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The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 111 No. 11

NOVEMBER 1991

40p

SECULAR HUMANISTS URGED TO COMBAT OLD AND "NEW AGE" SUPERSTITIONS

The National Secular Society's annual general meeting was held at Conway Hall, London, on 26 October. Nicolas Walter, a Vice-President of the Society, was in the chair.

Barbara Smoker was re-elected president, and in a short presidential address she emphasised the continuing need for a strong secularist opposition to both the persistent power of the old religious orthodoxies and the seductive superstition of the "New Age".

Miss Smoker said secularists are often told we are flogging a dead horse — "or, perhaps, Nietzsche's dead god. In this country, at least, we are told, the battle against religion has been won.

"It is true that popular support for the mainstream Christian churches in England (less so in the rest of Britain) has declined dramatically over the past century; but organised Christianity, particularly the Established Church, retains far more of its historical and fiscal privileges than most people seem to realise. Public subsidies, tax exemption, official status — all these continue unabated, and in many cases are actually increasing.

"Instances include religious teaching and worship in state schools, the huge subsidies to denominational schools (increased gradually over the past four decades to 100 per cent of most of their costs), fees paid to hospital chaplains out of the stretched NHS budget, the blasphemy law, censorship, the legislative power of the Bench of Bishops in the House of Lords and of other religious appointments to the same House, and a highly disproportionate amount of broadcasting time devoted to religion.

"In spite of all this undue privilege and influence, the Christian churches are clearly bothered by the fact that they have largely lost the hearts and minds of most of the population of the developed world: hence their ecumenical attempts to paper over the schismatic cracks

in the God-given rock of unity. The latest, and much publicised, attempt to join forces against the common enemy of common-sense is their dubbing the 1990s the decade of Evangelism (as Protestants call it) or (as Catholics prefer) the Decade of Evangelisation. (Ironic that they cannot even agree on the name!)

"At the same time, there is the rise of the well-funded, international, punitive, fundamentalist Protestant pressure group, the Christian Reconstructionists, which — though less strong in this country than elsewhere (notably Latin America, where it is in opposition to Liberation Theology) — is making its voice heard here.

"Above all, the steady decline in mass adherence to mainstream religion is largely counterbalanced by the rise of faith in the populist 'New Age', with its resurgence of such not-so-new (indeed, mostly centuries-old and long-discredited) superstitions as astrology, faith-healing, spiritualism, reincarnation (often simultaneously with the Christian heaven!), miraculous relics, premonitions, and all the rest of the pre-scientific nonsense in which so many young people (especially) now believe, to which are added new quasi-scientific superstitions, such as the Bermuda Triangle, flying saucers, and fanciful explanations for crop circles.

"Most important of all in its practical effects is the incommensurate influence that organised religion retains in holding back legal reforms and social progress, particularly in bio-ethical areas such as abortion, embryo research, and voluntary euthanasia. And in causing all this damage to human society and suffering to individuals, Christianity is abetted by the non-Christian religions. In particular, Islam is becoming stronger.

"The horse that we secularists are still flogging may be scientifically diagnosed as dead, but it won't lie down: certainly not without a lot more bashing. It is up to us in the freethought movement to do the bashing — to knock it down, and let it rot."

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: William McLroy

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

MAMMON BEFORE GOD

The Bishop of Oxford opened a can of extremely troublesome worms when he sued the Church Commissioners over their investment policy. The Right Reverend Richard Harries and his colleagues hold the quaint view that ethical and moral considerations should take precedence over the pursuit of maximum profit. The Church of England's financial managers are less sensitive on such matters when it comes to allocating funds approaching the £3 billion mark. But the Bishop of Oxford challenged the Commissioners' contention that charity law compels them to seek the highest possible return on investment.

Robert Walker, QC, appearing for the Church Commissioners, told the High Court what generations of freethinker have averred: biblical precepts are a worthless guide for ordering human affairs. Considering the lilies of the field and taking no thought for the morrow will butter no parsnips. Other-worldly platitudes in the Sermon on the Mount — so often quoted by "liberal" Christians and half-believing fence sitters — do not impress Mr Walker. He described adherence to such injunctions as an example of "Christian fecklessness". Christ's teachings are "all very well for those seeking personal sanctity", but not for business.

The Church Commissioners have already taken an ethical stand, albeit a limited one, on investment policy. They avoid companies involved in the manufacture of armaments or concerned with gambling, tobacco or newspapers. And they no longer hold shares in companies operating mainly in South Africa.

Indeed it could be said that the Church Commissioners started a disinvestment operation in property nearly thirty years ago. Back in the Sixties, Anglican landlordism was synonymous with Rachmanism in the rented accommodation market. Church-owned properties in the Paddington area of London were among the worst managed and highly priced in the capital, often tenanted by prostitutes and members of the criminal fraternity.

Oxford, it seems, is still "the home of lost causes" and the Bishop lost his case. But whatever the outcome had been, one thing is certain. The Church Commissioners will always ignore the divine command to lay up treasures in heaven. They have far more confidence in the here-and-now Stock Exchange and other financial institutions, whatever the risk from moth and rust.

AND NOTES

BURGESS AND BELIEF

The *Sunday Times* of 20 October included in the Magazine a feature on "Men of God", containing colour photographs with captions of a baker's dozen of world religious leaders — the Pope and Billy Graham, two Orthodox Patriarchs, one Hindu and two Muslims, the Dalai Lama and a Shintoist, a Jew and a Lutheran, Desmond Tutu and George Carey. It also contained a Commentary by Anthony Burgess, the prolific writer. Most of this feature was the usual journalistic stuff, but the Commentary displayed the sort of attitude to unbelief which should have gone out with the Ark.

Burgess began by saying that Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God was premature, added that atheism is out of date, and showed how out of date (or out of touch) he is by including H. G. Wells and G. B. Shaw among "rationalistic pundits". He said that God's existence is somehow proved by "man's need for God", not seeing that it might just as well be disproved by many men's (and women's) lack of need for God. He said that "ordinary people" "need religion", not seeing that more and more ordinary people do quite well without it.

He said that "secularism and militant atheism belong to the last century", not seeing that there are far more open secularists and militant atheists now than then. He tried to identify unbelief with Communism, stressing how strong religion remains in Communist countries, not seeing that the mistake of Communism was not to reject dogmatic religion but to imitate some of its worst characteristics. He said that "political ideologies" are "substitutes for religious systems", not seeing that this is precisely what is wrong with them. He said that "the secular alternatives" to religion "are revealed as shamefully hollow", not seeing that his own knowledge of such alternatives was revealed as shamefully lacking.

Burgess identified himself as being among "those of us who are Christians", and devoted most of his attention to the Roman Catholicism he grew up in and still more or less belongs to. No doubt he would excuse the unpleasantness of his personal conduct as revealed in his own autobiography by saying that he would be even more unpleasant without Christianity. Who can tell? But his closing invocation of "tolerance and goodwill" as "the human qualities that really matter" made a typically hypocritical conclusion to a typically ignorant piece of well-paid and ill-informed journalism.

ANIMAL ABUSE

With Christmas only a few weeks away, the mass slaughter of birds and animals continues apace. And while the Christian church has traditionally upheld the view that animals have been provided by the creator for the benefit of humanity, large numbers of non-Christians — including some unbelievers who work themselves into a frenzy of self-righteous indignation over Jewish and Islamic ritual slaughter — will join in the carnivorous orgy on 25 December.

Judaeo-Christian theology affirms that man is a special creation — in God's image, no less — so it is not surprising that for many centuries it was held that animals were put on the earth for his use as food, beasts of burden, or ritual sacrifice. The first seven books of Leviticus are a gruesome chronicle of religious butchery, while New Testament accounts show that Jesus would hardly have qualified as a patron of an animal welfare society.

The Roman Catholic Church resolutely opposed ideas that animals should not be exploited or that humans had duties towards them. In the last century, Pope Pius IX refused to endorse the work of an animal welfare organisation that opened a branch in Rome. And St Francis of Assisi notwithstanding, animals are still very badly used in Catholic countries.

In a recent statement, the International Fund for Animal Welfare declared that in Spain today will be found "some of the worst examples of ritual animal abuse in the world". Men, women, and children openly participate in the torture and killing of animals. These atrocities take place on saints' days, "with the tacit approval or even encouragement of the local priests and nuns".

One English visitor described how last year the Feast of St Vincent was celebrated in Manganeses: "I saw a terrified goat thrown to her death from the tower of the village church. Although the local priest has spoken out against this event, he apparently allowed this desecration of the church tower." In hundreds of Spanish towns and villages, saints' days and other religious festivals are celebrated by stoning animals to death.

The IFAW puts the question: "Why do Roman Catholic leaders remain silent even when some of these atrocities take place on the very doorsteps of their churches?"

Roman Catholics in India are protesting against a Calcutta drug firm's use of a religious picture in publicity material for a contraceptive pill. Leaflets advertising the pill carry a picture of the Madonna and Jesus, together with the caption: "For the joys of planned Motherhood."

HOLLOW CHRISTIANITY

Having lost the battle to prevent adults enjoying a Sunday drink, Christians in Wales are trying to stop children enjoying themselves at Hallowe'en. And sad to say, these po-faced killjoys have had some success this year. In Gwent, for instance, they pressurised the education authorities into circularising schools with a warning not to hold Hallowe'en events. As a result, after weeks of preparation a fund-raising evening at one school was cancelled.

Mr Geoffrey Drought, Gwent's Director of Education, wrote to all nursery, primary and secondary school heads: "I have had representations from a considerable number of Christians urging that schools do not observe Hallowe'en.

"There is certainly no place for observation in the RE Syllabus as taught in Gwent Schools and I ask you not to make reference to it in your lessons, or to encourage children to act out demons or devils in their play."

For several years now, Christian groups, much influenced by American fundamentalists, have been endeavouring to excise traces of our pagan heritage from festivals at which our ancestors marked and celebrated the seasons. They don't want people — particularly the young — to know there was a vital pagan culture long before these islands were missionised by Christians who absorbed many of the old rites and practices into their religious observance. Later, they took their alien religion to Africa, America and Australia, where it blighted native culture and folklore.

Preparations are at present afoot in thousands of schools for annual concerts, nativity plays and Yuletide parties. Unlike religious indoctrinators who want to ban Hallowe'en celebrations, we say let the children enjoy themselves. And let us derive satisfaction from the Christian usurpers' annual whinge about how the benighted British are "leaving Christ out of Christmas".

Christine Confrere, a 41-year-old French woman, has died after drinking 15 pints of mineral water in order to "cleanse herself of the devil". Her husband, two daughters and sister, who also thought they were possessed, between them drank 85 pints. They recovered in hospital.

THE FREETHINKER

Volume 110, 1990

Bound in dark blue covers with title and date.
Price £9.50 plus £1.10 postage.

G. W. Foote & Co., 702 Holloway Road
London N19 3NL

THE FLESH IS WEAK

Ohmygawd! He's done it again!! Jimmy Swaggart, until recently America's most popular and wealthiest televangelist, has been caught with his trousers down. Erratically driving his Jaguar through a one-horse town in southern California, he was stopped and immediately recognised by a police officer. Also recognised by the lawman was Swaggart's companion, a local prostitute by the name of Rosebud. The preacher was wearing a "Jesus Loves You" T-shirt, and a pile of pornographic magazines was on hand for spiritual uplift. Swaggart has resigned as head of the Family Christian Academy.

It will be recalled that on his hugely successful Pentecostal television show, Jimmy Swaggart savagely denounced worldly pleasures, particularly sex outside marriage. He was first to put the boot into another televangelist, Jim Bakker, when his shenanigans with church secretary Jessica Hahn came to light. He denounced Marvin Gorman who, in the manner of televangelists, also succumbed to weakness of the flesh.

Revenge is sweet in American born-again circles and Gorman turned the tables on Brother Swaggart by photographing him leaving a motel of dubious reputation with a prostitute. Swaggart's tearful confession to having departed from the straight and narrow was seen on millions of television screens — another nail in the coffin of televangelism.

Anyway, Rosebud now says she believes that her encounter with the hot-gospeling groper could be the divine will at work. "God probably wants me to get off the streets", she told a reporter. Perhaps so; we are told that He moves in a mysterious way.

Freethinker Fund

Names of old and new friends appear every month on the list of subscribers. Unlike the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, *The Freethinker* does not receive hand-outs from the State. Readers' generosity in the form of donations and legacies enable us to meet the annual deficit. Financial support and a growing circulation will ensure the paper's survival.

Anonymous, F. E. Gourlay, H. Hilton, S. Pickett and S. Sanders, £1 each; M. Dearnley, N. Green, W. G. Stirling and A. Stewart, £2 each; B. Piercy, £2.50; D. S. Lee, £3; G. D. Thompson, £3.80; J. R. Crellin, £4.40; E. C. Balfour, J. Barr, E. F. Channon, F. Crobrough, N. Haemmerle, R. W. Hamilton, W. Hill, F. Jacot, L. T. Johnson, A. Negus, M. Sargent, R. J. M. Tolhurst and K. Williams, £5 each; E. C. Hughes, £7.60; R. J. Condon, £10; D. Williams, £11; J. R. Bond, £15; Anonymous, £30; O. D'Arcy, £35.

Total for September: £200.30.

“Bending Reality”

TERRY SANDERSON

Some years ago, I worked as part of the confidential counselling team on the problem page at *Woman's Own* magazine. It wasn't unusual for us to receive three or four letters a week from distraught people who had visited a palmist or tarot reader “just for a bit of fun” and come away shattered because they had been told some tragedy was about to overtake them or their family. Sometimes the writers of these letters were suicidal.

And that is why I have a new hero. His name is James Randi, and many readers of *The Freethinker* will have seen the recent TV series, “Psychic Investigator”, in which he charmingly set up assorted psychics, astrologers, dowzers and faith healers in order to mercilessly debunk them, using only rationalism and logic. Sometimes the practitioners of these “supernatural arts” seemed genuinely perplexed that their powers did not stand up to Mr Randi's unforgiving scrutiny. One has to conclude that in the world of the occult there is as much self-delusion as there is deliberate exploitation.

Mr Randi is, himself, a stage magician and is familiar with all the tricks of the trade. He knows that when people are desperate to believe that supernatural powers are at work, they can easily be distracted, manipulated and bamboozled. Those who take comfort from imagining, for instance, that it's possible to talk to the spirits of their deceased loved ones are easy prey for unscrupulous “psychics”. Mr Randi was a constant thorn in the side of the dreadful Doris Stokes and frequently revealed how the supposed necromancer actually achieved her communication with the dead — having nothing to do with psychic powers and everything to do with careful planning. The audience, for the most part, did not want to hear, and this is why I so much admire James Randi's persistence.

His task seems thankless — he tries to protect the gullible from the unscrupulous, but the victims do not want to be saved. If one fortune teller talks a load of crystal balls, the unsceptical customers simply take their cash elsewhere hoping that the next seer really will have that elusive gift. I doubt very much whether James Randi's efforts to educate the public in the artful ways of the peddlers of the occult will have much effect.

However, James Randi is about to attempt his most ambitious exposure: he is taking on one of the world's greatest “supernaturalists”, none other than Uri (Mr Spoonbender) Geller, who has been moaning in the papers that Randi has been “persecuting” him over the past twenty years. Now Geller is suing Randi for millions of dollars. Mr Randi welcomes the court case because he believes that at last he will be able to demonstrate to the world that all the “supernatural” antics Geller gets up to can be reproduced by any

competent conjuror, using just the power of dexterity. Mr Randi has been quoted as saying: “What this guy does is what every stage magician does. He distracts attention away from what he is really up to, and does the trick. Geller claims his spoon-bending was totally original. Nonsense. If a magician saws a woman in half on stage, that's old hat. If he saws a horse in half, that's a new gimmick, but it's the same trick.”

Why is Mr Geller so worried? If he really has supernatural powers, why not just bend Mr Randi's head a little? “I may have lost thousands of pounds' worth of work,” says Mr Geller of the damage his reputation has suffered because of Mr Randi's pursuit. And that's much nearer the point. The supernatural business is worth loadsamoney, and a lot of people want to be in on the action. The “bit of fun” becomes a little more sinister when you realise how much cash it turns over.

Take Russell Grant, for instance. Mr Grant is ubiquitous, and probably the nation's most famous astrologer. His predictions are syndicated in newspapers and magazines up and down the country and he spent nine very lucrative years spouting about sun signs on breakfast television. He has written so many books that he himself has lost track of the number (and he admits that the most ludicrous was the astrology diet book). One imagines that Mr Grant is a very rich man. His bland little snippets may seem like “harmless entertainment” but they generate amounts beyond most of our wildest dreams. No wonder Russell was foaming at the mouth when James Randi poured his sceptical scorn on the dubious profession of astrology.

Even the old lady at the bottom of the street who reads the tea leaves can make herself a nice bit of pin money as word spreads in the vicinity. Whatever gibberish she talks, she will be sought by those desperate to know what will happen in the future. Rationality flies out of the window in such instances and that is why we need James Randi so desperately. Each time we are tempted to fall into the seductive clutches of the supernaturalists, he is there to tell us that we can't claim we were ignorant when we emerge disappointed at the other end. He is wise enough, though, not to say: “I told you so.” He's much more likely to ask: “Have you learned your lesson yet?”

Three Indian men have been charged with the murder of a young girl who was ritually killed to appease Hindu gods. People living in a village near Delhi where the killing took place say the eight-year-old-girl was possessed by demons.

Another Miraculous Relic Under Fire

R. J. CONDON

Is nothing sacred these days? As if the exposure of the Holy Fraud of Turin were not a sufficiently bitter pill for the Catholic Church to swallow, scientists have now turned their attentions to another much-loved relic, the miraculously liquefying Blood of St Januarius in Naples.

Januarius, Bishop of Benevento during the persecution of Christians by Diocletian, was sentenced to be torn to pieces by wild beasts. But none of the animals would lay a claw on the good man, not that it mattered since he was beheaded immediately afterwards.

A century or so later the holy trunk and its head were dug up and placed in the Monastery of Montevergine, where they kept company with a portrait of the Virgin Mary allegedly painted by St Luke.

In 1294 the people of Naples, the birthplace of Januarius, began to build a cathedral to be dedicated to the saint and martyr. Today his body rests in the crypt. While it was being carried there its congealed blood liquefied and began to flow, or so they say. A quantity was saved and now flanks a bust containing the saint's head, preserved in a sumptuous chapel in the cathedral itself.

At three series of ceremonies each year — 18 occasions in all — vast crowds gather in Naples Cathedral to pray for the liquefaction of the saint's blood. Millions watch on television. There is much anxiety, for the miracle does not always happen. The prosperity and even safety of Naples depend on it — the city is uncomfortably close to Vesuvius.

The martyr's head is exposed on an altar. A priest brings a phial of the blood close to the head. Prayers are led by a group of women known as the saint's "aunts", who have been known to shriek and curse if nothing happens. The miracle is not left entirely to Januarius. To make sure the priest inverts the phial a few times. This usually does the trick. The blood liquefies, the people praise God and press forward to kiss the phial.

The miracle has attracted a certain amount of criticism, even from churchmen. The Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston, for example, did not believe the blood was that of St Januarius. Now it appears not to be blood at all. Dr Luigi Garlaschelli, an organic chemist at the University of Pavia, believes the answer lies in thixotropy, a property of certain gels by which they become liquid when agitated and later resolidify. To support this hypothesis he formulated a gel which not only resembled the blood but used ingredients and techniques that would have been available in the 14th century, when the Naples ceremonies began.

Dr Garlaschelli took a solution of ferric chloride, a substance found on the sides of active volcanoes such as Vesuvius, slowly added calcium carbonate (crushed

marble) and strained the liquid through gut or parchment. The filtrate was allowed to evaporate to some extent after which salt was added. The resulting gel liquefied when shaken in a phial of the kind containing the saint's blood. The colour was matched by varying the amount of salt.

Publishing his findings in the scientific magazine, *Nature*, Dr Garlaschelli thinks a medieval alchemist or artist might have stumbled across the recipe while experimenting or seeking a new pigment. At a time when relic forgers were outdoing each other in impudence, we can be pretty sure that such a discovery would be put to nefarious use. The Church has never allowed the blood or whatever it is at Naples to be analysed. Perhaps it will now — there is recent precedent for it.

The Church has already responded with its usual get-out for when a relic is called in question. Its spokesman for England and Wales, Fr Peter Verity, said: "These phenomena have never been part of Catholic teaching." Seeing the use the Church makes of them, simple Catholics might be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Fr Verity went on: "People have always been free to believe or not believe in them. The main thing is that if it helps somebody to come closer to God, all well and good." Rather like St Paul, in Romans chapter 3, justifying his lying for the glory of God.

Cash for Cathedrals

The Government is to give the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches £2 million to repair their cathedrals. And a further £9 million in state aid will be granted over the next three years.

Ely Cathedral is the chief beneficiary of the present hand-out (£235,000). Salisbury and St Paul's will receive £150,000 each.

Roman Catholic cathedrals on the list are Southwell (£50,000), Nottingham (£10,000), Norwich (£9,000) and Northampton (£6,000).

The churches will also indirectly receive vast amounts of public money for the upkeep of their buildings from the State-aided English Heritage.

Figures released by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys show that over a thousand Irish women travelled to Britain for an abortion during the first quarter of this year. Of the 1,053 Irish women who had pregnancies terminated in British clinics, 460 were from Northern Ireland where the Abortion Act 1967 does not apply.

Censorship: Always Wrong?

NICOLAS WALTER

Nicolas Walter, managing director of the Rationalist Press Association and a vice-president of the National Secular Society, debated the question of censorship with Professor Roger Scruton at the Royal Society of Literature on 17 October. The text of his opening statement is published below.

Every society, indeed every human group (if not every individual), objects to some forms of expression for one reason or another, and every society imposes on such forms of expression limits of one kind or another — whether the informal ones of custom and taste (enforced by the community through public opinion), or the formal ones of law or violence (enforced by the authorities through courts or thugs — and sanctions of one kind or another, whether ostracism or punishment).

This is the context in which censorship should be discussed and in which the question before us should be considered. But before we ask the final question, *Is censorship always wrong, or ever right?*, there are many other questions we should ask and answer. The first is, *What do we mean by censorship?* My definition is: The positive effort to stop someone publishing something, whether officially or unofficially, so that it doesn't appear at all. (This doesn't include the negative refusal to publish something in one place, if it can appear in another place.) Then come the other questions, as follows.

Why are we censoring? Do we want to prevent offensive material being published at all, to suppress it before it appears; or do we want to punish the publisher of offensive material, to deter other publishers from repeating the offence again? If the former, is it right to try to suppress something before it has the chance of appearing? If the latter, is it worth trying to act against it once it has appeared? Do we want to maintain standards or make gestures, or to make ourselves feel good or our victims feel bad? We must be confident that we are censoring for the right reasons.

What are we censoring? Material which attacks God or the King (or Queen), or the Church or the State, or threatens society or the people, or opposes the regime or the party, or disgusts the pure or excites the impure, or defies the strong or damages the weak, or would bring a blush into the cheek of Mr Podsnap's young person, or just annoys us? Are we censoring sedition or blasphemy or profanity or obscenity or indecency or racism or sexism or defamation or what? We must be confident that we are censoring the right material.

Who is censoring? Church or State, Government or law, civil servants or policemen, judges or vigilantes, wise men (and women) or fools, good men (and women)

of knaves? We must be confident that the right people are censoring.

Whom are we censoring? The wicked or the weak, subversives or innocents or profiteers, creators or consumers or middlemen? We must be confident that the right people are being censored.

When are we censoring? In advance or in arrears, when it is helpful or harmful, when it is in accordance with public opinion or in opposition to it? We must be confident that censorship is being carried out at the right time.

How are we censoring? By consent or by power, legally or arbitrarily, rationally or irrationally, publicly or privately? We must be confident that censorship is being carried out in the right way.

What then? Does censorship work? Is the actual offending material suppressed, the actual offender punished, the potential offender deterred, the potential victim saved, society preserved, the people improved? We must be confident that censorship has the right effects.

When we have asked all these questions and answered them properly, it is quite reasonable for us to go to either extreme — to have a perfect censorship on the authoritarian model (the right reasons, the right censors, the right censored, the right material, the right procedure, and so on), or to have no censorship on the libertarian model (no reasons, no censors, no censored, no material, no procedure, and so on), or to have something in between.

It is easy to imagine a system censoring all material which causes trouble in society — not just the art and literature which Plato wanted to suppress, but all philosophy and all religion, all material concerning sex or violence, all politics and all arguments, all irony and all humour, all questioning and all protest. Indeed many societies have tried to establish such systems. We could go further, back to the original meaning of censorship, and also suppress other activities which cause trouble in society — alcohol and tobacco, pop music and competitive sport, newspapers and television, and all the many other dangerous and unpleasant things around us.

But this is absurd! Why? Because we don't know who would censor the censors, because we know that people aren't all the same and don't agree about what is good or bad and what should or shouldn't be censored, because we think that some danger and change cause less damage to society than no danger or change, because our very act of discussing censorship means that we are not certain or confident about it.

The fact is that every act of censorship seems right at

that time and in that place, but seems wrong at another time or in another place. Thus all the acts of censorship recorded in history, or now listed in each issue of the *Index on Censorship* magazine, make sense to the censors, but don't make sense to the censored, and almost all look mad to us.

Even in our own very partial system, most of the relatively few acts of censorship are either useless or dangerous, from the well-known cases which enliven the history of the subject (*Madame Bovary*, Zola, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Fanny Hill*, *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name*, *Spycatcher*) to the unknown cases which continue in the background (the tons of sex magazines seized and destroyed every year). The few current acts of censorship are useless and ridiculous — the *Visions of Ecstasy* video, the *True Faith* comic book, the novel about Lord Haw-Haw, Lady Birdwood's antisemitic pamphlets, even the paperback editions of Sade.

I suggest that grown-ups should be treated as grown-ups, able to think and say and read and hear and see what we want, subject to the minimum of rules. I imagine a system censoring no material, unless it constitutes a direct and immediate and genuine and serious threat of

public disorder or private damage. I see no rational or realistic argument for all the mechanisms of pre-censorship which we have developed — Official Secrets, cinema and video film licensing, radio and television previewing — or for all the mechanisms of post-censorship we have inherited from the past — the laws of sedition, racism, blasphemy, obscenity, criminal libel.

I see rational and realistic arguments only for the preservation of public order, putting published material on the same level as the words and behaviour which are held liable to cause a breach of the peace in the Public Order Acts, or for the protection of private life or personal reputation, putting libel and slander on the same level as other forms of individual damage — with some generally acceptable forms of prevention or compensation. I want other people to treat me as I treat them. I want evil material — and there is plenty of it — to be dealt with by critical discussion and disapproval, not though the criminal law and punishment. I prefer Mill and Milton to Platon and Scruton.

So, in reply to the question, *Is censorship always wrong, or ever right?* my answer is, *Almost always, or hardly ever.*

Christianity's Guilt Complex

CHARLES WARD

That is what first began to put me off — the way Christians went on about sin and the awful guilt you were expected to feel for being a sinner. You were rotten to the core whether you thought so or not. It was Adam's fault, or maybe Eve's (he got the blame anyway), but that didn't let you off the hook. You needed salvation — everyone did. That was where belief in Jesus came in. It was all in the Bible and you'd better believe it.

Well, I didn't see anything wrong with believing in Jesus. He seemed a very nice guy, the way he was presented in church and Sunday-school, and some of his ideas looked pretty good to me. I thought that made me a Christian, but my new friends, who had inveigled me into going to their summer camp, told me that was just where I was wrong. They were what would now be called fundamentalists and they didn't think much of church people on the whole.

I got the full treatment. Choruses with my cornflakes, lashings of St John for lunch, testimonies from other lads with my tea, and slices of St Paul for supper. I didn't understand the half of it but they seemed to have got it taped and their enthusiasm was infectious. So I said the right words, sincerely as I thought, and was accepted joyfully as "saved". When the camp ended I

went home with the intention of converting the other members of my family.

They stolidly ignored my evangelistic efforts and in any case these began to wane as I found myself increasingly suspect among my religious companions because I kept asking questions but could not agree with their answers. When I was told that the Devil (in whom I had never believed) was reclaiming my soul I thought it was time to part company. I returned to more congenial moderate "Churchianity". With one difference. I had a new zeal for Bible study. These earnest but bigoted anti-intellectual Christians could not possibly be right! I did not feel at all weighed down with sin.

But now that I came to think of it, even the hymns we sang in our moderate church and sometimes around the piano at home suggested a condition of moral turpitude entirely foreign to my experience. Prayers laid it on even thicker. I dutifully tried to be miserable, but it just wasn't me.

I could feel rotten about things I had done, or failed to do, but no more than I could help. I did wish to become a better chap. All the same I could see no point in continually reminding myself how hard the job might be.

"Positive thinking" did not then enjoy the sort of popularity it does today, but I thought that a cheerful attitude to life had more to commend it than the church's "miserable offender" syndrome, if you'll excuse the pun.

Of course in my innocence I thought that "sin" was a synonym (I don't seem able to help this!) for any kind of wrong behaviour. Actually it's a sort of technical term applied by religious folk to any act, or failure to act, which in their view is a transgression of some command of "God". But it's something men thought up, after all.

Which doesn't mean you have to throw out the baby we call "morality" with that now unwanted theological bathwater. Despite a widespread notion to the contrary, stemming from the idea of Moses staggering down the mountain with those heavy tablets, morality did not proceed from religion. It is likely, as James Hemming says, that moral values are "as old as language itself". "Man only finds words for things when he is aware of them." (pp 82-83, *Instead of God*, Marion Boyars, 1986.)

Christianity has stood guilt on its head, causing people to feel guilty over matters for which they are not responsible and innocent over matters for which they are.

Time and time again, morally unjustifiable acts have been "justified" on religious grounds as "acts of faith". Meanwhile the superstition of mankind's sin (only to be "atoned for" by the death of "God" in human form) goes on after nearly two thousand years. Some Christians are still trying to blame it on "Adam's disobedience", disregarding what science has told us about evolution. Converts still accept this imaginary scenario.

That this appears to them, almost literally, as "Gospel truth" is due to more than credulity. It has been well said that people believe what they want to believe, but we ought to ask ourselves why on earth they should want to believe some things in the first place.

In this instance the explanation seems to lie in our reluctance to engage in balanced self-judgment. Recourse to mythology, by means of which we can allay or manipulate emotions that alarm and disturb us, is the easier option.

Whether one is thought to have "sinned against God", contravened some social code, distanced oneself from some ideal "good", disobeyed one's "conscience", or whatever, to be rid of the anguish of guilt is a natural longing.

The idea that guilt may be transferred from a guilty person to some other living being has had a long, indeed gruesome, history. Whatever sick mind first conceived it, there was obvious appeal, for some guilty party at least, in the provision of exemption, not merely from expected punishment, but also from the anguish of a

guilty conscience.

Guilt cannot be transferred. If you are guilty of something, you are guilty to the end of Time, though you may be pardoned, or go on to better things. Shame and remorse are unhappy feelings but an attempt to suppress them, when they are deserved or appropriate, undermines the personality. Yet their persistence is agonising, especially for those whose wrong-doing comes to be regarded by themselves as so heinous that its contemplation appears unbearable. Rescue from this "hell" can only be obtained by transformation of character.

When in ancient times human beings became morally sensitive, they found words to denote their experiences of this awareness, ranging from depths of bitterness and despair to heights of bliss and dedication — such words as "hell" and "heaven". Though imagined by the religious to be post-mortal states, the more perceptive recognise their psychological reality here and now.

It is time that people ceased to wallow in imaginary guilt or have it foisted upon them. There is more than enough of the real kind around.

Sign of the Times

Two of Britain's best known charitable institutions have taken Christianity down a peg.

Barnardo's, the children's charity, has decided to get rid of its specifically Christian image in order to meet the needs of contemporary society. It is seeking the Charity Commissioners' consent to alter the articles of association which describe Barnardo's as a Christian organisation within the Protestant tradition, with the promotion of Christianity as one of its main objects.

New members of staff will no longer be asked for their views on religious matters. It already employs people of different religious faiths (and probably of none). Barnardo's ruling council decided to change the charity's status and public image after a two-year debate.

Branches of the British Red Cross have received a directive from headquarters advising them that single-faith (inevitably Christian) services should no longer be held under the organisation's auspices.

The circular states that people of all religious faiths, or none, are welcome to join the charity. "It is important that no official single-faith Red Cross service should be held which could give rise to any public perception", branches have been informed.

"Where such celebrations currently exist, branches should seek alternative celebrations."

A Red Cross service which was arranged to take place in Guildford Cathedral has been cancelled.

DARWIN, by Adrian Desmond and James Moore. Michael Joseph, £20.00

This has to be my book of the year. The familiar bewhiskered figure, dressed for his daily constitutional on the Sandwalk at Down, looks out at us from the front, back and spine of the book jacket, a picture of contentment, satisfied with a job well done. Inside, though, there is a different story, splendidly told by Adrian Desmond and James Moore; the story of "a man grappling with immensities in a society undergoing reform" and threatened with possible revolution: "a troubled man at a turning point in history".

Before his voyage on the *Beagle* and after giving up medicine, Darwin's ambition was to be a country parson, pursuing his naturalist interests in the style of Gilbert White. But he had come under the influence of the "tall, satirical, sponge expert", Lamarckian freethinker Robert Edmond Grant, while a medical student in Edinburgh in 1827, an influence that helped "to shape his own initial approach to evolution ten years later". Darwin also attended a geology course under Robert Jameson and, on the practical side, made friends with the trawler crews of Leith, accompanying them to sea and examining the catch as it was dredged up. Later, while preparing for the church, he joined the "beetle craze" at Cambridge, which involved classifying your quarry after you had caught it.

He was, then, as friends told him, well qualified for the role of gentleman naturalist to share the table with Captain Robert FitzRoy on the *Beagle*'s proposed two-year survey of coastal South America.

The story of the voyage, lasting five years, is well known through Darwin's own account, but is always worth re-telling, from the amusing first encounter with the hammock. Far from funny was the seasickness which plagued Darwin throughout. And there were constant moans ("I would much sooner live in a coal-barge on the Cam"). But there were, of course, the "transports of pleasure", the achievements, the stupendous geological conclusions. We may note, too, that British warships had just taken the Falkland Islands, although only one Englishman actually lived there.

In Australia a "good humoured" group of "Aboriginal Blacks" gave Darwin a display of spear throwing for a shilling, and their cheeriness left him doubting if they were "such utterly degraded beings as usually represented". He regretted that "the White Man. . . seems predestined to inherit the country".

Darwin returned in 1836, with a 770-page diary and packed notebooks on geology and zoology; and as Desmond and Moore say, his "haul had been enormous.

His master catalogues listed 1529 species in spirits and 3907 labelled skins, bones, and other dried specimens." He completed his *Journal of Researches* in seven months and, in July 1837, began the notebooks in which he entered his "dangerous" thoughts ("People often talk of the wonderful event of intellectual Man appearing . . . the appearance of insects with other senses is more wonderful"), developing "my theory" which "would give zest to recent & Fossil Comparative Anatomy".

It was a theory he couldn't divulge, the theory of "descent", which was equally applicable to humans as to other animals. He couldn't divulge it for fear of ostracism. He had seen "the Devil's Chaplain", the Reverend Robert Taylor, and Richard Carlile hounded out of Cambridge, and he had seen his old friend Grant humiliated at the Geological Society for his Lamarckian views. By netting man and ape together, Darwin "risked being identified with atheistic low-life", the authors say. "For a gentleman among the Oxbridge set, priming itself to guard man's soul against the socialist levellers, publishing would have been tantamount to treachery — a betrayal of the old order. It was a terrifying predicament."

So he lived a double life, highly respectable and respected, not daring to divulge the momentous ideas he was developing in private. "Oh you Materialist", he chided.

In 1839 Charles married his first cousin Emma Wedgwood, an evangelical Christian who implored her husband to be "careful even fearful" of casting off Jesus. And in 1842 as they were preparing to move, with Emma pregnant, into the former parsonage at Down, in Kent, half a million workers were on strike against wage cuts and demanding the vote; and George Jacob Holyoake was imprisoned for six months for blasphemy.

Darwin himself hated religious controversy. Privately he could not "see how anyone ought to wish Christinity to be true". If it were, "my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine." It was, nevertheless, a doctrine adhered to by his wife, Emma, and many other of his friends, which is one of the reasons for his reticence in demolishing its basis with his theory of natural selection.

When *The Origin of Species* finally appeared in 1859, the real enthusiasts were the atheists. "What a book it is", exclaimed Harriet Martineau (a close friend of Darwin's brother Erasmus), "overthrowing (if true) revealed Religion on the one hand, & Natural (as far as

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Final Causes & Design are concerned) on the other". But she thought it "a pity that 2 or 3 expressions" seemed theological; "the theory does not require the notion of a creation & my conviction is that Charles D does not hold it."

Did he? The nearest he came to stating his own (non) religious views was at a meeting with Edward Aveling and Ludwig Büchner, when he called himself an agnostic and asked: "Why do you call yourselves atheists? Why should you be so aggressive?" And he added that freethought was "all very well" for the educated, but he wondered if ordinary people were "ripe for it."

"Here spoke the comfortable squire, seeking not to disturb the social equilibrium", say his biographers. Hardly surprising, then, that he should refuse to support Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant at the Knowlton trial, or allow Aveling a dedication in *The Student's Darwin*. The book was a collection of articles written for the *National Reformer*, which Darwin had previously praised — in a private letter.

And so the contradiction continued to the end: the most daring of scientific thinkers, the man who revolutionised biology and shattered the very idea of special creation, clung to his respectability, sitting on his theory of evolution for twenty years. Even then it was, he said, like confessing a murder.

Fortunately he was an inveterate hoarder and, thanks to a great deal of recent work, Desmond and Moore say: "We now know more about the piecemeal, day-by-day development of Darwin's evolutionary views than about any other scientific theory in history." They have used this mass of material to produce a vividly written, scrupulously annotated biography of 800 pages, with 91 illustrations.

COLIN McCALL

Eugene Roddenberry, who died in October, was one of the most influential freethinkers in the world. The successful creator of "Star Trek" was also an active member of the American Humanist Association, and the television series was pervaded with humanistic ideas. When he won the Humanist Arts Award for 1991 he gave a long interview in the American "Humanist" (March/April 1991), explaining his humanist beliefs and their place in his work; " 'Star Trek' is my statement to the world ... my political philosophy ... my social philosophy, my racial philosophy, my overview on life and the human condition."

REPORT

UNITED KINGDOM HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS. Amnesty International, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 8DJ, £4.

This report makes disturbing reading. It shows how greatly a decade of authoritarian Thatcherism eroded civil liberties in this country.

Regarding Northern Ireland, details are given of ill-treatment of suspects, killings by security forces and the lack of disciplinary action against the perpetrators. Instead, arbitrary convictions of suspected terrorists are secured by non-jury Diplock courts, using uncorroborated confessions. On 14 November 1989, the United Kingdom Government announced its indefinite derogation from Article 5(3) of the European Convention on Human Rights, because of "public emergency threatening the life of the nation".

In Britain, the situation is equally depressing. The Report describes how ill-treatment of the accused was used to secure false confessions in the Birmingham Six, Broadwater Farm and Guildford Four cases. It is explained how the Prosecution illegally withheld vital evidence from the Defence and how the West Midlands Serious Crime Squad fabricated admissions by suspects. There is no proper remedy available because the outcome of enquiries by the Police Complaints Authority are secret and, in any event, police wrongdoers are rarely disciplined even when large damages are awarded to victims of police brutality by the civil courts.

Examples are given, such as the case of Mohammed Hajiazim, arrested in London for a parking offence in 1989, who was kicked so hard by policemen that one of his testicles had to be removed. In 1989 there were 2,372 complaints of police assault in London alone.

The treatment of foreigners is also condemned. In 1989 there were over one hundred cases of Immigration officers illegally refusing entry to asylum seekers. No disciplinary action was taken, nor were the victims given a second chance of entering. This, together with arbitrary arrests, detentions and deportations of refugees, has destroyed the British tradition of giving asylum to victims of persecution. The Home Secretary can expel any foreigner whose "presence is not conducive to the public good". This power is used frequently, even against persons such as Anwar-al-Hardy, who had lived in England for fifteen years but was expelled to Iran in 1990 because of the Kuwait invasion.

While Eastern Europe liberalises, the United Kingdom becomes more repressive. Perusing this damning report prompts the question of why this country is becoming so authoritarian. Perhaps it is insular English "Victorian values" at work?

TED GOODMAN

Too High a Cost

DOUGLAS HOLDSTOCK

November is the month of Remembrance for war dead. Among those remembered in churches and at war memorials this year will be the British servicemen, some of them teenagers, who died in the Gulf War. It may be a useful time to look back at the war and its consequences.

Debate on the issues raised by the second Gulf War will no doubt continue for many years, and no consensus may ever be reached on some of them. Because of the way the war was fought, many of the basic facts will never be known. The number of Allied military dead is known exactly, but estimates of Iraqi dead vary by many thousand; perhaps 120,000 military, mainly conscripts, up to 15,000 civilians during the war, and many thousands more in the civil war and among the Kurdish refugees.

A team from the Harvard School of Public Health predicted soon after the end of hostilities that 170,000 children under five could die of starvation and diarrhoeal disease in the next year or so due to destruction of power installations and water purification facilities during the war — were the latter legitimate targets? Some hospitals were bombed; all lack power and basic facilities such as drugs, intravenous fluids and blood transfusion (full details in *Counting the Human Cost of the Gulf War*, £2 from Medical Educational Trust, 601 Holloway Road, London N19 4DJ). A further report from the Harvard group in October finds matters worse; the death rate among under-fives has quadrupled, and psychological damage to children could harm them for life. The devastation resulting from the war is documented in harrowing detail.

The full glare of media publicity is no guarantee of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Faced with deadlines and reliance on a military-controlled satellite link, press and television relied on official briefings. These turned out to be somewhat selective, and despite the impression given at the time, over 90 per cent of the bombs dropped were not precisely targeted; of those that were, not all turned right at the second traffic lights as programmed.

Nor are the ultimate environmental effects yet clear, but they surely amount to one of the greatest man-made disasters. The effects of the oil slick will be confined to the Gulf, but burning of the oil wells will do serious harm to regional agriculture and climate.

Tam Dalyell, MP, and others, warned of the likely environmental effects of the war; as to the human consequences, concern in the Western media was confined to its effect on oil supplies and prices and hence on the economy, and on the possible numbers of allied military casualties. The media took notice of the

Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons when it warned that the NHS would be stretched by several thousand war wounded, but not when it predicted 100,000 dead Iraqi conscripts.

All this must make us ask if the war was justified or could have been avoided. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and Iraqi actions there were inexcusable, but sanctions were highly effective before the fighting began — over 90 per cent according to the CIA, not likely to be sympathetic to Iraq. The intransigence of Saddam Hussein before, during and after the war, makes it likely that he would have withdrawn from Kuwait with great reluctance. On the other hand, the atrocities committed by the Iraqis might have been less but for the immediate threat of war hanging over them. As we are seeing in South Africa, sanctions are a slow way to enforce international will, but a far longer trial of their effectiveness against Iraq was surely justified.

The difficulties of keeping a multinational armed force of several hundred thousand on the edge of the desert for a year or more, including Americans in an alcohol, drugs and sex-free zone, need no emphasis. For these or perhaps more political reasons it seems likely that President Bush, probably urged on by Margaret Thatcher, decided on war almost from the start, and pushed the UN into acceptance by taking advantage of most members' strong objection to Iraqi aggression and by behind-the-scenes diplomacy (such as promises of debt relief to Egypt and more arms sales to Saudi Arabia). Whatever the interpretation of the various Articles of the UN Charter, dissected at length on the correspondence page of *The Freethinker*, the action as it turned out seems quite incompatible with the Preamble to the Charter which begins: "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. . .", or Article 1 which states that "The Purposes of the United Nations are: (1) To maintain international peace and security. . .". The crucial Security Council Resolution 678 "to use all necessary means. . ." was a fudge; probably some of those voting for it hoped that it was bluff. UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar may or may not have reluctantly accepted this resolution, and the legality of the use of force, but in several public statements he made it clear that the United States, not the United Nations, was responsible for the actual conduct of the war.

The situation that led to the Gulf War may have been unique — an aggressive act by a repressive military dictatorship in an area of high international tension, which also threatened the vital interests (the oil supplies) of an otherwise unopposed superpower. But other

Letters

ANTI-ABORTION SPLIT

Barbara Smoker has allowed herself to be fooled by anti-abortion propaganda (Letters, October). There is no doubt that your description of SPUC as a "Catholic-dominated pressure group" was accurate.

Since its formation (and I was present at the inaugural meeting in 1967) the organisation has been at great pains to present itself as broadly based. Initially, Roman Catholics were excluded from membership of the Executive Committee — although the Roman Catholic MP, Norman St John Stevas, was its parliamentary champion from the start. However, when Phyllis Bowman — one of the founders, a leading activist throughout the past 25 years and currently Director — converted to Catholicism in the 70s, this pretence became even harder to maintain.

Although now retired from the abortion scene, I continue to read the anti-abortion lobby's literature, receive press cuttings from the religious press, and still occasionally debate with its members on platforms, radio and TV. From all of this contact it is obvious that the main support and driving force is and always has been the Catholic Church.

Despite its Anglican chairman (who, incidentally and interestingly, was recently quoted in the *Guardian* as "the Rev Alan Rabjohns, chairman of the Cost of Conscience Movement of priests who are preparing organised resistance to women's ordination" — which tells us something of his motivation for wanting to deny women rights over their own bodies), despite its current wooing of fundamentalists and Muslims and despite allowing LIFE to carry the blatant Roman Catholic flag, SPUC was and is dominated by and dependent on the Catholic Church for most of its grass-roots support.

It really is a great pity that freethinkers/Humanists do not concentrate their attention on attacking our enemies rather than nit-picking their friends.

DIANE MUNDAY, Wheathampstead

IN DEFENCE OF CUPITT

Karl Heath who, I understand, is a retired lecturer in philosophy, dismissed *Creation out of Nothing*, by Don Cupitt, as "a preposterous farrago of pretentious nonsense" (*The Freethinker*, October). I have to say that this "nought out of ten" judgment caused me surprise.

Admittedly, my acquaintance with philosophy is less noteworthy, consisting of a brief encounter in undergraduate days and some occasional reading since. Like most of my peers I was much bewildered by the labyrinthine thoughts of the "great minds" to which we were introduced. It was, as someone said, an odd sort of ancestor-worship, as we were expected to familiarise ourselves with the ratiocinations of the ancients before coming to grips with contemporary thought.

However, we persevered, despite the many complexities and false trails we encountered, being assisted by the writings of one Professor Joad who had a talent for rendering philosophers' ideas less obscure. He warmed our student hearts by declaring roundly that few philosophers wrote clearly and intelligibly.

Some time ago, out of curiosity, I borrowed Cupitt's book from the local public library and was sufficiently interested to acquire a copy for myself. The contents of my bookshelves tend to be much annotated, often with marked disagreements and questions, and I find it interesting to re-read these after a while, observing any changes which have taken place in my thoughts on the subject.

regional conflicts go on, as in Yugoslavia. Disputes will occur in the future, perhaps over resources other than oil, so that any lessons from the Gulf that could prevent disagreement escalating into war must be learnt. First must be the role of the arms trade, without which Saddam Hussein could not have grown from bully to world threat; global arms sales must not just be monitored but drastically cut back. An agreement banning chemical weapons is also urgent, and must include controls on sales to dubious regimes of chemicals which can be used for both legitimate purposes, such as pharmaceuticals, and manufacture of chemical weapons. Similar constraints on the sale of nuclear technology are needed even if, as is Iraq, the recipient is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In the long term, we must evolve a system of global security dependent not on the threat of military force but upon cooperation and consensus; this must be linked with relief of poverty and underdevelopment and action to protect the global environment. Regional security must become the responsibility of bodies such as the European Community — national sovereignty should be an idea whose time has gone. An EC with defence and foreign affairs responsibilities might have had a voice firm enough to prevent the Gulf War while ensuring the effectiveness of sanctions. In the Middle East, a body like the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe could be an outcome of the peace process just beginning.

The constitution of the UN, and the Security Council in particular, must be re-examined in the changed world entering the 21st century. No one country should ever again hijack its procedures as did the US over the Gulf; on the other hand, the right of any one State to veto key decisions should also be reconsidered.

As correspondents to *The Freethinker* have noted, individual humanists will have differing views on all these issues, and humanist organizations may be unable to reach a consensus on all of them. But if humanism is to justify a claim to be "conscience in action" it must do better than the British Humanist Association has done over the Gulf war. Refusing to condemn the bombing of 17 million people back into the Middle Ages, on the grounds that humanists' values and beliefs vary, surely makes humanism so vapid as to be meaningless. There was a terrible human error; history may show whether as a result of conspiracy, cock-up, or both. But whatever form a New World Order may take, it must ensure that such a mistake cannot be repeated.

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.

Cupitt says: "Profoundly different mentalities co-exist among us. So long as the talk runs only upon everyday matters, we may get along without difficulty. But when questions of ethics, religion and philosophy arise, chasms open." How true!

He goes on to outline the stances taken by three main groups: (1) those who, whether believers or not, "still find the traditional language of belief perfectly intelligible"; (2) those "whose world effectively consists of 'our' critically tested and communally agreed knowledge" (this is clearly the group to which Karl Heath belongs); (3) those who (like Cupitt) "live in a world of language" (pp188-189).

Modern linguistic philosophy (for which I hold no brief but try to understand) may be unpalatable to those who don't belong to group (3). But why represent it so unattractively by serving up some samples of its "verbiage" cold and raw? Phrases, not perhaps the author's happiest choice and too easily misconstrued by the critic, when deprived of any explanatory context may well appear absurd.

Some grasp is needed of what it means to the third group to say (for example) "language creates reality". Of course, in terms of groups (1) and (2) it is nonsense — and Cupitt would agree. This does not make it nonsense *per se*. One might think of different cartological projections or different geometries. They are not interchangeable but each is logical by its own standards.

Putting on his group (2) hat, Cupitt would not quarrel with the scientific truisms expressed by Karl Heath and could even find hilarious the remark about the dinosaurs, not to mention other ridiculous notions he is supposed to have been inferring.

Karl Heath seems to have got steamed up because *Creation out of Nothing* is not the sort of book he expected. But Cupitt is quite frank. "We are not talking about science at all. We are talking about . . . a world of meanings and values, that is, a world of language." (p. 152)

Cupitt's writing is fluent, lively and at times entertainingly colloquial. For that, even if for nothing else, Joad, I imagine, would have given him at least eight out of ten.

CHARLES WARD, Stroud, Gloucestershire

COULD DO BETTER

I do not object to Karl Heath criticising Don Cupitt's book, *Creation Out of Nothing*; it may well be a load of nonsense. However, I do feel that if he is going to accuse Cupitt of ignoring scientific facts then Mr Heath ought to make a better effort to get his own ones right. The Earth was anything but lifeless for "almost all of the pre-Cambrian era" as 3-billion-year-old stromatolite fossils testify. The Earth is also 4600, not 5000, million years old.

We are not in "a galaxy 30,000 light years from the heart of the Milky Way" — the Milky Way is the galaxy we are in, not some other. Nor is Andromeda our nearest neighbouring galaxy; the Magellanic Clouds are much closer. Mr Heath has some valid points, they would be helped by valid facts.

STEPHEN MORETON, Warrington

RELIGIOUS OSTRICHES

I read Jane Marshall's article (October) about her affinity with the Devil with considerable interest, having had similar reactions from people who regard themselves as Christians of one sort or another. None of these people seem capable or are prepared to apply analytical thought to their religion, or are so afraid of thinking to the extent of refusing to do any.

In his book, *The Transcendental Temptation*, Paul Kurtz has something to say about paradoxical mental attitudes. The explanation claims, rightly, I think, that many people who maintain, or claim to maintain, certain beliefs don't really believe, but can't bring themselves to admit it to the other part of the brain. This is all part of the dreadful human capacity for

self-delusion that seems to operate in all fields of human activity. They believe and disbelieve at the same time. They know some of their beliefs are quite impossible but are now faced with the problem of reconciliation. Remember the old philosophy of believing six impossible things before breakfast? For example, they must believe the Bible (God's word). Also God is omnibenevolent (perfection) yet God insisted on killing tens of thousand of completely innocent people (much of the Old Testament).

Their only way to cope with these paradoxes is to ignore them and hope they'll go away. Alternatively one can do what amounts to the same thing and say it is "one of God's mysteries". This is what they see their co-religionists doing. What they avoid at all costs is ventilating these problems and thus betraying doubts.

CYRIL JAMES, Sheffield

WORDS AND BELIEFS

Ernest Wakefield is rather unkind and unfair to ancient scribes in his recent letter (Letters, October). Belief in gods, demons, fairies, ghosts, etc., certainly long preceded the invention of writing. It existed, and exists, in non-literate societies. It is even highly probable that many such beliefs existed long before humans beings found words to express them. As Karl Heath puts it in the same issue: "If language names things and processes, how can this be possible unless the things and processes exist prior to language?" Quite; and this remains true even if the things and processes are "abstract mental concepts".

Apart from which, of course, as is only too painfully obvious, there are a great many people to whom these entities do have a concrete existence — hence the need for *The Freethinker*. Don't let's get bogged down in semantics. I think that all your readers, however properly or improperly educated, are well aware that the question, "Do you believe in Heaven and hell", means "Do you believe in the concrete existence of Heaven and Hell?" Regretably, many people do.

E. M. KARBACZ, Colchester

PEACE NOW

Harry Stopes-Roe makes civilised discussion difficult partly because he insists on abusing or patronising his opponents, and partly because he insists on interpreting terms or opinions in his own way without considering that they may have quite different but equally valid meanings for other people. His repeated definition of humanism as a "stance for living" or "life-stance" involves excluding things which many humanists want to include and including things which many humanists want to exclude. He insists in his latest letter (October) that "what Humanism is for" is "to give people the foundation on which to build their lives"; but this certainly isn't what humanism is for me. He also insists that I make humanism "absurd" by claiming that it may lead to "contradictory inevitable implications"; but this is precisely what happens when we argue from our common humanism to different conclusions.

Our respective positions on the Gulf War, which Harry Stopes-Roe says are "symmetrical", both derive from our humanism; but that is all they have in common. To put the issue at its simplest, I don't see how it is possible to support peace, whether now or at any other time, by waging war — except in the sense used by Tacitus when he reported a British leader as saying of the Romans, "Where they make a wilderness they call it peace" (which is a fair description of the result of the Gulf War). There has been war after war to end war or to make peace; and yet, as Milton asked three centuries ago, "What can war but endless war still breed?" The Humanist Peace Council, starting from humanist premises and arguing on rational principles, is for peace now and in the future and against war now and in the future. But of course we accept that other humanists may have

other views equally firmly based on their humanism.

As for the United Nations, I repeat that Security Council Resolution 678 only supported "all necessary means" to get Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, but did not sanction a major war to do so, and that the United Nations itself never approved a full-scale military attack to inflict physical, economic, social and political destruction on both countries. Like the Korean War forty years ago, the Gulf War was conducted in the name and under the auspices of the United Nations but on the initiative and in the interests of the United States, and in a spirit and manner contemptuous of humanity, and was therefore opposed by many individuals and organisations who support the United Nations. This is why the United Nations Association consistently opposed the beginning of the war and has consistently worked for peace in the area, and this is why the HPC is affiliated to the UNA (with which we are of course in regular touch).

NICOLAS WALTER, Humanist Peace Council, London N1

NAMING OF PARTY

Ted Goodman's shocking ignorance of Scottish politics is again shown by his miscalling the Scottish *National Party* "the Scottish Nationalist Party", and by his belief that the said Party is in favour of a "Scottish Parliament", i.e., some form of devolution (Letters, October). Fortunately, in the same issue, Eric Stockton and George Jamieson were on hand to put him right.

JOHN L. BROOM, Stromness, Orkney

Sunday Trade Confusion

"The situation is now a farce", declared Roger Boaden, representative of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, after last month's High Court ruling on Sunday trading. Mr Justice Brooke overturned decisions by magistrates in Coventry and Tunbridge Wells who had listed for trial cases against Woolworths and Comet.

The court allowed judicial reviews of the magistrates' decisions on the grounds that they could not determine the issues "without guidance of the decisions of the European Court". The ruling has in effect ended all Sunday trading prosecutions for the time being.

Mr Boaden said: "Government ministers and law officers have been bringing cases and insisting that the law is clear. But the High Court has said it does not agree and that they should all go away until the matter is decided."

The SHRC has called for "an immediate and comprehensive reform of the Sunday trading laws and put an end to this ridiculous situation."

The Rev Huw Pritchard, a Welsh Presbyterian minister, has announced that he will be advising his congregation not to vote Labour. He is outraged because Glenys Kinnock, wife of the Labour Leader, says she no longer believes in God. "A lot of God-fearing people are very upset by this", according to Mr Pritchard. "We knew Mr Kinnock is an atheist, but for Mrs Kinnock to follow suit is very sad." Mrs Kinnock says that the religious commitment she had to religion in her youth has "now largely gone".

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 1 December, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Saturday, 7 December. Buffet supper with entertainment by Lucie and John White. Tickets £8 (including wine). Details from Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone (0273) 733215.

Chiltern Humanists. The Pavilion, Mentmore Road, Leighton Buzzard. Tuesday, 12 November, 7.30 pm. Jim Herrick: International 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, 18 November, 7.30 pm. Nick d'Ambrumenil: Our Vulnerable Atmosphere.

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

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 3 December, 8 pm. Seasonal readings and music.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 10 December, 7.30 pm. G. Williams: Freedom of Information.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 28 November, 8 pm. Matt Cherry: Young Humanists Today.

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, 21 November, 7.30 pm. Lines of Thought (anthology of prose and verse).

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 December, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Ian Cooper: Unitarianism Today.

Fostered Boy Under "Extreme Religious Pressure"

A nine-year-old boy, who cannot be named for legal reasons, has been removed from his foster parents by a Social Services department. Officials from the London Borough of Southwark decided to take action because the boy was being "emotionally abused". He was in the care of Graham and Sallie Warner, who belong to the fundamentalist Ichthus Fellowship, one of the organisations behind the annual March for Jesus jamboree.

Gerald Bowden, MP (Conservative, Dulwich), is to take up the matter with Health Minister Virginia Bottomley. He said: "The Ichthus Fellowship cannot be seen as a pernicious influence on a child." But officials claimed that the boy had to spend 30 minutes every day praying and memorising passages from the Bible. As a result, he was obsessed with ideas about sin and Hell.

Dennis Simpson, Southwark's Director of Social Services, said: "It was clear to us the child was being put under extreme religious pressure. All the workers

involved agreed that the child had regressed emotionally and the Warners were not receptive to our comments."

Mr Simpson said that social workers conducted detailed interviews with the Warners, including questions about religion, before approving them as short-term foster parents.

"I don't think anyone could have picked up the extent of their religious beliefs or what an imposition they were going to be on the child," he added.

No Time for Religion

Actor Warren Mitchell has returned to British screens in a new six-part drama, *So You Think You've Got Troubles*. This time the actor who portrayed the arch-bigot, Alf Garnett, takes the role of Ivan Fox, a lapsed Jew.

In real life, Warren Mitchell has no time for religion. He abandoned the Jewish faith while a teenager. He says: "I like Jewish food and Jewish gags, but not the religion."

Warren Mitchell believes the world would be a better place without religion. He doesn't mind if his new show offends Catholics, Protestants or Jews. In his opinion there is too much bland comedy about.

Just over 20 years ago, Warren Mitchell was appearing as Satan at the Criterion Theatre, London, in Oscar Panizza's play, *Council of Love*, when its two directors were unsuccessfully prosecuted by the ultra-Right Christian campaigner, Lady Birdwood. It was alleged that they "did ribaldly vilify, ridicule and scoff at the Christian religion and did in like manner impugn its doctrines".

Lady ("racialism is patriotism") Birdwood was herself before the court last month. She was fined £500 at the Old Bailey for distributing anti-Jewish "literature". One of the leaflets she distributed urged the police to connect child disappearances with Jewish festivals.

Glen Summerford, a preacher who belongs to a Protestant sect which goes in for snake handling, has been charged with assaulting his wife. Summerford, of Scottsboro, Alabama, forced his wife's hand into a box containing a rattler. Police found 16 poisonous snakes at the Summerford house.

An inquest at Birmingham was told that a devout Roman Catholic gave up drinking for Lent and later went on the spree. While urinating on a bank of the River Cole he fell into the river and was drowned. A verdict of misadventure was returned.

Subdued Welcome

Pope John Paul's visit to Brazil last month — his first in eleven years — was not the happiest of his globe-trotting career. When he last visited "the largest Catholic nation on earth", 95 per cent of the population described themselves as Catholics. That proportion is down to 75 per cent and far fewer are regular churchgoers. Even more encouraging is the fact that atheism is making progress among the educated classes.

Brazil's welcome to the Pontiff was respectful but not cordial. Audiences at Masses and similar entertainments were much smaller than expected.

The Pope and conservative elements in the Brazilian church have been fighting a losing battle on two fronts. Strenuous efforts have been made to combat what is known as liberation theology. "Progressive" seminaries have been closed, while liberationists like Fr Leonardo Bof and Archbishop Arns have been silenced or replaced by traditionalists.

But such reactionary moves have backfired on Rome. Papal intransigence on social and political questions has driven vast numbers of Brazilians into the welcoming but deadly arms of American Pentecostal sects.

John Paul's visit was bad news for local authorities. At the height of the country's catastrophic economic crisis they had to spend £35 million on special altars and security arrangements.

The most fervent prayers now being offered in Brazil are for His Holiness not to include the country in future tours.

