advised that when the boy was left in a remote religious community he had in effect been abandoned. He commented: “It is moral abandonment of a child, leaving him without affection and guidance, endangering his physical and mental health. Religious liberty should not violate the right of the individual.”

Extensive publicity and legal pressure resulted in the boy being returned to his home in France.

One former member of the sect visited Dharamsala with a view to sending her son to the school. But she was deterred by the bad conditions and austere surroundings. The children she met were docile, “like little robots”. One girl suffering from an untreated abscess in her mouth was told it would be cured by “looking at a photo of Divine Mother”.

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Iran’s Prosecutor-General has announced that women who fail to cover themselves from head to foot could face the death penalty. Under the country’s religious laws, women who did not obey the Islamic dress code would be regarded as apostates.