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CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS AND JEWS LAUNCH DECADE OF RELIGIOUS SUPERSTITION

As 1991 drew to a close, a number of developments caused consternation in the ranks of Christian faint-hearts who prefer to keep their heads beneath the parapet, and outrage among leaders of non-Christian faiths. While the churches' Decade of Evangelism (or Evangelisation, as Roman Catholics prefer) has not so far made a noticeable impact on the British people's indifference to the Christian message, it has aroused deep suspicion and hostility in other religious quarters.

The appointment by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York of Bishop Michael Marshall to lead the Spearhead project did not go down too well, particularly when he said in a broadcast that the Decade would be one of confrontation. This attitude is characteristic of Bishop Marshall and his Spearhead colleague, Canon Michael Green, who *The Times* said "will bring their experience of evangelism across the Atlantic to bear in England". Muslim leaders in particular remembered Bishop Marshall's statement: "The call to win Islam for Christ is on the agenda." Their fears were not assuaged by the Archbishop of Canterbury's bland assurance that the purpose of the Decade was to reach "lapsed Christians" and those who are indifferent to religion.

More serious, however, is the "Open Letter to the Leadership of the Church of England", signed by over half the Anglican clergy and published in the *Church Times*. Ostensibly a protest against interfaith services — in particular the Interfaith Commonwealth Day Observance in Westminster Abbey — it is an uncompromising assertion of the uniqueness and superiority of "Christian truth".

Signatories to the Open Letter do not beat about the bush regarding their belief that "Jesus Christ... is both God and man... the only Saviour and hope of mankind". Consequently, they "are concerned that his Gospel shall be clearly presented in this Decade of Evangelism".

After a fraternal nod in the direction of non-Christian religionists ("we acknowledge their rights and freedoms"), the Open Letter writers express their belief that the Lord commanded his Gospel to be clearly proclaimed to all people, including those of other faiths, "with the intention that they should come to faith in him for salvation". And for good measure they quote Article XVIII: "Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved."

On the specific question of interfaith services, the signatories "believe these events, however motivated, conflict with the Christian duty to proclaim the Gospel". The Archbishop of Canterbury, always ready to kowtow to Islamic leaders, is told that such services, attended by representatives of different faiths, are hurtful "to Christian minorities in other lands, and especially where such faiths are unwilling to tolerate conversions or the existence of minority Christians communities".

While concluding with an expression of goodwill to people of whatever faith, the Open Letter writers nevertheless declare that their "obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ obliges us to proclaim him uniquely Lord and Saviour for all".

The initiative taken by a somewhat different band of Christians has caused considerable annoyance in the Jewish community. Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, denounced a missionary group known as Jews for Jesus. They are active in Jewish areas, standing on street corners and handing out tracts which claim that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. Last month they inserted a full-page advertisement in *The Times* at a cost of £15,000. Mawkish and simplistic, it is hardly likely to convert many Jews to Jesus. But mindful of Christian persecution of Jews over many centuries, Dr Sacks is understandably aggrieved by such propaganda.

(continued on back page)



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NEWS

CARRY ON SHOPPING

"Certainly the law must not be mocked; but if it is, responsibility is shared by people who have insisted for years that a bad old law can be usefully replaced by a bad new one. . . The time is past when it made sense to say that a fresh set of restrictions must be made law. In five years of discussions, no such set has been found: the state of public opinion makes it clear that none could be." A *Church Times* editorial, from which this extract is taken, is a welcome antidote to the banging of a "respect for the law" drum on both the Conservative right and the Labour left during a House of Commons debate on questions of Sunday trading.

Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Attorney General, announced what amounted to a Government cave-in. No action would be taken against traders who flouted the law. His statement caused an alarming emission of hot air. Audrey Wise (Labour, Preston) accused the man in grey at 10 Downing Street of encouraging law breakers by stating what the vast majority already know — Sunday shopping restrictions are bizarre. Ivor Stanbrook (Conservative and Neanderthal Tendency, Orpington) suggested that supermarket bosses should be sent to prison. Simon Hughes (Liberal Democrat, Bermondsey) brought a fetching shade of purple to Conservative cheeks when he said that the party of law and order had been bought by the big retailers.

Dotty expressions of opposition to Sunday trading were not confined to the House of Commons. In the Midlands, a group described as "ten Coventry and Warwickshire communists" helped themselves to goods at a Tesco supermarket to ascertain if it is breaking the law to steal from a store which is trading illegally. And at Tesco's Bradford store, a number of Christians led by Anglican, Methodist and Baptist clergy, staged a religious service. They sang hymns and listened to a sermon by the Rev Robin Gamble of St Augustine's Church.

Ignored by shops and shoppers, unenforceable by the courts and a nuisance to local authorities who are being pestered by religious pressure groups to initiate expensive legal action, the anachronistic restrictions on Sunday trading are in disarray. For the second successive year, thousand of shops have opened their doors to millions of customers during the run-up to Christmas. Mr Bumble was proved right and Britain carried on Sunday shopping.

This time the popularity of Sunday opening has led to

AND NOTES



A MATTER OF CHOICE

a significant development. Several retailers, including Sainsbury's, Safeway and Tesco, are to continue the practice throughout the year.

Public demand for an end to restrictions on Sunday shopping has been growing since the passing of the Shops Act 1950. The release on 1 January of the 1961 Cabinet Papers revealed that Sunday trading laws were regarded in Government circles as "antiquated and confused" 30 years ago. Rab Butler, Conservative Home Secretary of the day, submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet suggesting a liberalisation of the law or an end to all restrictions. Butler favoured the latter course: "It seems pretty clear that in present-day conditions, these restrictions are not needed."

Nearly all reforming measures are prevented or delayed by Christian lobbyists and liberalisation of the Sunday laws is no exception. Sabbatarian campaigners scored a notable success with the narrow defeat of the Government's Shops Bill in 1986. Among those who voted against reform were many Labour MPs from Scotland where they could legally shop in their constituencies on Sunday, and Unionist MPs from Northern Ireland which was not included in the Bill. It is now clear that although a small majority in the House of Commons voted against reform, an overwhelming majority in the country are in favour.

Who are the main opponents of Sunday shopping, cultural, sporting and recreational activities?

The Lord's Day Observance Society, founded in 1831 and once a power in the land, is strongly Protestant, fundamentalist and conservative. Northern Ireland is one of the very few areas in which it has the slightest influence. Viewing benighted mankind with dour disapproval, it is something of an embarrassment to most churches.

The Keep Sunday Special Campaign is a modern upstart dating from 1985. It presents a slick image and conceals its fundamentalism beneath a veneer of spurious social concern. The KSSC has created an anti-reform coalition of chambers of commerce, religious groups, churches and politicians. Its biggest "catch" is the unrepresentative Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers.

Sabbatarian freaks have long since lost the battle to impose their wishes regarding Sunday observance on the population at large. The current skirmish over Sunday trading is yet another futile delaying action to prevent England and Wales coming into line with Scotland on this issue.

Jane Wynne Willson's *New Arrivals* is the third in a series of Guides she has written on non-religious ceremonies. Starting in the middle of the human life cycle with *To Love and to Cherish* (1988), a guide to non-religious weddings, there followed *Funerals Without God* (1989).

New Arrivals is written in a straightforward style — although some of the author's assertions are debatable — and attractively produced. It contains plenty of useful advice and practical suggestions, including five sample ceremonies.

Of course there is nothing new about non-religious ceremonies and rites of passage. These were being conducted over 120 years ago by secularists, and a short section on the history of such ceremonies would be an interesting addition to *New Arrivals*.

The role of non-religious ceremonies in the 19th century was vastly different to that in the 1990s. Many of the forerunners of today's secularists and humanists previously had strong church and chapel connections. Those institutions provided any ritual thought necessary to hatch, match and dispatch. The emerging secularist movement developed alternative ceremonies, social and educational activities for those who had abandoned religious faith.

A "naming" has advantages over non-religious ceremonies. Unlike a funeral, it is not a stressful but a happy occasion for everyone (except, perhaps, the centre of attention who may be suffering from wind): unlike a wedding, it is not hidebound by legal requirements. But is there indeed a significant demand for such ceremonies? Jane Wynne Willson writes: "Since Humanist weddings are certainly increasing in popularity, as people find out about them, there is likely to be a growing demand for naming ceremonies." Really?

One is left with a feeling that the purpose of *New Arrivals* is to create, rather than respond to, a demand for naming ceremonies. That said, Jane Wynne Willson has written an exceedingly useful guide for those parents who want something more structured than a wine and cheese party or a knees-up at the Rose and Crown to celebrate a "new arrival".

New Arrivals: A Guide to Non-Religious Naming Ceremonies, by Jane Wynne Willson, published by the British Humanist Association, 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH, price £3.

The lateness of this issue of *The Freethinker*, due to the Christmas-New Year Holiday and other circumstances, is regretted.

CAREYCANT

The Archbishop of Canterbury recently proclaimed his idea of Christian love and respect for life by virtually endorsing the Khomeini death sentence on author Salman Rushdie.

In his York University lecture, Dr George Carey said he could understand Muslims' pain over *The Satanic Verses*, which was "so damaging to the faith". Others may feel that nothing Rushdie wrote was so damaging to Islam as the public burning of his book and the scenes in London and other cities when hordes of fanatical Muslims ran riot.

Dr Carey has just been reminded by over 2000 of his own clergy of the real pain suffered by Christians — particularly converts to Christianity — in Islamic countries. And he causes deep offence to many by attacking the possible victim of religious assassins, while failing to condemn the death sentence imposed on a British subject by a foreign demagogue.

Freethinker Fund

It is not only commercial firms but voluntary organisations and their publications that have been seriously affected by the recession. But while the total donated to the Fund during 1991 is down on the previous year, there is no recession in the goodwill of *Freethinker* supporters.

The final list of contributors to the fund for 1991 is given below. Our thanks to them and all whose generosity has kept *The Freethinker* in existence since 1881.

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Total for November and December 1991: £522.80.
Grand total for 1991: £4656.95 and \$80.

ANOTHER LAW DEFIED?

The cause of voluntary euthanasia has suffered a few stumbles recently. In the political arena, in November a proposal to legalise voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide in strictly limited circumstances was rejected by a clear majority in a referendum in the American state of Washington. In the publicity arena, in October the undignified suicide of Ann Wickett, the former second wife of Derek Humphry, the leading euthanasiaist in the United States, drew attention to some of the unpleasant features of the Campaign there. Humphry and the Hemlock Society, which he founded and still leads, both battle on, but their increasing support has led to increasing resistance from their opponents.

His latest book, *Final Exit* (Hemlock Society, \$16.95), which appeared earlier this year, has sold widely in North America and copies have now started to appear in some shops in this country (£12.95). It is a brief journalistic treatment of a subject he has written several books and many articles about, and is distinguished mainly for being a guide to "The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying". As such it gives the sort of detailed information about methods, including names and doses of particular drugs, that appeared in the *Guide to Self-Deliverance* which was produced in Britain by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (then called Exit) ten years ago and was withdrawn a couple of years later under the threat of criminal proceedings.

It will be interesting to see what happens now. As with the controversies about contraception, abortion, and now Sunday trading, this one will probably be resolved not so much by rational argument as by direct action, one side simply ignoring the old law and providing the service desired by a growing majority of the population.

Surjeet Singh Saran, a Sikh priest, has been jailed for seven years at Stafford Crown Court for raping a 13-year-old girl. The court was told that he was supposed to be exorcising ghosts. Although the girl thought it was superstitious mumbo-jumbo, she visited the priest "to keep her family happy". The offence was committed in his quarters at the Ravidass Temple in Walsall, West Midlands.

Fr Beresford Skelton, a priest at St Mary Magdalene's Church, Sunderland, was taken to hospital when a statue of Christ fell on him.

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.

Contempt of Court

COLIN McCALL

I have only once served on a jury and it is not an experience I should like to go through again, with the responsibility of sending or trying to prevent somebody being sent to jail. "Trial by one's peers", "innocent until proved guilty", are fine sounding phrases which don't always work out so well in practice.

The whole atmosphere of the courtroom with His Lordship (or whatever) perched on high, delivering his judgements or misjudgements, stating the "law" even if it is an ass, or telling the jury that he will "accept a majority verdict" (bewigged counsel in support) is intimidating to the average jurymen or woman. And we all know how terribly mistaken juries can be.

The few occasions when I should have liked to have been in court are when its aura has been dispelled, as in the *OZ* trial of 1971, or when the judge's biased summing up has been disregarded. Particularly, perhaps, when the Blake escape jury put humanity before the law.

Marty Feldman was my favourite comedian when Richard Neville, Jim Anderson and Felix Dennis were tried for obscenity at the Old Bailey, and he still amuses me when I read Tony Palmer's book on the trial. Marty, who appeared for the defence, didn't want to swear on anything, certainly not the Bible. He thought there were more obscene things in the Bible than in the schoolchildren's issue of *OZ* for which the three men were arraigned. When informed by the judge that he had to take the oath or affirm, he chose the latter. And when the prosecuting counsel asked him about his remarks on the Bible, Feldman described it as "much more depraved".

"Upon reflection", Tony Palmer found Marty Feldman's evidence "full of common sense. At the time, however, it seemed not only preposterous but ill-mannered and ill-timed". Not that the "mannered" evidence of experts carried much weight with His Honour, Judge Michael Argyle, QC.

How right Tony Palmer was to "reflect" on the comedian's contribution may be judged from this excerpt. "If authority is secure", Feldman said, "it does not fear attack. Ridicule is a valid weapon, I think. In a dictatorship, one of the first things they try to do is to outlaw ridicule. Hitler did this and Franco did this, and there are some who are trying to do this today. Anyway, comedy is personal; what makes you laugh doesn't necessarily make me laugh. So I don't think any subject should be outlawed. If you can discuss a subject seriously, then you should be able to discuss it humorously, especially at school."

When Michael Argyle began his summing up, it was, Tony Palmer wrote, "like listening to a friendly village schoolmaster — kindly, thoughtful and considerate".

But whatever the tone, the substance was "perniciously wicked", and by the end of seven hours the jury knew what was expected of them. And when they returned their verdicts of guilty on most counts, the judge told them with perhaps unintended irony, "although the result has nothing to do with me, may I say how much I agree with the verdict".

In theory, says Peter Hain in his *Political Trials in Britain*, "the jury is all-powerful", but they "are left in appalling ignorance of their rights. From the moment they are sworn in, they are treated as interlopers, temporarily visiting the temples of justice." Judges may treat them with courtesy but there is "never any suggestion in the relationship between the two that they have absolute *rights*" (italics in the original).

The outstanding example I know of a jurymen asserting his right for the advantage of the accused was way back in 1817, when William Hone was tried three times for blasphemous libel, and three times acquitted after speaking for 21 hours.

During the first trial he was continually interrupted by Mr Justice Abbott, who three times tried to silence him on grounds of irrelevance. It was then that one of the jurymen supported Hone, saying that the point might be material and the defendant, "should have an opportunity of stating the facts truly". "With reluctance", says Arthur Calder-Marshall (*Lewd, Blasphemous & Obscene*), "Abbott allowed the defendant to proceed".

When Hone had finished, both the attorney-general and the judge instructed the jury to find him guilty, though Abbott acknowledged that the verdict should be theirs. They were out for fifteen minutes and declared him "not guilty".

The second trial on the following day was under Lord Ellenborough, who also accused Hone of wasting time. "Wasting time, my lord!" he replied. "I feel the grievance of which I complain: I am to be tried, not you! When I have been confined to a dungeon, your Lordship will sit as coolly on that seat as ever; you will not feel the punishment: I feel the grievance, and I remonstrate against it. I am the injured man. I am upon my trial by these gentlemen, my jury."

Ellenborough's summing up was as biased as Abbott's. "I pronounce this to be a most impious and profane libel." And, he told the jury: "Believing and hoping that you are Christian, I have not any doubt that but you will be of the same opinion." But they weren't.

Ellenborough tried again the following day over what he called "an irreligious and profane libel", *The Sinecurist's Creed*. And again he failed. But he had, like Abbott and Argyle, shown that contempt of court is not confined to the laity.

Burns's Piety and Wit

CHARLES WARD

The birth on 25 January 1759 of Robert Burns is celebrated annually in his native Scotland and many other countries. Burns was no favourite of the Kirk. His sceptical attitude to religion is evident in such works as *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *The Holy Fair* and *Address to the De'il*.

Scotland is full of kirks both red and grey, but the one I was looking at across the moor was whitewashed. It stood isolated among the hills; not another building was near it. I wondered idly who could possibly attend.

Down the valley, by the far side of the loch, a train was heading south, doubtless taking exiles like myself, along with other tourists, back to the concrete jungle. Soon I too should have to leave.

Seeing the church brought to mind a remark by Robert Burns about the "ingrained piety and virtue" which, he said, kept him for several years "within the line of innocence".¹ I recalled my own childhood and our family's regular attendance at church. What came to the forefront of memory was the discomfort we suffered by having to sit in a pew for long periods.

A spiritual discipline it was, no doubt. I should not describe it as a spiritual exercise, quite independent of the fact that, apart from standing at intervals to sing hymns, exercise of any kind was strictly prohibited. Unlike the Masters of Zen, I was unable to transcend painful sensations of the flesh. Hence thoughts of a heavenly nature were absent from my mind.

I can imagine that, as a boy, Burns must have felt even more trammelled than I did, since his milieu was a restricted Calvinism just beginning to soften at the edges. But the child is father of the man. The great humanity of the bard to which our more sophisticated era, no less than any other, warmly responds, was there in bud. Before any of his work was published, the keynote of it all found expression in one of his early poems:

The heart aye's the part aye
That makes us right or wrang.²

As everyone knows, Burns's passions struggled with the demands of propriety, but what comes over pre-eminently is the compassion in his humour. Often quoted are the lines:

Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us
And e'en Devotion!³

While my mother, I am sure, had no wish to put on airs, she considered that sitting while engaged in prayer

was insufficiently reverential. However, provision for kneeling was not made in our Presbyterian house of worship. So she compromised by placing her head on the bookrest. In filial loyalty we followed her example. But a ridge intended to keep Bibles and hymnbooks from slipping to the floor was not designed for recumbent crania. As a result, far from rising at the blessed yet often long-delayed Amen wearing a look of ineffable peace, we did so, quite literally, with furrowed brow.

A natural sense of fellowship arose with the bard who wrote of "three-mile prayers"⁴ and was not himself disposed to practice of the habit.

From the pulpit we were constantly reminded of Pharisees who made a show of piety. That I was doing the same failed to register for many years. I would gaze at the preacher with an expression of rapt attention while tears, though not of emotion, oozed from the corners of my eyes as yawns were valiantly suppressed, my mind a dustbowl of incomprehension.

One minister had a habit of ending his sermons with the same, or at least a similar, peroration which began with the quotation: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." When these words penetrated my mental fog I responded like one of Pavlov's dogs, perking up and salivating in anticipation of getting home for lunch. However, this gambit could be misleading, as the poor man not seldom lost the thread of what he was saying. Like an aircraft unable to land, he had to make the circuit and landing approach all over again.

Protracted inactivity involved equally prolonged contact between our backs and the pew. This happened to be coated with varnish of a peculiarly adhesive quality.

This property was enhanced, particularly on a warm day, by transfer of heat from our bodies to the treated pine. We could find ourselves strangely loth to stand for the final hymn. The spirit was indeed more than willing and of course finally conquered, though to the accompaniment of a sound resembling tearing calico.

Later, in common with many of my contemporaries, I found it necessary to detach myself from a psychological rather than a physical bonding to the church — a separation my parents (to say nothing of people in Burns's day) would have found extremely hard to understand. They would have regarded it as loss, whereas I looked upon it as gain.

One generation passes to the next something of its fundamental attitude to life. Inevitably it is transformed, sometimes drastically. Burns owed much, as he acknowledged, to his father, yet their response to life was not identical. Nevertheless the poet belonged to his time, as we do to ours. Even our most singular personal

reactions do not entirely escape the past.

Although we cannot expect to find our modern viewpoints in Burns's verse, human nature, of which he was a most perceptive observer, stays the same. Across the generations one is drawn to a kindred spirit, notwithstanding unfamiliarity of style and tongue.

"The Holy Fair" and "Holy Willie's Prayer" began to make Burns known. The latter, according to the poet himself, "alarmed the kirk-session so much, that they held several meetings to look over their spiritual artillery, if haply any of it might be pointed against profane rhymers."⁵ As a signature to a couple of his "epistles" he wrote Rob (or Rab) the Ranter. But that he never was. Preaching was not his forte. Neither was debate on religious doctrine, although, as a teenager, Burns seems to have been as argumentative with regard to that subject as I had been in my young days.

Moods did affect his work at times, but usually he was drawn by his nature to whatever seemed the more rational view among the alternatives to hand.

I had a book of his poems with me. Taking it from my pocket, and opening at random, I chuckled as I read the lines:

Ah, Nick! ah, Nick! it is na fair,
First showing us the tempting ware,
Bright wines and bonnie lasses rare,
To put us daft;
Syne weave, unseen, thy spider snare
O' hell's damned waft.

Poor man, the fly, aft bizzes by,
And aft as chance he comes thee nigh,
Thy old damned elbow yeuks wi' joy
And hellish pleasure;
Already in thy fancy's eye,
Thy sicker treasure.

Soon heels o'er gowdie! in he gangs,
And like a sheep-head on a tangs,
Thy giming laugh enjoys his pangs
And murdering wrestle,
As dangling in the wind he hangs,
A gibbet's tassel.⁶

Burns wrote so often of the Devil, almost always playfully, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that he did not really believe in him.

Personally I never thought the Devil credible. Nor Hell for that matter. However, I do not presume to know what Burns actually believed. Or merely went along with, as people often do.

Burns once boasted of having a reputation for "a certain wild logical talent" as well as "native hilarity".⁷ I share his sense of fun but my logic might be disputed, since in earlier years I had no difficulty in believing in Heaven. Logically there cannot be the one without the other.

In whatever land or century we are born we are inheritors of accepted or popular notions. In childish innocence we may take these for incontrovertible truth.

As we mature we may or may not decide otherwise. On our choice will depend whether we seek to justify continued belief or the grounds we have for rejection of such ideas. Either way, they linger at the back of our minds, embedded in our vocabulary as a framework of thought.

As Burns himself admitted, he "owed much to an old woman who resided in the family, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition".⁸ Her tales nourished in him, he wrote, "latent seeds of poetry", though he insisted "nobody can be more sceptical than I am in such matters."

Of course he may have exaggerated. Scepticism, like belief, is a matter of degree. He certainly favoured the "New Light" as opposed to the "Old Light" doctrines then current, but, despite his satirical comments, he stood by "religion", though it was perhaps a resilient nobility of thought that he was really defending, not a system. The piety he pictured ranged from the humbug, cant, hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness that he heartily deplored, through the simple, sentimental earnestness so marvellously depicted in "The Cotter's Saturday Night", to the solemn injunction:

Keep the name of Man in mind,
And dishonour not thy kind.⁹

— which could very well be a humanist's motto, I reflected.

I got to my feet. The air had cooled. Light was changing. Suddenly there came one of those spectacular displays that weather in the Highlands so often produces.

The bens behind the loch became deep purple. The white-washed kirk, as if lit by a spotlight, seemed thrust forward by this rich dark backdrop. A symbol, I thought, of the irrepressible hope of "honest men" (and women, one must add) so greatly admired by the poet — the hope, in whatever words it may be formulated, that goodness will eventually prevail:

That sense and worth, o'er a' the earth,
May bear the gree, and a' that.¹⁰

Sense and worth (expressing a more plebeian ideal than "Thy Kingdom come") may of course never be universally evident on this planet, if we insist on being realistic. But if we don't altogether crush the poet in us all, the passion that makes life worth living (and, as more people are discovering, we don't have to dress that passion in doctrinal garb) we shall make an effort to extend their boundaries.

References

- 1, 5, 7, 8 from Burns's letter to Dr Moore
- 2 *Epistle to Davie*
- 3 *To a Louse*
- 4 *Epistle to the Rev. John McMath & c.*
- 5 *Poem On Life*
- 6 *Glendiddel Hermitage*, June 28, 1788
- 10 *Is there, for honest poverty...*

Getting and Spending?

T. F. EVANS

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.
William Wordsworth

It is only rarely that a book appears which casts an entirely new light on the problems of British society. It is more usual for a book to show well-known problems from a new angle. A book which does this appeared in 1981 and was re-issued as a Pelican paperback in 1985. It did not attract a great deal of attention at either time. It has the awe-inspiring title, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, and thus would not seem the kind of work to be recommended for holiday reading. But it is nevertheless quite absorbing. The author Martin J. Wiener, was, when the book was first published, James Professor of History at Rice University, Houston, Texas.

Acres of newsprint and hundreds of books have been used to explain the reasons for the inadequacy of British economic performance since the period of the Industrial Revolution. Now Britain lags behind those she taught so long ago, and behind new nations unknown at the time of Britain's original economic leadership. Professor Wiener has a simple explanation. The British achievement, especially that at the time of its greatest flowering (which was also the time of its beginning to decline) in the Victorian age, was Janus-faced. To quote from the book:

The English genius was... not economic or technical, but social and spiritual; it did not lie in inventing, producing or selling, but in preserving, harmonizing and moralizing. The English character was not naturally progressive, but conservative; its greatest task — and achievement — lay in taming and "civilising" the dangerous engines of progress it had unwittingly unleashed.

It should be made clear that this is not the view of the author himself. He does not believe that the true English genius should naturally or necessarily, lie in that direction. In his analysis and understanding of the developments of life and culture since the Industrial Revolution, he reached the conclusion that true progress had been distorted in this way. He supports his argument with a wealth of reference to an extensive selection of authors, from creative writers, such as the Victorian novelists and other literary figures, to the authors of text-books, treatises and general commentaries on economics and political subjects.

Frequently a thought flashes from the pages that relates directly and immediately to the problems over which successive governments and, indeed, almost the entire country, have agonised over the last half-century or so. The author is not a political writer in any partisan sense. His blows fall on both sides of the political divide but, as in the nature of things, in the period of study, Britain has been ruled, or misruled, for longer by

administrations of the Right rather than the Left, it is the conservative side that appears to come in for greater punishment. An early aphorism declares that "in economic matters... bosses tend to get the workers they deserve; the attitudes and behaviour of workers are deeply influenced, even, if only in reaction, by the attitudes and behaviour of employers."

The general thesis is that the successful Victorian business man tended to turn his back on the manufacturing industry where he made his wealth, and then to build a country house and turn himself into a country gentleman. Richard Cobden expressed this forcefully, as quoted in Morley's *Life of Richard Cobden* (1881):

Nay, feudalism is every day more and more in the ascendant in social and political life. So great is its power and prestige that it draws to it the support and homage of even those who are the natural leaders of the newer and better civilisation. Manufacturers and merchants as a rule seem only to desire riches that they may be enabled to prostrate themselves at the feet of feudalism. How is this to end?

A quick answer might be that it is not yet ended, well over a century later.

Wiener refers to the view expressed in differing ways by such writers as Dickens and Trollope, Ruskin and William Morris that "commercial values were infecting and corrupting an older, quasi-feudal society." He mentions Trollope's novel, *The Way We Live Now*, and also the novels of Dickens' last period, a few years earlier, in which are seen examples of corruption and shady financial dealing of a king that occasion no surprise to a reader who is familiar with such names as the Fayed brothers, Guinness, Barlow Clowes and the BCCI.

From a general analysis of changing attitudes in the Victorian age, Professor Wiener draws out the threads of development in society and culture in the present century. He does this with many references — all of them apposite and some highly amusing — to the thoughts of leading figures, including politicians of different parties. Thus, he selects Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative premier of the inter-war years, as a leading example. Baldwin, although the heir to an ironworks business, always professed to have little interest in the industrial life (apart, it may be presumed, from the income which it regularly provided for him). In *The Torch of Freedom* (1933), he wrote of his native Worcestershire and his confidence that

... whatever may happen to England, whatever defilements of the countryside may take place, whatever vast buildings may be completed, whatever disgusting noises may be emitted upon her roads, at any rate in that one corner of England the apple blossom will always blow in the spring and that there, whatever is lovely and of good report will be born and flourish to the world's end.

He spoke also of his family firm as "a place where nobody ever got the sack!"

Other politicians fell in with this vision of England. Ramsay MacDonald contrasted the unreal world of Westminster with "the sheltered vales and creeks of the West". Nearer our own day, observes Professor Wiener, both Harold Wilson and James Callaghan (for all the former's talk of "the white heat of the technological revolution") acquired farms and, in true Baldwin fashion, liked to be photographed there.

It is often remarked that if radio listeners switch on at the beginning of the day they are more likely to find themselves hearing a programme of agricultural or religious interest; thus suggesting that someone, somewhere, is under the impression that the prevailing temper of the country is both rural and devout. Some support for this view may be found in the almost incredible success of the long-running radio serial, *The Archers*, in which a more or less rural community contrives to serve both God and Mammon by concentrating its life on the twin centres of church and pub.

The sharp-eyed Professor Wiener has not missed this feature of British life. Wickedly, he quotes the socialist Sir Stafford Cripps who said in a 1947 broadcast that "our strength and happiness reside largely in the things of the spirit", and finds in a Conservative Party General Election statement of 1949 the following stirring call to the battle of the hustings:

Conservatism proclaims the inability of purely materialist philosophies to read the riddle of life, and achieve the necessary subordination of scientific invention and economic progress to the needs of the human spirit. . . Man is a spiritual creature adventuring on an immortal destiny, and science, politics and economics are good or bad as far as they help or hinder the individual soul on its eternal journey.

Professor Wiener has great fun in putting next to each other utterances by politicians of Right and Left, united in the desire to show that Britain which led the world into industrialism could show the way out into, presumably, "the sheltered vales and creeks" of which MacDonald had spoken.

Few people today think of turning back from industrialism, whether they are in the church or politics. Rather do they think of a way out of a situation in which industrialism has made such progress that products were used to make ourselves flood into this country from such places as Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan. The solution now being put into effect, that of transforming Britain from the former "workshop of the world" into a giant leisure park surrounded by so-called "service" industries, has resulted in the concentration of political power being shifted, in the acid words of Tory maverick, Julian Critchley, MP, from the landed estate owners to the estate agents.

Unfortunately, with all the changes in society, culture

and industry, the solution to the nation's problems is as far away as ever. So, too is an answer to the question posed by Tolstoy in one of his short stories, *What Men Live By*. Tolstoy's answer, not surprisingly, brought in both God and love. Not many political programmes put these forward today. Indeed, for those who spurn the supernatural and associated mumbo-jumbo and anything based on revelation, there is an amusing irony in the call some years ago "to proclaim the ethic of altruism against egotism, of community against self-seeking, and of charity against greed." Rather unfortunately, from some points of view, these words occur in the Church of England report, *Faith in the City*. To some conventional — and conservative — believers, this kind of thing is carrying religion too far, a little like the Devil citing scripture for his purpose — in reverse.

Christian Writers on Religionists' Hit List

Christian fundamentalists in the United States have declared war on two unlikely "agents of Satan". They are C. S. Lewis, an eminent writer on religious topics who died some years ago, and Roger McGough, still very much alive and a devout Roman Catholic.

Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and McGough's *The Lake* are included in an anthology entitled *Impressions*, which allegedly "encourages children to dabble in witchcraft". One education authority that uses the book in its schools, has been accused of teaching Satanism. Groups of parents, backed by right-wing Christian organisations, have brought an action against the authority in the California Supreme Court. A representative of the Christian witch-hunters declared: "Many people are writing books today who have no morality, no decency, and all they want to do is destroy this country."

It is difficult to defend the book in an atmosphere of hysteria that has been generated by the fundamentalists. One parent who expressed approval of the book had the windows of her home smashed. A dead cat was left on the principal's desk at a school where the book was being used.

One must assume that the objectors haven't read beyond the title of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The Witch in it is the personification of evil; the Lion is the personification of good, and an obvious Christ figure; and the latter, after being put to death, rises again and destroys the former. In fact the main objection to this favourite children's book is that it is such crude Christian propaganda.

THE CHATTO BOOK OF DISSENT, edited by Michael Rosen and David Widgery. Chatto & Windus, £14.99

The Something or Other Book of This or That is a safe and satisfying sort of publication for everyone — it is easy to produce and fun to read, it doesn't go out of date, it always makes a nice present, and so on. There are several well-established series of such books — from Oxford and Cambridge, say, or Penguin and Faber — and now here is an attractive if occasionally irritating *Chatto Book of Dissent*.

Michael Rosen and David Widgery are left-wing intellectuals with lively minds and wide knowledge who have tried to provide something more original and provocative than a predictable collection of classic texts. They interpret "dissent" as something which comes between mere protest on one side and outright revolution on the other, which "sets itself against the established powerbrokers" and "questions the given rules of those who govern society", and they say that the book goes beyond disagreement and "focuses on a level of intellectual friction which is more fundamental because it expresses an insubordination". They exclude disputes about methods of government (describing them as "a debate within the elite on how best to rule"), they exclude right-wing dissent (dismissing reactionary or racist nonconformists very peremptorily), and they exclude utopian speculation (commenting that "someone else will need another book as big as this to do *The Chatto Book of Utopias*"). They try to concentrate on ordinary people ("the unknown footsoldiers of progress"), and on dissent which has a practical point ("linked to systematic action"), though they don't always succeed in either case.

After a short sharp introduction there are ten sections (which aren't entirely distinct), broadly covering oppression, freedom, men, the rich, religion, imperialism, war, rulers, injustice, and science and art. In 450 large pages there are at least as many items, including both famous and obscure ones by well-known writers and many more by obscure or unknown people, punctuated by plenty of good jokes and graffiti. There are several familiar favourites — John Ball, Bacon (Roger and Francis), Galileo, Milton, Swift, Voltaire, Paine, Byron, Shelley, Wilde, Zola, Hasek, Forster, Brecht, Joseph Heller, Martin Luther King, and so on (not always well selected). There are also a great many unfamiliar surprises even for the most serious students of this kind of material, most of them pleasant and a few unpleasant.

As in even the best-regulated anthologies, there are inevitably many regrettable omissions, and it would be

possible to think of as many things that should have been here as are here. (Anarchists and pacifists are two classes which are particularly badly represented.) There are also some unfortunate inclusions, inevitably reflecting the editors' particular prejudices, presumably intended to tease liberal readers, and certainly provoking dissent from their conception of dissent — Engels on historical materialism, Mayakovsky on Lenin, Sartre on Sartre, Paul Foot on Shelley, Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* of 1969 against men, Malcolm McLaren's cynical advice to punk musicians, and above all two IRA statements (from the Long Kesh hunger-strikers in 1980 and the Brighton bombers in 1985) which raise the question of how the publication party for the book at Conway Hall on 22 November was held not only in the premises but under the auspices of the South Place Ethical Society.

The editorial work is valuable but variable. On one hand Rosen and Widgery have ranged far and wide in many cultures over many years and have gathered all sorts of interesting and intriguing material, and have also tried to give primary rather than secondary versions of the items they have chosen. On the other hand they often fail to give complete or correct information about the sources (or to give proper credit for copyright material), and their transcriptions aren't always accurate. It is noticeable that the more recent material is increasingly banal in thought and clumsy in expression and could well have been drastically purged. There are also a few silly sectarian remarks (genus Marxist, species Trotskyist), but they can be ignored.

By and large, this is a rich and rewarding collection of dissenting material which will make you laugh and think, and is worth reading for pleasure and then re-reading for profit. It should be enjoyed by all freethinkers who appreciate the many varieties of free thinking. They may be particularly interested in the section on religion — entitled "Our Father, who art in heaven, stay there"! It includes passages from Xenophanes, Epicurus, Pelagius, Wyclif, Luther, Marlowe, Defoe, Holbach, Sade, Blake, Carlile, Holyoake, and Joe Hill, together with many other brave heretics and sceptics down the ages — a random sample rather than a representative selection, which is stimulating rather than satisfying, and which raises the thought that another welcome publication would be a nice big *Book of Freethought*.

NICOLAS WALTER

The Egyptian novelist Alaa Hamid has been jailed for eight years. His novel, *A Distance in a Man's Mind*, was described by the court as "blasphemous to Islam and the prophet Mohammed".

REVIEWS

THE WORST YEARS OF OUR LIVES, by Barbara Ehrenreich.
Lime Tree, £14.99

Could anything in the developed world have been worse than Thatcherism? Barbara Ehrenreich's collection of essays "from a decade of greed" in Reagan's America, is a resounding howl to match the protests of any of us.

It is a sad, sickening fact, however irreverent these pieces are, that there is very little cultural nourishment in a country whose staple diet consists of a language designed to reduce any human emotion or experience to "ad speak". People in the United States, we are told, no longer sit down to eat; they merely "graze", like cattle. Communication between loved ones is restricted to a few moments of "quality time" — a contradiction in terms by the very use of a catch-phrase to describe it.

The author could not publish without proclaiming herself a feminist, and the journals for which she writes announce their stance in titles like *Ms*, *Mother Jones*, and so on. Ehrenreich devotes a section of her book to what she calls "Strident Women" and another is called "The Man Excess". She is forthright on men's need to listen to the women they know toward the mutual aim of really conversing. She is broadly polemical when addressing such issues as women's need to show both her strength and her maternalism. But she is a social critic on the order of Joan Didion (she pays tribute to Didion with the section entitled "Lurching Toward Babylon") and her targets are generally the right-minded men and women whose habits over the past decade betrayed the courting of excess very near decadence, in everything from their manner of dress to their predilection for national suicide, not on the coast-to-coast, multi-storey highways but in front of the soporific television and video screens.

As nauseating as this picture of celluloid reality may be, Ehrenreich posits an American tradition which is not founded on faith, flag and family. Her origins in Butte, Montana, attest to an idyllic wholesomeness that had nothing whatever to do with ignorance or with innocence but which enabled ordinary people to detect what was sham in the image-makers who grabbed national headlines and overweening attributes with crocodile tears of patriotism and sycophancy toward those with the heftiest expense accounts (*ergo* Oliver North). It is discouraging to realise how little influence this truly silent majority will have. But Ehrenreich is convinced that such people do flourish amidst the baleful idiots in city halls the length and breadth of the

American liberals throughout the century have

attacked the zealots for their religious hypocrisy. But only a tiny proportion of them have adopted an openly humanist viewpoint, as Ehrenreich does. To suggest that this, too, is part of one American tradition is to tantalise the foreigner with a picture of America never glimpsed on television, in the cinema or the pages of American literature. Ehrenreich does little more than to assume that her humanism is American; but she does offer a parody of "secular" Sunday worship (the text taken from Voltaire) that attacks dogmatism from any quarter and which says precisely where she stands on "pastoral humanism".

Ehrenreich's parents taught her to search for the "why" in every situation, and she shows she has taken this fundamental lesson to heart in these pieces. They question most aspects of American life as we reach a new century from the reassuring standpoint: in reason we trust, not in God or God's minions.

JAMES MacDONALD

PAMPHLET

THE CHALLENGE OF SECULAR HUMANISM, by Eric Matthews. The Humanist Society of Scotland, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, HA3 2JD, £1

"'Humanism' is a very vague word, when used without any qualifying adjective. Two of the definitions given for it in the Concise Oxford Dictionary are: 'devotion to human interests' and 'doctrine emphasising common human needs and abstention from profitless theorizing'. There could not be any sort of challenge to Christianity (or to any other system of belief) in a humanism which was so defined. Indeed, it is easy to see why certain types of Christian might define themselves as 'Christian Humanists', without any contradiction."

No apology is necessary for quoting in full the opening paragraph of this excellent work. Less than two decades ago, such views were regarded as heretical in some humanist quarters. Those who recognised the need for a qualifying adjective (other than "positive") to the word humanism were loftily dismissed as "old-fashioned Victorian rationalists". But in recent years there has been a growing recognition of the necessity to emphasise the non-religious and anti-religious aspects of humanism, if only to prevent the appellation being hijacked by Christians of the All Things to all Men Tendency.

In *The Challenge of Secular Humanism*, originally presented as a paper to a conference of Scottish religious education teachers, Eric Matthews makes clear throughout that the humanism he is referring to is "very definitely non-religious and in some cases positively anti-religious". And, he declares, "it clearly presents a

challenge to Christianity and also of course to other religious systems”.

Eric Matthews considers various Christian propositions and then in the plainest of English exposes their hollowness. The First Cause argument can be punctured by the child who asks: “But what caused God?” Other pro-deity arguments are undermined in economic and understandable language.

The Humanist Society of Scotland is to be congratulated on its initiative in publishing this work which is enjoying wide circulation in educational circles. It will be of immense interest to outright unbelievers and thoughtful Christians alike.

W. McI

G. W. Foote and the R Word

ELLEN WINSOR

Now an almost forgotten fragment of English social history, republicanism was espoused by a disparate cross-section of Victorian society. George William Foote and Charles Bradlaugh, founders of *The Freethinker* and the National Secular Society respectively, were among the secularist movement's most eloquent advocates of the anti-monarchist cause.

There seem to have been a few whiffs of republicanism around of late. Media anxiety over the Royal Family's failure to pay taxes on the same basis as the rest of us and the Labour Party's somewhat grudging acceptance of the need for constitutional reform may yet prove to be part of the same plot. Reform of the House of Lords and the electoral system (for some elections at least) will inevitably lead to questions being asked about the legitimacy of monarchy in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, even if the R word is one which causes a degree of awkwardness in some company.

A friend once remarked to me that English republicanism is not dead, it is merely sleeping. If that is true, it has been a remarkably sound sleep, even in the columns of journals such as this. In fact one has to pinch oneself to remember that the republican movement of the last half of the nineteenth century was closely associated and identified with the freethought movement in general, and the National Secular Society in particular. Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* was an avowedly republican journal and the leading organisation in the field, the National Republican League, was dominated by Bradlaughites. Much the same was true of the early *Freethinker* and its founder, George William Foote. Given the reluctance with which Foote allowed his journal to dabble in the murky and divisive waters of politics, the fact that it openly expressed republican views throughout his editorship is all the more impressive, illustrating the unanimity and depth of republican sentiments in secularist ranks.

Foote's republican arguments are scattered around the books and articles he wrote and are closely related to his writings on freethought themes. I recently enjoyed reading two of his pamphlets which neatly subsume most of the arguments he presented elsewhere. These are *Royal Paupers: Showing what Royalty does for the People and what the People do for Royalty*, 4th edition, published in 1892, *God Save the King and other Coronation Articles*, published in 1903. The latter is a collection of articles which first appeared in *The Freethinker*.

The origin of the title of the first of the pamphlets,

Eric Matthews

THE CHALLENGE OF
SECULAR HUMANISM

Price £1, including postage
(discount on quantities)

The Humanist Society of Scotland,
37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock,
Ayrshire KA3 2JD. Telephone
0563 26710 (evenings and weekends)

Catholics in Dispute

A second German bishop has called on the Roman Catholic Church to reconsider its opposition to birth control and remarriage after divorce. Last July Bishop Karl Lehmann, head of the German bishops' conference, said there was a need for radical rethinking by the church on the papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. Now Bishop Norbert Werbs has told a meeting in Rome: “We must ask ourselves if we are not demanding too much of Catholic couples.”

But a group of “pro-life” lobbyists have expressed opposition to any change in Church policy. In a letter to Dr Fred Sai, president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, who recently urged the church to think again on its attitude to birth control, the pro-lifers say: “We cannot see how the church can enter into a fruitful dialogue as long as the International Planned Parenthood Federation continues, all around the world, to campaign for and to provide abortion.”

The 28 signatories describe abortion as a grave offence against the dignity of women “whose vocation to motherhood is natural”. They also denounce contraception, claiming that it is “bitterly resented” in developing countries. Warnings about the dangers of over-population are “deceptive”, declare the lobbyists, who include Professor Jack Scarisbrick and Denis Riches of Britain.

written during Victoria's reign, lies in a definition of the term pauper discovered by the author. This is "one supported by charity or some public provision". However, Foote thinks this may be a little unfair to those in workhouses who did once work and are anticipating that their plight will only be temporary.

Foote surveyed the "Royal Paupers'" contribution to the nation, but could find little of worth. He noted that the Family had invented little since George IV came up with his shoe buckle and had written or published little of note apart from the Queen's "Leaves" from her journal, in which Victoria devoted much space to the greatness and goodness of her husband, Prince Albert, and the legs and fidelity of John Brown. Most uncharitably, Foote claimed that thousands of school-girls could have turned out a better book. He also expressed concern at the Family's fertility and postulated that this may fuel a future funding crisis as, despite her wealth, the Queen had had consistent trouble financing her offspring. This had necessitated asking for a steady increase in the number of individuals supported by the Civil List.

The Freethinker's first editor undertook a detailed survey of the number and responsibilities of the hundreds of "Royal flunkeys". He was clearly bemused by their number and light burden of responsibilities. These "flunkeys" extended from the Lord Chamberlain (salary £2,000 per annum) to the lowest groom or porter. He seemed even less impressed by the rapid progress made in their careers by members of the Royal Family. He wrote of the career of the future King, Edward VII, then Prince of Wales: "His Royal Highness was a Colonel at the mature age of seventeen; he was made a full General on his twenty-first birthday, and a Field-Marshal at the age of thirty-five. Yet, he had no military training, nor has he rendered any kind of military service. His promotion meant the attainment of a handsome sinecure and the right to wear an expensive assortment of uniforms."

Foote made an attempt to survey Royalty's wealth and calculated the cost of maintaining it at over £800,000 per year. Although accepting that this may not amount to much when calculated on a per capita basis for the population as a whole, he argued that this could do great good if spent elsewhere. He attacked the argument that Royalty does no harm because it is inherent in the nature of constitutional monarchy that the Monarch exercises no real power. If this is the case, he contended, we would do better to sweep the sham away and establish a republic.

He compared the products of the British hereditary system to the electoral system of the United States: "What is our boast? George III, the madman; George IV, the profligate; William IV, the ninny; and Victoria, whose loftiest virtue is that, being a Queen, she has

lived like an honest woman. The single name of Lincoln outweighs a thousand such; nay, compared with his greatness, they are all but dust in the balance."

Foote went on to lambast the Queen for her remoteness from ordinary people; her failure to attend to the minimum duties that might be expected of a head of state (although he also pointed out that her failure to complete these merely demonstrated how she is not needed); and a "wretched" education system which meant that the Family seemed incapable of recognising the disgrace of its position. He deplored the argument that Royalty deserved privacy from the public when it was maintained by public funds.

Eleven years later, when he came to compile *God Save the King* Foote found it necessary to assure historians of the future that there was still one voice raised in opposition to and mockery of the Monarchy. He repeats some of the arguments found in the earlier pamphlet but also draws some illuminating parallels between loyalty to the Monarch and religious belief. Loyalism had all the common characteristics of religion — blind faith, headlong zeal and a hatred of heresy. He had been disturbed by popular outpourings during the celebration of contemporary Royal occasions and remarked that the real person the adoring crowds acclaimed was less important than a "fictitious creature" of their imaginations.

Foote identified a strange contradiction concerning the King, Edward VII, at the time planned for his coronation. This had been postponed due to the King's severe illness with appendicitis. His life had been saved by surgery, but despite placing his trust in medicine, the Monarch had chosen to thank God and the people's prayers for his recovery, rather than the doctors who had operated.

Finally, G. W. Foote noted the "humbug and vulgarity" which had become characteristic of early twentieth-century loyalism (and which has developed apace in the last 88 years) and seemed to be attempting to develop a little humility in the Royal Family by encouraging them to remember that "however high your seat. . . you actually sit on your own posteriors".

Of course, things have moved on. But the present writer believes that while the detail may have changed, the substance of many of Foote's arguments remains valid. The question is will freethinkers be in the vanguard of an emerging republican movement next time around?

Brook Advisory Centres have invited MPs and other elected representatives from Northern Ireland to visit a centre in Britain. Plans to open a centre in Belfast are being strongly opposed by churches and religious pressure groups.

Letters

A FEMINIST OBJECTS

I am always happy when *The Freethinker* arrives, to read the interesting and often heartening news about freethought in Great Britain.

I was therefore much taken aback by the anti-feminist jeer at "office frumps (who) complain about 'sexist' calendars and posters", and the apparent ridicule of the term "Ms", the title preferred by most women in the United States today, and one which is surely common in Great Britain.

The case editorialized about, in which a staff member at Penn State asked that a copy of Goya's Naked Maja be removed, sounds like an overreaction. But it should prompt *The Freethinker* to ask: did this music lounge contain any reproductions of undressed men in suggestive poses? If, not why?

As for the disparagement of "office frumps," the gratuitous display of undressed female flesh in the workplace can be sexual harassment calculated to put down women employees, embarrass them, or even discourage their presence. And no, I am not a prude. As a former art student, I especially enjoyed life drawing classes. As a feminist, I object to the assumption that artwork or commercial displays with sexual themes should only undress women, and be directed at male viewers only.

Finally, I can assure you that "anti-sexist thought police" do not rule in the United States. In fact, that term seems calculated to muzzle feminists and others who seek to debate the status quo. As Susan Faludi has documented in her new book, *Backlash*, women's rights have never before been under such attack in the United States. I hope *The Freethinker* will do its part to spare us further backlash.

ANNIE LAURIE GAYLOR, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

DISTURBING

The December 1991 issue of *The Freethinker* contained two items with some disturbing messages.

An editorial entitled "The Sexual Harassment of Ms Grundy" appeared to dispute the concept of sexism altogether and dismissed criticism of sexist images on posters, calendars etc, as the work of "office frumps".

Worse still was the review by Peter Cotes of the Channel 4 programme about Hasidic Jews. I did not see the programme so I can only comment on Mr Cotes' own article. In paragraph two he conceded "these Hasidic sects show no desire to conform, or live together with, rather that be separated from their neighbours—such are the rights of people in a free society. . .", but went on to criticise their "adamant refusal to lose their identity, their refusal to assimilate. . .". And what was the penalty for this "retrograde form of life" refusing to become "desirable friends and neighbours"? For those who have not sought to "escape detection" it is death.

CHRISTOPHER RICHARDSON, Nottingham

A GRATEFUL TRIBUTE

From time to time I read *The Freethinker* in my local library. This letter is simply to express my gratitude to you for confirming one of my opinions, namely that atheism and malevolence go hand in hand. Your magazine reeks of malice from start to finish.

Let me give two examples from the December 1991 edition. In one article, women who object to pornography being pasted up on the walls of their offices are jeered at as "frumps".

Or again, in his review of *Volvo City* Peter Cotes launches a tirade against the Hasidic Jews of north London for daring to be different to him. He concludes his review by warning the Jews to either stop being Jewish or face death. Does he intend that as a prediction or a threat?

Yes, I know that organised religion can be exceedingly unpleasant. I don't have much time for it either. But reading your magazine convinces me that secularism, in the long run, is even more nasty.

Enclosed is a £5 donation. I want your magazine to continue . . . as a warning to those who see atheism and secularism as the only moral alternatives to organised religion.
DAVID PRESTON, Nottingham

IN DEFENCE OF THE NEW AGE

I was absolutely appalled to read Janet McCrickard's article, "Blaming the Victim: Spirituality of the New Age" (*The Freethinker*, December 1991). I do not know what brought on this virulent, spiteful and highly inaccurate attack on New Age, but in doing so Janet McCrickard actually damages her claim to being a humanist.

The New Age is not a definite dogmatic belief. I know hundreds of New Agers who are completely antipodean to the description that Janet McCrickard has given your readers. Apart from paranoid misinterpretation of some New Age ideology, most of her opinions are subjective and can be allowed. These misinterpretations are very important as most of her criticism is levelled at the healing opportunities in the New Age, so they require extrapolation.

New Agers do not say "if you are ill, it is because you are choosing to be ill"; what they say is that you are the product of what you have been. Therefore everything you do relates in some way to your present condition and that by the same token, if you take action to balance those negatives you can create your own future. This will be more ambient and healthy, therefore there is no contradiction in the New Age claim that misfortune is created by the individual and that some people are negatively contagious.

What the New Age sets out to do is not to impose a new dogma or philosophical belief, but to provide alternative perspectives and opportunities which are non-doctrinal. Rather than disadvantage individuals or narrow their horizons, the New Age actually expands the possibilities and the technology individuals have at their disposal. It is *not* a New Age ideal to dismantle the NHS. Neither is it to force people to take responsibility for themselves to care for their own health. In fact in a recent survey of two thousand occultists' and New Agers' perceptions, to the question whether the individual would use alternative or orthodox healing, virtually everyone said they would combine the NHS with alternative healing. In other words, New Agers are opportunistic and want ultimate choice and ultimate freedoms of those opportunities in every sphere of existence.

We cannot see how Janet McCrickard can assert that new Agers adopt extreme Right-wing political stances as our experience is exactly the reverse. It is despicable to suggest the New Agers blame the Jews for their torture at the hands of the Nazis. There is no documented proof of this assertion whatsoever. It is an insult to New Agers and to the Jews themselves.

We have yet to discover why Janet McCrickard hates the New Age so much. What she seems to have done is swallow anti-occult fundamentalist propaganda hook, line and sinker.

It is absurd to suggest that the New Age is recruiting people. Like any other sub-culture, some followers of the New Age want to tell people their "good news". If people do not wish to listen, that is their prerogative. We would be pleased to show Janet McCrickard the very many comparisons between humanism and New Age philosophy. Of course they are not the same, but we harbour no enmity. Enough difficulty is to be found in fighting cultural supremacy and religious fascism without this in-fighting.
CHRIS BRAY, SAFF, 6-8 Burley Lodge Road, Leeds, LS6 1QP

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURACY

Karl Heath has the remarkable talent of simultaneously admitting that I am right and denying it. Whilst acknowledging that I am correct as regards the age of the earth, pre-Cambrian fossils and the Magellanic Clouds he accuses me of being "pedantic, superfluous and inaccurate" (Letter, December 1991).

There is nothing pedantic about a period of well over two billion years in which Karl Heath had alleged the earth was "lifeless" when, as he now admits it was not. As regards being "superfluous", his remarks about the early earth's atmosphere and life on land are utterly irrelevant.

If Karl Heath is puzzled about my comments on the Milky Way he should reread his own words that we live in "a galaxy 30,000 light years from the heart of the Milky Way". This clearly suggests that our galaxy is something different to the Milky Way and that it is located 30,000 light years from the Milky Way's heart. He should write more carefully.

Nowhere have I been "inaccurate"; that is obviously not true of Karl Heath. Accuracy is essential when tackling believers of any kind. Someone who makes errors of fact that can be remedied just by reference to a child's encyclopedia is not only showing himself to be a sloppy scholar; he is weakening the credibility of his own side.

STEPHEN MORETON, Warrington

LIFE STANCE: THE HUMAN FACTOR

Harry Stopes-Roe's December letter on "individual assumptions" unwittingly demonstrates the central problem of regarding Humanism as a life stance.

If it's an ideology, its tenets can be debated with some measure of universal objectivity. If it's a sociopolitical programme, at least a consensus may be reached at a local, national and, in a more limited way, international level. But if it's a stance for living, it's immediately intertwined with the infinite diversity of human genetic and environmental factors.

One may, of course, try to reduce these to lowest common aspirations like a quest for human dignity and an optimistic outlook on the world. But the most logical and historically validated consequence of these generalities is that rival groups should rush to war because their "human dignity" demands immediate satisfaction and their "optimism" motivates each group to anticipate victory.

Whatever views are held about the Gulf War, presumably few Humanists see militarism as the optimal form of conflict resolution.

DAVID TRIBE, Sydney, Australia

CHURCH AND GOVERNMENT

As Chris Honeywell explained in the case of Northern Ireland (Letter, December 1991), church hierarchies, dependent upon the support of their governments, tend to go along with government policies. We saw this in the Concordat signed by Hitler and the Roman Catholic Church. To this extent, those churches which are Established, or receive privileges such as rates relief, are more or less the (im)moral arm of their governments.

When church leaders, like Cahal Daly, protest that religion is not to blame for the Ulster troubles, they are correct in the sense that it is politics which is to blame. But what they will not admit is that their church hierarchies are part and parcel of that political struggle.

E. F. CROSSWELL, Slough

NEW AGENCY

When visiting local groups I note that most people arrive with a partner. I am planning to set up a Humanist singles agency with a view to providing friends, pen-friends or partners. Details will be forwarded to interested readers.

RON SHELLEY, 98 Beaufont Avenue, Blackpool, FY2 9AG

A (FORMER) CURATE REMEMBERS

I'm not quite sure what you mean by saying that Bishop Michael Marshall "is on what could be described as the rock bottom wing of Anglicanism" (News and Notes, December 1991).

If you are referring to his churchmanship, you couldn't be more wrong. Before becoming Bishop of Woolwich, he was Vicar of that notorious Anglo-Catholic shrine, All Saints', Margaret Street, London. I blush to mention that I was briefly (1971-2) one of his curates!

DANIEL O'HARA, London EC2

EVENTS

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

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

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meeting obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Saville 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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 4 February, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

Humanist Holidays. Easter (17-21 April) in Torquay. Information from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 239175.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 11 February, 7.30 pm. Brian Blackwell: The New Leeds RE Syllabus.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Bill Abbey: Columbus — Was His Journey Necessary?

National Secular Society. Annual Dinner at the Bonnington Hotel, London, Saturday, 11 April.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 20 February, 7.30 pm. Public Meeting.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Friday, 24 January, 7 pm. The Conway Memorial lecture. Sir Hermann Bondi: Humanism — the Only Valid Foundation for Ethics.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 February, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Annual General Meeting followed discussion of A. N. Wilson's book, Against Religion.

Murder in the Family

Two Muslim brothers who were found guilty at Leeds Crown Court for murdering their sister and her lover have been jailed for life. Mr Norman Jones, QC, prosecuting counsel, told the jury that Sharifin Bibi and Hashmat Ali "vanished as if they had been spirited away from the earth. They left behind a house with the lights on, the door locked and the telephone off the hook."

The motive for the double murder was that Sharifin Bibi abandoned an arranged marriage and went to live with Hashmat Ali. This had caused deep offence to her religious family. The brothers carried out the killings "to protect the honour of the family which, they felt, had been despoiled", the prosecutor claimed. Their father was a devout Muslim who taught at a mosque.

The court heard that the couple disappeared in December 1988. It is believed that they were killed in a house owned by one of the woman's brothers.

(continued from front page)

Israel Finestein, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, condemned the "Madison Avenue-style evangelism" of Jews for Jesus. It was "deeply offensive to all who hold their Jewishness and Judaism dear".

But Mark Green, a Jewish-born Christian who lectures at the London Bible College and is chairman of Jews for Jesus UK, defended their missionary work. He declared: "If a decade of evangelism is going to be successful, some people are going to be upset."

Allah's warriors have also entered the fray by launching a "Decade of Islamic Revivalism". Dr Zaki Badawi, chairman of the Imams and Mosques Council, admitted that the move was in response to the Christian Decade of Evangelism which, he said, would target Muslims "in order to bring our young generation into the Christian fold".

Although the purpose of the Decade of Islamic Revivalism is not to win converts, Christian missionaries are not so particular. Fundamentalist groups, some of American origin, have been directing their propaganda at Muslims, especially in colleges and universities. Young British-born Muslims, no longer prepared to tolerate the suffocating restrictions of their homes and mullah-dominated communities, are a soft target for Christian campaigners.

It is highly likely that aggressive missionising by religious factions will continue throughout 1992 and beyond. Unbelievers could derive much enjoyment from the spectacle. But unfortunately the squabbles between dedicated followers of assorted gods, saviours and gurus will foster intolerance and communal divisions.

Neither True Nor Free

Charles Martin an associate of something called the True Freedom Trust, has launched an attack on a new book by gay journalist and counsellor, Terry Sanderson. The Trust is a fundamentalist Christian organisation which claims to "cure" homosexuality by prayer and therapy.

Terry Sanderson's book, *A Stranger in the Family: How To Cope if Your Child is Gay*, was recently featured on the Radio 4 programme, *Woman's Hour*. Its author asserts that parents should not blame themselves because they have a child who is homosexual.

Charles Martin issued a statement in which he said: "From my experience in working alongside True Freedom Trust I would strongly disagree. Particularly amongst men, an absentee father is a crucial factor in pushing someone towards homosexuality. It is a condition brought about, in large measure, by unstable family influences. . ."

"It is a disabling sexual orientation, which with goodwill and much hard work can be reversed."

He cited the research of Professor Irving, which was undertaken in the 1960s and has been long since discredited.

Terry Sanderson hit back at the True Freedom Trust, describing it as "a sinister organisation which claims to 'release' men and women from homosexuality. They claim to achieve this by 'counselling' and other 'therapies'. In fact it brainwashes people, who may already be insecure, into feeling even worse about themselves.

"Unfortunate gays who fall into their clutches are in danger of having their mental health damaged."

Jehovah's Mad Witness

A Jehovah's Witness who drowned his 70-year-old aunt in a baptism ritual said he believed she was possessed by evil spirits.

Exeter Crown Court heard how Andrew Sale, 24, of Totnes, Devon, asked his aunt if she wanted everlasting life. He then tied her hands and feet and drowned her in a bath. He later wrapped her body in a white sheet.

The Court was told Sale claimed that his name was Jesus. He lived in heaven and had destroyed Satan.

Sale, who comes from a staunch Jehovah's Witness family, pleaded not guilty to murder. The court ordered that he be admitted to a secure mental hospital.

Clairvoyants who sent a press release to BBC Radio Kent in October 1987 failed to predict that it would take over four years to deliver. It arrived in the post last month.

