

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 112 No. 3

MARCH 1992

40p

CHRISTIAN CAMPAIGN AIMS "TO REVIVE FLAGGING SUPPORT" SAYS CANDIDATE

Two initiatives, one "to put the Gospel back at the centre of British life", the other "to promote Judaeo-Christian values in politics", are being supported by pious politicians in the run-up to the General Election.

Chris Patten, Roman Catholic chairman of the Conservative Party, interrupted a Cabinet meeting at 10 Downing Street to co-sponsor the launch at the House of Commons of a publication entitled *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*. Described as "an analysis of modern culture", it will be the focus for discussion at an international gathering being held at Swanwick in July. A former secretary of the Roman Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales will chair the event at which the Archbishop of Canterbury will speak. Over 270 "thoughtful Christians in public life" have promised to attend.

Frank Field, MP (Labour) and Simon Hughes, MP (Liberal Democrat), co-hosted the House of Commons function. Mr Fields said their aim was "bringing Christianity out of the ghetto."

Bishop Leslie Newbigin, a key figure in the project, said *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture* "affirmed the Christian Gospels as not merely an option for personal life but as public truth which must shape public life."

Dr Hugh Montefiore, the former Bishop of Birmingham, said there was symbolic significance in the launch being held in the House of Commons. The sponsors were concerned "with the public debate about truth and refuse to relegate it to the personal and private options of individuals."

The Movement for Christian Democracy, founded in 1990 and "committed to strengthening Christian values in political life", has mounted a campaign directed at Parliamentary candidates. It seeks to ascertain which prospective Members of Parliament "feel able to endorse the heart of the six principles on which the Movement is founded."

The MCD organisers state: "It is our conviction that the Christian ethic should be central to all aspects of life, including the nation's political, social and economic affairs. We regard religious faith as fundamental to society."

Much of the "six principles" is bland and unexceptionable. But in the accompanying questionnaire it becomes evident that those behind the Movement for Christian Democracy speak with forked tongues. Parliamentary candidates are invited to give a For/Against answer to tendentiously worded questions on euthanasia, "destructive" experiments on human embryos, abortion, "the family" and Sunday trading. It is all familiar stuff.

Colin Challen, Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for Beverley, did not complete the questionnaire. He wrote instead to Dr Robert Song, the MCD chairman, saying that while the document "is very commendable in parts", he cannot accept that in the hands of the MCD we would see much progress.

"Rather we may see the religionists trying to revive their flagging support against a background of increasing worldwide religious tension and turmoil", Mr Challen declared.

"It is easy to make the claim that religious faith offers the basis for a new life.

"For the vast multitude, of course, faith does nothing of the sort, but merely becomes another form of enslavement and impoverishment.

"You would no doubt draw a distinction between yourselves and the fundamentalists of all faiths, who do not appear as 'tolerant' as yourselves — but then why 'Christian' democracy? Is a 'Christian' democracy one in which atheists can dwell? Or, in other words, how long would it be before your version of democracy became a vehicle for evangelism, conversion and ultimate oppression?"

(continued on back page)

THE FREETHINKER

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: William McIlroy

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

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

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

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

ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

United Kingdom: twelve months £5. Overseas surface mail
(including Republic of Ireland) £5.60; USA: twelve months
\$12. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling
drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency
(including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of
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Printed by Bristows Printers, London.

NEWS

A CRUEL CREED

An initial reaction to the plight of the 14-year-old Irish rape victim prevented from having an abortion was to demand the Attorney General's resignation. This was understandable enough. The forces of the State were lined against the girl, decreeing that she could neither have an abortion in her own country nor go to a clinic in Britain for that purpose. But the resignation of a law officer, however exalted, would change nothing. What Ireland needs is a fundamental change in attitudes on a wide range of social issues.

Fortunately the Supreme Court overturned a High Court ruling which prevented the girl from travelling to another country for a pregnancy termination. The decision was widely approved. Legal costs were met by the Irish Government, a gesture which indicates that the country's leaders are no longer in thrall to bishops.

President Mary Robinson, whose electoral triumph was a strong rebuff to reactionaries and traditionalists, has urged the Irish people to "pull together" and make progress towards a more compassionate society. But if that desirable aim is to be achieved, it will be necessary to cut the Roman Catholic clergy down to size. For while bishops and priests have been curiously restrained in their comments on the case of the young rape victim, the church and its organisations, always in the forefront of opposition to reform, bear much responsibility for the desperate situation in which she found herself.

Ireland's "pro-life", anti-abortion crusaders show little of the compassion urged by President Robinson. For the most part they are sex-obsessed and fanatical Catholics whose church denounces birth control and describes abortion as murder, but has never found difficulty in imparting its blessing on these engaged in mass slaughter on the battlefield. Their counterparts in Britain — ardent Christians, but not exclusively of the Roman Catholic faith — loudly proclaim their "respect for life", while their parliamentary backers vote against abortion and in favour of capital punishment.

The unfortunate girl's ordeal has at least forced large numbers of Irish people to recognise the folly of their decision in the 1983 referendum when, by a two-to-one majority, they voted into the Constitution a cast-iron prohibition on abortion. It was already illegal under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, but with a "pro-life" insertion into the Constitution, not even a modest measure of reform could take place without a further referendum.

S AND NOTES

The 1983 referendum resulted from a vigorous campaign by "pro-life" and "family" groups. Their clamour was augmented by sermons and pronouncements from the pulpit, together with displays in churches of posters depicting blood-smeared foetuses. Over the last nine years these groups have transformed the strict application of the anti-abortion laws into a holy crusade. They succeeded in closing two women's clinics, restricting the sale of contraceptives, withdrawing books on health matters from library shelves and having information about British abortion services deleted from magazines.

There are two main sections to the hard core of the Republic of Ireland's "pro-life" movement. First, a veritable army of priests who use the pulpit to denounce any suggestion of liberalism or reform. In many cases, these career celibates operate as sex educators. Their influence is still enormous, particularly in rural areas.

Secondly, there is a substantial body of assertive and educated middle-class women who have played a key role in establishing and running pressure groups which campaign against divorce law reform, abortion, contraception and sex education. Prior to the 1983 referendum, these groups spearheaded an anti-abortion campaign, involving children even younger than the 14-year-old rape victim in their demonstrations.

This embarrassing episode in the Republic may resurrect the myth that Northern Ireland is an oasis of Protestant liberalism in a desert of Romanist reaction. The reality is somewhat different. Social reforms have never been willingly accepted in the Six Countries, but imposed from Westminster. To this day the Abortion Act 1967 does not apply. Yet Northern Ireland contributes a substantial proportion of the thousands of Irish women who every year make the difficult and expensive journey to clinics in Britain for a termination.

It is significant that the seemingly impossible feat of securing an agreement by the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches occurred last year when it was announced that a Brook Advisory Centre was planned for Belfast. Roman Catholic priests and the Rev Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterians were as one in condemning Brook and all its works. Brook specialises in working with young people. It was invited to Belfast by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, seriously concerned about the large number of pregnancies among teenagers. In the last five years, babies were born to 29 girls under 14.

SECOND THOUGHTS

Religious revivals in Britain invariably turn out to be a false dawn. Now that the initial excitement of the Decade of Evangelism has subsided, some Christians are facing the fact that an orgy of worshipping and missionising is not going to have a lasting effect. Worse, it is likely to cause even greater division in already splintered Christianity and emphasise the separation between believers in the Judaeo-Christian God and adherents to erstwhile false faiths.

One Christian who is becoming "increasingly unhappy" about the Decade is the Rev Nigel T. Collinson, chairman of the Southampton District of the Methodist Church. In a *Methodist Recorder* article, he says the Decade "is in danger of becoming an excuse if not a reason for division". Mr Collinson pours cold water on the aspirations of those who talk of a return to an age of faith.

"There was never a real Golden Age of Faith", he writes.

"Those of an older generation will point to their youth when churches were supposedly full. But it didn't amount to all that much really. The faith of that 'Golden Age' was blown away by the advent of smaller and more dispersed families, by better entertainment than the Wesleyan choir or the Primitive preacher."

Mr Collinson expresses a fear that the Decade of Evangelism "will bring to the surface the worst tendencies of sectarianism". Given the Christian record, he is almost certainly right.

IN THE FASHION

A Vatican tribunal has ruled that transvestism, or cross-dressing, by either partner is not grounds for the annulment of a Catholic marriage. The Rota Romana, a court which considers cases which diocesan authorities cannot resolve, made the announcement in its annual report.

It would be rather embarrassing if the tribunal had made a decision implying disapproval of a practice still exceedingly popular with church dignitaries. This is evident at any assembly of ecclesiastical peacocks, all of them tastefully attired in long skirts with a profusion of frills, lace and jewellery.

One of the church's most celebrated cross-dressers was consecrated to the priesthood while appearing as an actress at a theatre in Bordeaux. He eventually became the Abbe de Choisy. Before his death in 1724 he embarked on a history of the church, working at his desk in a ball gown, elbow-length gloves and ear-rings.

The Education Secretary has announced that £150 million will be spent on improvements to church schools during 1992-3.

“We Must be Active” says Arrested Campaigner

Michael Newman, a prominent member of the British Humanist Association who serves on its Executive and Education committees, was arrested in Birmingham on 23 February after selling a copy of the banned video, *Visions of Ecstasy*. When Mr Newman accepted £2 for the video outside a meeting organised by the Young Humanists group, a vice squad officer in plain clothes made the arrest.

Police took the names and addresses of those who attended the meeting. A spokesman said the video would be examined in relation to the Obscene Publications Act and the Video Recordings Act. It would be referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions. He repeated the offence later in the week at Leeds and Canterbury. All three occasions were widely reported in local newspapers and radio programmes.

Speaking at the Birmingham meeting, Michael Newman said: “We have been ignored and silent for too long. We must be active in campaigning as humanists, atheists and agnostics.

“We must join the national and local organisations that claim to represent us and get them to speak loudly and clearly on our behalf. They have emphasised the values we share with Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews,

with all faiths. But they have deliberately avoided making strong public statements. They have let the sensitivities of the religious to gag them in speaking on our behalf. This silence has continued to allow the religious a monopoly on morals in this country.

“The conservative pro-Christian lobby, with people such as Baroness Cox, has the power, influence, money and media attention to suppress our rights in schools and to control the public debate about religious education through censorship.

“We must no longer use backdoor diplomacy. We must challenge them on every issue.”

Visions of Ecstasy, an 18-minute film about the Spanish St Teresa of Avila, was described by Mr Newman as “very boring”. It was refused a certificate for public showing and distribution by the British Board of Film Classification. The Board ruled that the video is blasphemous and would “outrage the feelings of Christians.”

Outraged Christians include Valerie Riches, moral guardian and director of Family and Youth Concern. Mrs Riches said: “Many awful things are brought to my attention, but this is just terrible.”

Rushdie Still Defiant Three Years After Fatwa

The third anniversary of the infamous death sentence passed on Salman Rushdie was marked in many countries by expressions of solidarity with the author of *The Satanic Verses* and condemnation of religious terrorism. Meetings and other events were held in Australia, Switzerland, France, Denmark, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Germany, and the United States.

The main event in Britain was a meeting at Stationers Hall, London. Organised by the Friends of Salman Rushdie and the Rushdie Defence Committee, it was televised by the BBC. Earlier in the day, a group of supporters led by Michael Foot and Fay Weldon, laid flowers at the Smithfield site where dissenters were burned at the stake. The wreath was described: “In tribute to all those around the world who struggle courageously to exercise their right to freedom of expression and to defend the right of others in the face of crushing censorship, intolerance and public silence.”

Geoffrey Robertson, QC, chaired the Stationers Hall meeting. There were speeches by playwright Tom Stoppard and German novelist Günter Grass. Martin Amis made a short speech before introducing Salman Rushdie who was warmly greeted by a large audience. While obviously affected by the strain of living in

hiding for three years with a bounty on his head, the novelist made a forthright speech in which he said: “I have no intention of becoming a non-person.”

The author of *The Satanic Verses* spoke of the murder by religious terrorists of its Japanese translator and the near fatal attack on its Italian translator. Rushdie’s courage in the face of great danger — and no doubt he realises the danger of assassination by an Islamic fanatic even if the fatwa is rescinded — was impressive and in marked contrast to the treachery of a few self-publicists and back-stabbers in legal and literary circles.

The National Secular Society, Committee Against Blasphemy Law and Humanist Liaison Committee issued statements condemning the fatwa and reiterating demands for the abolition of blasphemy law.

Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS, said the chief excuse made for Islamic threats and violence against anyone allegedly offensive novel is that, since Christianity is protected in this country by blasphemy law, it is unjust that Islam should not be similarly protected.

“This disparity in the law does indeed give some plausibility to their case”, she added.

“Why should religion be given special protection? Its

various exponents should be able to stomach the same rules of debate as any other interest group.

"Blasphemy no longer figures in the legal systems of most other European countries, so why do we need it in Britain? Its abolition would simply allow the same freedom of expression in religious controversy that we take for granted in, for instance, political controversy.

"This law reform has now, in the light of Muslim demands, become a matter of urgency. Muslim extremists are even more touchy than Christian extremists, and if our law were to give blasphemy protection to Islam, no one would dare to mention it except in the most respectful terms, for fear of incurring heavy legal costs — if nothing worse.

"A few weeks after the iniquitous fatwa, Tony Benn, MP, had the courage to introduce a parliamentary Bill to abolish the law of blasphemy, on the centenary of a similar Bill introduced by Charles Bradlaugh, MP, founder and first president of the National Secular Society. But Benn was no more successful than Bradlaugh had been.

"Though public opinion favours abolition of this archaic law, most MPs are more concerned about losing the votes of a religious group than about social consequences."

Nicolas Walter, on behalf of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, also said that one of the dangerous factors in the Salman Rushdie case is a sense of grievance felt by Muslims and members of other religions that the law of blasphemy protects only Christianity from attack.

"However, CABL argues that the solution is not to extend the law to cover other religions, which would only intensify controversy and encourage extremists to enforce their prejudices, but to abolish the law so that all religions are treated on an equal basis with each other and with all other controversial beliefs.

"The Committee is also concerned that pressure to make a new law against incitement to religious as well as racial hatred might have the same effect and make matters worse rather than better. We hold that the existing laws against personal damage and public disorder are quite sufficient if properly enforced — though we note that they have not been used against several people who have supported the fatwa against Salman Rushdie during the past three years.

"The common law offence of blasphemy in this country is an outdated and dangerous relic of religious persecution which should be abolished."

The Humanist Liaison Committee, which represents the main national organisations in the humanist movement, condemned the fatwa against Salman Rushdie when it was first issued. It deplores the fact that three years later it is still in force and affirmed its support for the Rushdie Defence Committee's campaign "against" this outrageous threat to a writer for merely

writing a book and to a British citizen who has broken no British law.

"We call on the British authorities to do everything possible to achieve a satisfactory conclusion to the whole episode.

"At the same time we regret that during these three years there has been an increasing number of such threats by religious extremists around the world. We call on all responsible authorities to do what can be done to protect the freedom of thought and speech in religious as in all other matters which has been won at such great cost over such a long period."

It has been confirmed that a paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses* will be published by an international consortium. Perhaps this less expensive edition will enable Islamic protesters to read the novel. In any case it should enjoy record sales — thanks to publicity engendered by the Ayatollah Khomeini and his book-burning henchmen.

Freethinker Fund

Reader's donations and legacies have ensured *The Freethinker's* survival in the face of many problems, particularly ever increasing costs. We are also much indebted to those who write for the paper, endeavour to increase its circulation and send reports to the editor.

This years the Fund has got off to a good start. Our thanks to everyone on the first list of contributors in 1992.

F. A. Avard, R. H. Barr, J. Bendall, K. S. Clair, J. Farrand, V. Gibson, T. M. Graham, J. W. Mooney, E. t. Rose, J. Theobald and W. Turner, £1 each; Anonymous, A. M. Ashton, N. Barnesm, A. Dawn, R. S. Eagle, G. Edwards, R. Grieve, O. Kaplan von Lang and I. Young, £2 each; J. C. W. Lewic, £2.50; R. J. Beale, H. g. Easton, M. Perkins and N. Toon, £3 each; P. Steihl, £4.40; D. Baker, J. Boyd, V. bridge, J. t. Caldwell, M. J. Carr, J. Cass, B. Cattermole, O. Ford, D. Franklin, W. Grainger, J. D. Groom, J. Hazelhurst, J. Henderson, A. P. Hodges, C. Honeywell, A. J. Hoyle, I. S. Iverson, B. E. M. Jones, J. m. Joseph, R. Lewis, J. Lippitt, T. Morrison, F. J. Muskett, A. Negus, Mr. O'Brien, T. R. Richardson, J. Ryan, R. V. Samuels, S. J. Sanders, E. Stockton, G. Stang and J. Walsh, £5 each; R. Brown, £7.50; J. G. Hillhouse, £9.40; C. L. S. Howard, E. Lewenstein, V. C. A. Mitchell, E. W. Sinclair, P. S. Smith, A. Taylor, S. Trent and K. R. Wingham, £10 each; J. Bleeker, £14; J. Rapley, £14.40; B. Aubrey, D. S. T. Baxter, L. Dawson, M. Fox, V. S. Petheram and I. A. Williams, £15 each; two Anonymous donations of £20 each; W. Donovan and G. L. J. Lucas, £25 each; R. J. Condon, £30; J. Vallance, £45; Anonymous, \$70.

Total for January: £593.20 and \$70.

Nature Minus Man?

CHARLES WARD

It is now fashionable to be "green", yet oddly enough the topic suffers from a widespread taboo. To make a rather macabre comparison — as I pick my way through the lush verdure of planet-friendly literature, I feel sometimes as if I were at a funeral where the word "death" must never be mentioned lest it prove too great a shock for some. The unmentionable topic here is "Nature Minus Man".

Even as a child I learned that the disappearance of Earth and its occupants from the universe was only a matter of time, though in my school days this dread event seemed too remote to cause anxiety. Today the question has acquired an alarming urgency. Well, let us not be afraid to take a head-on look at this gloomy possibility.

Man is a peculiar product of evolution on a particular planet. There is no scientific reason, so far as I know, to suppose that the highly convoluted process of which *homo sapiens* is an outcome could be exactly duplicated on any other planet anywhere in the universe.

It is doubtless permissible to assume the existence of highly intelligent creatures elsewhere among the galaxies, but the pleasing fancy that they are rational bipeds similar in appearance to ourselves must be relegated to science fiction.

Earth is man's only home. If Earth were at this juncture no longer able to sustain him, he would become extinct.

Man, as we are constantly reminded, has already ruined irreparably much of his environment. He has realised late in the day that it happens to form part of the planet's life-support system on which he, along with other creatures, depends for survival. Moreover, many of his kind have been unwilling to make sufficient effort to control their greedy and destructive habits.

That many find this bleak assessment of the situation intolerable is not surprising. Few of us have been accustomed to thinking of our species as anything other than the most important phenomenon in the entire cosmos, with unlimited prospects.

The world's numerous religions have fostered this attitude. Man has indulged in a kind of self-hypnosis. Religious people claim divine revelation or intuitive insight, but the fact remains that religious ideas, including the special place of man in the cosmos, all developed in human minds. Whatever other influences may have been at work, these minds could not but be conditioned by the culture and presumed knowledge of the periods in which their owners lived.

For instance, in very early times, Earth was thought to be motionless and flat like a table top, the sky an inverted bowl round the interior of which passed the

"lamps" of day and night. This cosmos, as conceived, was huge enough to be awe-inspiring to beings who feared that at the horizon one might fall over the edge. Gods dwelt above the sky, the dead in shades below the ground.

Yet while today some realisation of the immensity of the universe and of Earth's almost peripheral position in one of the millions of galaxies has been made inescapable, many are reluctant to acknowledge that man is an ephemeral, not to say negligible, constituent of the universe. The idea is clearly not one that strikes a warm, responsive chord in the human heart.

Two facts, however, ought to be faced. One is that if we are to survive as a species we must preserve our planetary environment. The prospect of human beings existing elsewhere is not nowadays inconceivable. But even were such an undertaking feasible, it is unrealisable by our generation.

The other fact is that nature (a term by which we refer, for all practical purposes, to Earth's eco-system) is life-preserving as well as life-producing.

Below the level of rational life-forms the life-preserving role operates, apparently blindly, on a staggering, statistical scale, as in the dispersal of seed. But once past the frontier of rationality there is a fundamental shift.

For example, man can now engineer genetic improvements in crops which could never occur under "natural" conditions. I mention this merely to indicate our ingrained habit of making a distinction between man and nature. We have persuaded ourselves that nature is there only for man's benefit. Why not the other way round?

The truth is, we are part of nature — nature's instruments, which nature has produced. We are not, really cannot be, detached observers, despite our scientific discipline.

It might be absurdly mythopoeic to say that Earth intends to survive. Yet the survival of the planet does happen to be the projected consequence of innumerable events in, on and around it, which may or may not be seen as related, though all are involved in the evolutionary process.

The implications of purpose which we tend to see in this process, an effect of our anthropocentrism, may not be scientifically justifiable, but neither is it scientific to ignore the occurrence of many "directional" coincidences. Explanations may elude us without depriving them of significance.

Among these, man's possession of a brain with potential far in excess of what could result from natural selection, is a notable example. Nature may have

produced in us the intelligence essential for the world's survival. That human folly threatened this in the first instance is ironic but, assuming that the pessimists are wrong and that we shall not apply our skills too late, our doing so might lead to a vast increase in human wisdom. There is no harm in hoping, if that is not all we do.

One skill, the importance of which can hardly be given too much emphasis, is that of being able to manufacture contraceptives on a massive scale. As freethinkers are keenly aware, reactionary religion does everything it can to undermine all attempts to encourage birth control, especially among less developed nations. A reason given for obstructing rational efforts to counter a population explosion which could seal the fate of the human race, is that they are not "natural".

Practically nothing that man does is "natural" in the sense inferred — which is to "let nature take its course"

without any help from man. Out goes medicine, most kinds of science. All civilisation goes down the drain if we adopt the notion that without human "interference" nature manages very nicely. Not much is changed in this myopic argument if, instead of "nature", one says "God".

Accept the fact that man is not only part of nature but is also nature's instrument and the whole perspective changes. Oh yes, man has done some foolish, indeed some evil things, yet he is not all bad — far from it — and he is learning from his mistakes. Let nature's servant do what nature needs. Earth is not immortal, any more than its creature man. The world will come to an end one day, and then, if not as is more likely long before, so will the human race. Nevertheless the story is not yet ended and it is not inevitable that we should write an inglorious final chapter now.

An Anglican's Guide to Prayer

NEIL BLEWITT

An interesting leaflet has been received by one of the Freethinker's contributors and is reproduced here. It was unsolicited.

Prayer is the means by which man communicates with the Almighty. But before discussing such matters as the proper location for the offering of prayers, the correct posture to adopt and the appropriate form of address, it must be made clear that prayer is a most important aspect of a believer's life and should not be used "unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly." For example, contact should not be made with the Almighty simply to enquire after the well-being of the Holy Ghost. In any case, it must be assumed that all three members of the Trinity are in perfect health at all times.

The first matter to be considered is where one should pray; and the Bible is of assistance here. From it we learn that, at various times, prayers have been offered in a wilderness, at the top of a house, in a prison, in a temple, on a mountain, in a field, on the sea-shore and, in the case of Jonah, from within the belly of a fish. This last location however, is not recommended for the modern supplicant. It is a difficult position to get into in the first place; and no less difficult to get out of while remaining sentient in the second. But this is not to say that it can not be done with the requisite amount of faith; for by that anything may be accomplished. As St Paul pointed out in his Epistle to the Hebrews — by faith Enoch was translated and Rahab the harlot perished not. However, it must be stressed that if any supplicant were to attempt to emulate Jonah's feat, the church could not be held liable for any adverse consequences that might ensue. And the Almighty will be equally satisfied to receive prayers from any of the other locations

mentioned. But the ideal must be that which was the subject of an instruction by our Lord himself. He said that to pray one should simply enter into one's closet and shut the door. Now it may be objected that when one wants to do so, it may already be occupied. In that situation, of course, one must wait until it is free or, alternatively, enter into somebody else's closet and shut the door, always providing that *that* is vacant at the time.

To the question, "Is there a correct time to pray?", the answer is in the negative. Again, we are fortunate to have biblical precedents in books as diverse as Daniel, Psalms, Luke and Timothy, and from them we learn that morning, noon and night are equally propitious. The Almighty is ever available. As David observed, tautologically perhaps, but aptly, "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." Paul and Silas obtained their release from prison following a prayer offered at midnight. It will be recalled that, as a result of this prayer, which must have been uncommonly earnest, God set in motion an earthquake which shook the foundations of the prison and unlocked all the cell doors. And it was evening when Elijah's prayer was answered with fire from heaven which consumed not only the intended sacrifice but also the altar on which it stood and the dust and water around about it. But it can not be emphasised too strongly that if the reader should find himself in circumstances similar to those of Paul and Silas or Elijah, and he prays with the same degree of vigour and achieves comparable results, again the church can not accept any liability in the matter for damages however caused. In the first example, therefore, it is recommended that the conventional appeals procedure be followed before a more radical solution is

attempted; and, in the second, that the supplicant should be specific in the prayer itself as to precisely what the fire is required to consume.

Another important point to consider is the physical attitude one should adopt while engaged in prayer. There are biblical precedents for standing in a synagogue, standing on a street corner, smiting the breast while standing in a temple, lying down (a posture favoured by Samuel) and, in the case of our Lord, once, falling on the face. But generally he knelt as did Daniel, Peter and Paul; and this must be the suggested attitude since it shows a degree of humility. It is conceded that a supplicant could display an even greater degree of humility by emulating the ascetics of old. St Simeon Stylites prayed from the top of a column for 30 years and, for a portion of that time, while standing on one leg. St Eusebius lived and prayed for several years from the bottom of a well which, it must be added, was dry during his period of occupation. But it is not believed that the Almighty requires men nowadays to pray while standing on one leg at the top of a 60-foot column, nor from the bottom of a dried-up well. It is doubtful, further, if the local authority would grant planning permission for such a column as St Simeon's and a latter-day St Eusebius might well find himself in contravention of the Health and Safety at Work Act.

It may puzzle the reader as to why our Lord fell on his face to pray. Unfortunately, St Matthew, who recorded the incident, does not give the reason. But it could well have been an accident; or the Lord may have thought it a good idea at the time but one which afterwards he regretted. But it is significant that he did not repeat the posture and nor has it found favour in the Christian church. However, if a supplicant feels he must fall on his face to pray, there is no reason why he should not do so. But he ought to have regard to his environment at the time. It is not recommended, for example, if he is in six feet of water or in the middle of Piccadilly Circus in the rush-hour.

The act of praying should not be undertaken lightly. The supplicant must approach it in a fit and sober frame of mind. He must be aware of his own insignificance and the Almighty's consequence. It would not be overstating the human condition to employ the phraseology of the Bible and the Prayer Book and to describe one's self as wretched, a worm, dust, vanity and a miserable sinner. A reading of the Litany will be found to be particularly helpful in this respect. It contains eight reference to miserable sinners, one to ordinary sinners, a score pleading for mercy and there are many points where the supplicant's sins, ignorances, negligences and infirmities are mentioned. And these, it should be noted, are all in the plural. The authors of the Prayer Book, it is certain, had a good knowledge of human frailties.

Once the supplicant is aware of his own inferiority, he is then in a position to focus his attention on addressing the Almighty in terms commensurate with his station. Again, the Bible and the Prayer Book provide suitable forms of address, and such phrases as the following are sure to be acceptable: King of Kings, Lord of Lords, The Fountain of all Goodness, Most Powerful and Gracious Lord, Everlasting God, The Only Ruler of Princes, Sovereign Commander and so on. The diligent supplicant may be able to add to this list by studying the Prayer Book and, indeed, by composing his own forms of address. Adjectives and nouns from the titles may be transposed, thereby adding to the stock, but this needs to be done with care.

It may be submitted that the Almighty is aware of his own attributes and capabilities and that, therefore, there is no need for the supplicant to recite them to him. Of course God knows that he is the Everlasting King, the Commander of the Fountain and Goodness Gracious, but the church is of the opinion that he likes to know that his supplicants know. (The astute reader will have noticed examples of transposition in the preceding sentence.)

Heathen gods were thought to need propitiating with sacrifices, either in lieu of, or in addition to, prayers; and it cannot be denied that the Almighty, as depicted by mortals in the Old Testament, was not himself averse to the practice. Indeed, it was stated that he was especially fond of the sweet savour of roast lamb and beef. If God needed defending one could say, of course, well — who isn't? But this is not necessary, for in the New Testament there is no authority for the continuance of the custom; and it may well be asked if the author of the Pentateuch was not mis-reading the wishes of the Almighty. However — it is firmly stated in the New Testament that by his crucifixion, our Lord was regarded as a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice. And it should be pointed out that it would be illegal to make sacrifices in churches anyway; they are not licensed as abattoirs; and it would hardly be seemly to conduct Evensong in a slaughterhouse.

It will be noticed in the Prayer Book that at the commencement of a number of prayers there are references to relevant promises made, or previous actions taken, by the Almighty in connexion with the point of the supplication. For example, in the prayer for fine weather one reads: "O Almighty God, who for the sin of man once drowned the world (except eight persons) and afterwards of thy great mercy didst promise never to destroy it so again. . .". And, in the prayer to be used in time of dearth and famine: "O God, who in the time of Elisha the prophet, didst suddenly in Samaria turn great scarcity into plenty and cheapness. . .". It can not be stated too strongly that these are not reminders to the Almighty devised to drive him into a corner as cynics

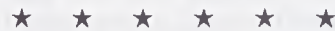
suggest. God does not need reminding. And even if an ancient achievement of his were not in the forefront of his mind, it will be observed that the recollection of it in the prayers referred to is couched in inoffensive terms.

One should not become despondent or disillusioned with prayer if God does not appear to respond immediately, or in the way in which the supplicant requires. It must be properly understood that God alone knows what is best for each supplicant; better, in fact, than the supplicant knows himself. And, in any case, the Almighty receives thousands of petitions every second of every day and it must surely be seen that time is required to process them all. This is not made any easier in that some of them may be contradictory. For example: God may receive a prayer for rain from a gardener and a prayer for fine weather from a holiday-maker, both from the same area. What would *you* do in God's position? Satisfy one only by sending rain or sun? Try to satisfy both by sending showers? Or satisfy neither by delivering a blizzard? A similar situation arises in time of war when God receives prayers for victory from chaplains representing both parties to the conflict. How does he adjudicate? He can hardly, in common parlance, declare a score-draw. But he is constantly faced with these problems, so one must accept, however difficult that may be, that whatever happens is for somebody's good and God has done his best in the circumstances. It is, therefore advisable, to avoid disappointment, to add at the conclusion of each prayer the words of our Lord himself: "Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt." This covers all eventualities, viz: the good of the supplicant as perceived by God, God's own will in the matter and the adjudication between competing claims.

There is no reason why supplicants should not compose their own prayers providing they follow the style and language of those in the Prayer Book and have regard to the other matters already dealt with: the need for an expressions of humility, an appreciation of God's consequence and a willingness to accept whatever answer to the prayer is given, even if this appears to leave the supplicant in a worse state than he was before the prayer was uttered. Extempore praying is not encouraged, but where a supplicant feels moved to pray in that way, he should avoid such expressions as "Oh, and by the way, Lord. . ."; or "Oh, my God, I almost forgot. . .". These are not thought to be acceptable. But generally, one will find in the Prayer Book prayers for every purpose. The assiduous reader will already have consulted it and found therein a diversity of prayers — ranging from one to be used in times of plague to one for Members of Parliament.

Finally, mention must be made of the value of prayers in time of sickness. Where a believer has been afflicted with some malady or other, his minister will be pleased

to visit him to offer comfort and cheer. And there is a form of service in the Prayer Book devised especially for use at the bedside of the sick. The only difficulty the patient may experience is in coming to terms with the knowledge, which will be imparted by the minister during one of the prayers, that his illness has been visited upon him by God either that his composure during its course may be an example to others, or as punishment for past wickedness — the patient's, that is, not the minister's. The outcome of the illness may well, therefore, reflect the gravity of whatever sins were committed. All that is required of the sufferer during the service is to thank the Almighty for his fatherly visitation and to be aware that it is for his soul's refinement and his mind's instruction. He may find this unpalatable at first, particularly when he realises that the Church can accept no other reason for the illness occurring. But in the unhappy event of further bouts of sickness he will soon become accustomed to the idea and, perhaps, learn to live a better life in the future — if he should ever again rise from his sick-bed. A glance at the Communion in the Prayer Book will be of assistance. Here the sufferer may be prompted to recall the offence for which his malady has been inflicted. He may find that it is because he was drunk, that he removed his neighbour's landmark, that he cursed his mother or that he made a molten image. The Communion is a reminder, too, of God's awesome power declaring, as it does, that he may still pour down from heaven fire and brimstone or summon storm and tempest for the chastisement of sinners in this life and commit them to unquenchable fire in the life hereafter.



This leaflet is one of a series. Others available are:
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Adult Baptism — Taking The Plunge
Fast Foods For Lent
The 39 Articles In Easy Steps
Holy Matrimony — The Christian Position
The Lord's Supper — A Digest
The World, The Flesh And The Devil — The Choice Is Yours

A petition backed by one million signatures in support of Sunday trading has been presented by shopworkers to MPs and Peers last month. Workers from electrical shops, video stores and DIY centres displayed a huge banner proclaiming the million signatures. Calling on MPs to reform the law after the General Election, Roger Boaden, director of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, said: "Whichever party comes to power, the message is the same. Shoppers have waited long enough, they want to shop on Sunday, provided adequate legal protection is given to shopworkers."

A HISTORY OF ATHEISM IN BRITAIN FROM HOBBS TO RUSSELL, by David Berman. Routledge, £9.99

When is an atheist not an atheist? It depends to a great extent on definition. If, as some would have it, an atheist has to deny the existence of God without qualification, then there may indeed be few philosophical atheists around. In the eighteenth century a number of writers cited by David Berman doubted the possibility of "speculative atheism", attributing disbelief variously to "pride or affectation", "indolence" or "wantonness of . . . heart".

Such was the repressive denial of atheism that, in his *Answer to Priestley* (1781), William Hammon found it necessary to declare upon his "honour" that he was an atheist. Even this didn't satisfy one reviewer. Of what value was the honour of an atheist? Only God could give meaning to an oath and as an atheist didn't believe in God his honour was valueless. Insidious though this is, comments Dr Berman, "it is a fitting reaction to the first published avowal of atheism in Britain, for in the reviewer's paradoxical contortions we can almost see the repressive tendency in its death throes".

Hammon's may have been the first published avowal of atheism in Britain, but there had been "an explosion of atheism" in the seventeenth century and particularly in the Restoration period, "largely confined to the upper classes and based primarily upon the thought of Hobbes". Because it wasn't avowed, and was indeed disavowed, it requires all Dr Berman's scholarship, added to that of his predecessors like J. M. Robertson, to uncover. But, the former says, "it existed, and the failure to recognise it must distort any intellectual history of the seventeenth century in Britain".

Hobbes denied that he was an atheist and made numerous references to God in *Leviathan*. But, Dr Berman argues, rather than being thrown around indiscriminately, "Hobbes' orthodox pronouncements make up a more or less orderly story in which the irreligious thought is embedded and camouflaged". Far fetched? Not when we remember that a man could lose his life for heresy and that Hobbes was so threatened.

Hume was another philosopher who denied atheism and, in a meeting with Baron d'Holbach and friends, absurdly said he didn't believe in atheists, when he was actually surrounded by them. Again Dr Berman turns to the works, where he finds Hume's conception of God "so vague and dilute that no past or present atheist would bother to attack it".

Hobbes and Hume are just two of the "covert" atheists Dr Berman tries to unveil in three chapters of

this closely reasoned and fully annotated book, before turning to the history of overt atheism.

Here, too, there is much dispute. Shelley's antireligious prose works, *Necessity of Atheism* and *Refutation of Deism*, appeared in 1811 and 1814 respectively. He condemned religion in *Queen Mab* and signed as an atheist in letters and in continental hotels. But, say his religious critics, these are crude, juvenile productions and actions. (Contrast the treatment of Mozart.) Anyway, Shelley couldn't have been an atheist, writes one of his editors, because he doesn't "flatly deny the existence of God. He merely asserts that with existing data and the known laws of logic, the existence of God cannot be proved".

We might be prepared to settle for that but characteristically Dr Berman doesn't. He examines the *Necessity* and the *Refutation*, "a most formidable systematic defence of atheism from the empiricist standpoint". And, he concludes, "Shelley's atheism can be regarded as the irreligious culmination of British empiricism. If Hume is Locke made consistent, then Shelley is Hume made explicit".

Pioneers of the secular movement such as Carlile, Holyoake and Bradlaugh also come under Dr Berman's scrutiny. And with Bradlaugh we return to my opening remarks. "But in any case you deny 'God'?" he asks himself in one of his *Doubts in Dialogue*. "Not unless you define the word", he replies.

Bradlaugh's "positive affirmation" was philosophical monism, adapted from Spinoza, which he considered was describable as atheism, "because it does not include in it any possibility of Theos".

Dr Berman's final threesome is the academic philosophers G. E. Moore, John Ellis McTaggart and Bertrand Russell, of whom the second is perhaps the most intriguing, though not convincing character in the book. He combined membership of the Rationalist Press Association with support for the Church of England; and "distinctive, assertive and unqualified atheism" with belief in immortality.

Dr Berman himself is an academic, senior lecturer in philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, and *A History of Atheism* is highly recommended for those of a philosophical bent. When it came out in hardback in 1988, David Tribe described it in these columns as "an intellectual thriller with an individual dialectic". Now for £9.99 you can get it in paperback and follow the author's consideration of why atheism arose so late in Britain, and the pressures that made its public avowal so difficult and dangerous.

COLIN McCALL

REVIEWS

SEX AND POLITICS: THE FAMILY AND MORALITY IN THE THATCHER YEARS, by Martin Durham. Macmillan, £10.99

I found this a fascinating book on a number of counts. But, before saying why, I must declare an interest. The author, Martin Durham, who is senior lecturer in politics at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, visited me a number of times to look through my abortion files as part of his obviously extensive research. However, the conclusions are so different from those which I now must admit sprang from my own previous unthinking political prejudices, that I can truthfully claim I gave this 209-page paperback unbiased attention!

Before beginning a thorough read, I found the thesis that the rhetoric of the Thatcher Government "outstripped or even contradicted its actions" unacceptable. By the time I had finished I was forced to agree.

Meticulous descriptions of the various campaigns waged aggressively and noisily by the moral right, confident that the Government was on its side, alongside analyses of the outcome, made me re-consider what actually happened during the Thatcher years.

Case studies of the campaigns against abortion, contraception for under-16s, embryo research, sex education, sex and violence, obscenity, etc, contain an impressive number of quotations from speeches and press reports as well as from interviews by the author with many of those at the forefront of seeking to "clean-up" Britain. These illustrate how individual Conservative MPs sided and voted with the morality lobby's views, whilst the Government made sympathetic noises on the sidelines.

Nevertheless, at the end of the Thatcher era, few of the aims of the "moral right" had been achieved. We now, in some respects, have a more liberal abortion law, contraception is available for under-age girls without parental knowledge or consent, embryo research is enshrined in law and pornography is still readily available.

For Freethinkers, part of the attraction of the book must lie in descriptions of the tactics, cross membership, accounts of intermecine feuds and quotations from a whole Pantheon of humanist bogies. These range through anti-abortion organisations such as LIFE, SPUC, the Association of Lawyers in Defence of the Unborn, the Human Life Council and Rescue, leading on to anti-contraception campaigns orchestrated by Family and Youth Concern (formerly the Responsible Society and also very active in opposing sex education) and Victoria Gillick, to generalised religious group with fingers in

most of the anti-sex pies. They include the Salvation Army, Care (formerly the Festival of Light), the Conservative Family Campaign, the Order of Christian Unity, the National Campaign for the Family, the National Council for Christian Standards in Society and others far too numerous to mention here.

Fascinatingly, the book illustrates how many of the groups contain the same individuals and spokespeople who pop up all over the place. The "fringe" groups not infrequently disappear from view when there is no current campaign and the book re-inforces my own view that some of them consist of one, two or three people, a word-processor and some headed notepaper ready for resurrection when it is opportune to attract the attention of MPs and the media.

As a comparatively short book, an enormous amount is crammed in without adversely affecting readability. I found the chapter on abortion (the subject I know best and am therefore most qualified to judge) masterly. Such a comprehensive account, analysis and commentary on anti-abortion bills, parliamentary questions, motions and debates that have come up with monotonous and frightening frequency during the past two decades, could easily have filled a whole book. But nothing of importance appears to have been left out in the chapter, "The Battle Against Abortion".

So, overall, this is a publication I heartily recommend. Even the prurient who having failed to read the subtitle, "The Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years", may pick up the book expecting to learn about whoring at Westminster, could find themselves in for an informative, readable and pleasant surprise.

DIANE MUNDAY

Letters

PRUDERY AND IGNORANCE

Your correspondents (*The Freethinker*, January and February) have wandered a long way from the original subject; a portrait of a woman by Goya. As always with that artist, it is clear from the painting how the painter felt about the sitter. Without speculating about her identity it is quite obvious that she was not a professional model and that he admired her. If her had disliked or despised either her or what he was doing, it would show. (Though to be quite fair to the censors of Penn State, this may be a bit less evident in a reproduction than in the original.) Therefore any objection to the painting is an objection to the depiction of the unclothed female body *per se* and nothing else.

It isn't the first time. In 1930 the Spanish Post Office issued monochrome reproductions of the painting measuring 4.5 x 3 centimetres. Letters bearing these disgraceful objects were seized by US Customs. What we have at Penn State is no new response, but old-fashioned American puritanical prudery using a new jargon.

However, Penn State and the US Customs did have some idea what they were dealing with. There is no sign in their letters that either Annie Laurie Gaylor (January) or Lucy Fisher (February) knows anything about the Goya painting at all. They

are merely using the occasion to air their own prejudices, insecurities and muddled thinking. No-one has a right not to be offended especially not by something they have not seen.

MARY HAYWARD, Hon Secretary, The Campaign Against Censorship, Fareham, Hants

DRAWING THE LINE

Lucy Fisher's belief that some of the paintings by Goya are pornographic (Letters, February), underlines the difficulty of defining pornography, and distinguishing it from eroticism. Are the *Kama Sutra*, the *Decameron*, the uncensored *Arabian Nights*, the novels of Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence, for example, pornographic or merely erotic. I think that one or more of your "anti-porn" correspondents should let us know.

JOHN L. BROOM, Stromness, Orkney

AN IMPRESSION OF FEMINISM

When Lucy Fisher writes (Letter, February) that she would complain "if anyone put up a nudie calendar in my office" she has every right to specify what can or cannot be displayed if she owns the office. But I suspect that by "my office" she means her place of employment which is owned by a private firm, a local authority or a Government department.

Lucy Fisher asks if "the last 20 years of feminism made no impression at all". It has made a very unfavourable impression of an arrogant and intolerant minority who claim to speak for all women and try to impose their own narrow standards on everyone.

J. G. GORDON, Bournemouth

SUDDENLY IT'S SUNDAY SHOPPING

Of course I agree that, if some traders wish to sell and some customers wish to buy, then Sunday is as good a day as any other. Nevertheless I feel that Humanists should not applaud what has just happened.

Certain powerful chains of supermarkets suddenly introduced Sunday opening with only a few days' notice. Among the employees of these companies must be many who chose their jobs with the working hours and days in mind, and their conditions of work were very abruptly altered with no time for consultation. Although Sunday duty is said to be voluntary, its success must surely depend on some pressure to "volunteer".

The present Government usually ensures that laws — good and bad laws — be rigorously enforced. Its public statement that it will not take action over breaches of Sunday trading legislation looks suspiciously like pandering to powerful commercial interests.

I should have preferred if a very desirable law reform would have arrived in a more orderly manner.

PETER DANNING, Richmond, Surrey

SELECTIVE CONCERN

On the question of Sunday shopping, Ron Smith (Letters, February) criticises *The Freethinker* for giving "a mere 13 words to the people most affected, shop assistants". If he is right about firms compelling employees to work on Sunday without extra pay, why are they not flocking to join their union (USDAW)? Could it be that Sunday working suits many shop assistants, particularly part-timers? Do supermarkets and other shops which open legally in Scotland have any difficulty in recruiting staff who are aware that they may have to work on Sunday?

There are two further aspects of this question to be considered. First, does Ron Smith use public transport, walk in a municipal park, visit an art gallery, museum, cinema, concert hall, sports stadium, restaurant, hotel or public house on Sunday? Some people have to work in order that he can do so.

In the second place, does he buy a newspaper, milk, vegetables

or any commodity on Monday which is produced, packed and distributed on Sunday? Again, some people have to work in order that he can do so.

L. J. MYERS, Loughborough

OBITUARY

F. H. Amphlett Micklewright

Although the wayward career of F. H. Amphlett Micklewright has been recorded in *The Freethinker* (November 1979), recapitulation is in order now that he has died at the age of 83.

Frederick Henry Amphlett Micklewright sketched a self-portrait with his description of another ecclesiastical wanderer "fluctuating between the claims of Rome and Canterbury with side-glances at Unitarianism". In the course of his own fluctuations, Micklewright was a Church of England minister, a Unitarian minister, again an Anglican man of the cloth and finally a Roman Catholic who, according to his whitewashing *Guardian* obituarist, "attended mass almost daily". While a church employee, he wrote pamphlets for the Rationalist Press Association. (He was also a highly successful book keeper, as those from whom he borrowed books discovered.)

After his break with the Church of England in 1955, Micklewright became actively involved in the freethought movement. Later he served for a time on the executive committee of the National Secular Society.

In those days Micklewright's chief characteristic was a blistering hatred of Roman Catholicism. This was reflected in speeches and articles wherein he castigated "the Roman Catholic rabbit-warrens to be found in the slums of Glasgow and Liverpool", "the bastard Canon law of the Roman Catholic Church" and "the crypto-fascist policies of the papacy". As for individual Catholics, "they are usually to be distinguished by their tight-lipped bigotry and their ignorant arrogance". In Micklewright's opinion, "John Bull made a bad mistake when, in 1829, he passed the Catholic Emancipation Act."

Micklewright relished gossip and took to intrigue like a Victorian wetnurse took to gin. Realising that his virulent bigotry was not endorsed by the National Secular Society, he affected to believe that a "fifth column" of pro-Vatican pinkos had infiltrated the organisation. To the great relief of all — except those of the Hyde Park school of "freethought" who regarded him as a second Bradlaugh — Micklewright eventually departed in a state of huff, puff and offended dignity.

Some years later, news that the great anti-Catholic crusader had converted to Roman Catholicism was greeted with a mixture of hilarity and incredulity in freethought circles. But it did not greatly surprise those who had long since weighed up F. H. Amphlett Micklewright.

No Substitute for Blood

DAVID GODIN

Kevin McNamara's Wild Mammals (Protection) Bill, was narrowly defeated in the House of Commons last month. Although the majority of its supporters were on the Labour benches, a substantial group of Conservative MPs backed the private measure.

The recent attempt to pass a Bill through Parliament which would have outlawed the hunting with hounds of foxes and deer, as well as prohibit hare coursing and give some measure of protection to the harmless hedgehog, showed in microcosm all that truly stinks in these British Isles, and how our reputation for being "a nation of animal lovers" is, like our claim to "always play the game", and having "the finest police force in the world", just so much fairy-tale toffee. It is precisely because we know these things aren't true, that we need to keep claiming they are. There is something so profoundly unintellectual about the British nation these days that it seems that, if you do not display a certain degree of blood-lust, your patriotic credentials are questionable. If ever nation endured the sufferings of others with fortitude, that nation is the British.

Like many moral issues, the debate proved once again how dangerous it is to assume that people have their virtues and vices in sets. The previously esteemed John Mortimer came out in favour of hunting (pity the poor nag that has to jump a hurdle with him astride its back), and it seems that he now considers himself so much a part of the Establishment that he could flaunt this particular vice fearlessly (just as Clement Freud once did when he boasted his indifference to the fate of battery hens). However, Teddy Taylor, the self-confessed right-wing Conservative MP, spoke and wrote most eloquently in favour of abolition, and, for his pains, was the recipient of the kind of vitriolic hate his political fellow-travellers seem so adept at. He was dubbed "a communist" (an epithet which, no doubt, will linger around much like the word "Satanist", long after its original meaning is forgotten), a crypto-socialist (how crypto can you get), and "a repulsive creep".

What the debate did expose beyond any doubt however, was the mentality of the hunting fraternity, who found refuge in the surrender of personal responsibility and conscience, to the oceanic Will of The Group — a cosy collectivisation that allows otherwise decent people to do wicked things. These same people probably would support the banning of works by the much-reviled Marquis de Sade, and probably because he touched that raw, but recognisable, nerve of irrational, sadistic impulses that fester just below the surface of all "civilised" conduct. This reservoir of abomination needs to be secretly sustained,

("it's silly to take thing to extremes"), because from time to time, society needs to exploit it for its own purposes.

So, the "pleasure" of the hunt is going to be allowed for a little longer, but, in typical, hypocritical British manner, the actual motivation is never allowed to become too overt or recognisable — as some consenting, adult, homosexual men recently found to their cost. Enjoying ritualistic cruelty, they freely and voluntarily entered into acts which resulted in a few drops of their own blood being spilt, and a few bruises and love-bites being sustained. They mistakenly thought that their defence that this was all entirely voluntarily entered into would excuse them, but the judge thought otherwise and sent them to prison for inflicting actual bodily harm on each other. It was their acknowledgement that this was a route to sexual pleasure that sealed their fate. Had they dressed it up as a Higher Degree Masonic ritual perhaps the judge would have been more understanding.

Also, a week or so before the hunting Bill was debated, the British press carried reviews and articles about a recently published paperback that claims that the US Government has for many years now, been in cordial contact with Alien Entities from another planet, and regularly hosts all sorts of intellectual and scientific-exchange get-togethers for the select few who can be entrusted to keep The Secret. In the crazy times in which we now live, nothing could come as much of a surprise to me, but I sincerely hope that if these advanced Entities are indeed in touch, then they have powerful, strong, and vocal, anti-hunting, anti-vivisection, vegetarian and liberationist movements back home! Perhaps John Mortimer might volunteer himself to prove to them that drag hunts aren't half as much fun as the real thing!

The daily trivialisation of sexuality continues to smokescreen the dark side of our sexual impulses which repressive societies produce, but could anything be more simply and clearly demonstrable than the overwhelming factual evidence that nothing, but nothing, depraves and corrupts so much as cruelty? Throughout the ages, creative, sensitive and artistic people (the "repulsive creeps" of right-wing mythology) have intuitively mooted this disquieting, bizarre and unsettling thread that links power, authoritarianism, brutish sexuality, cruelty, blood, lust and killing. . . . When will we face up to it? I'm buggered if I know why some people find them so alluring when to me they are so repellent, but, at the same time, I know I'd rather be lovingly buggered than ever indulge any of these impulses myself!

Cruelty in the Name of God

TERRY SANDERSON

Last month, *Free For All*, the public access programme on Channel Four, gave over some of its time to a report on the "ex-gay movement" which claims that it is able to "cure" homosexuals by counselling and prayer. The movement originated in the United States, of course, but now seems to be taking off in a big way in this country.

One of those in the forefront of the "sexual healing" fraternity is George Harvey, who for several years has been running an organisation with similar aims to those of the American evangelicals. He claims to "counsel" homosexuals who are unhappy with their orientation and turn them into heterosexuals. He has achieved this in some cases, he says, within seven weeks.

The programme showed Mr Harvey in action in a recreation of one of his "counselling" sessions. He has the Bible open on his desk and, far from "counselling" his victims, he appears to be trying to brainwash them with a lot of garbled mumbo jumbo that even the casual observer would find hard to credit. Real counselling is a useful tool in helping people find their own answers to problems that are disturbing them and interfering with their lives; to refer to what the homophobic evangelicals do as "counselling" is a perversion of the terminology.

Mr Harvey took up his "ministry to heal homosexuals" when his own son, Simon, killed himself because he discovered that he was gay. This young man who, judging by his suicide note, was an intelligent and sensitive person, could not face a life of condemnation from his father, and therefore decided that the only way out was suicide. Throughout the programme young men repeatedly said that they had contemplated killing themselves as a release from the torment of being gay in a disapproving world.

After all, homosexuals — like everyone else — have been raised to despise homosexuality, and consequently this dislike becomes deeply internalised. The aggression and negativity are all around us — in the tabloid press, Parliament, social institutions, television sitcoms and even the Humanist movement. Whenever I have written in the Humanist press on this subject, I have invariably been on the receiving end of hostility. Homosexuals, it turns out, are the people their mothers warned them about. If even our mothers tell us that gay is bad, how can we ever imagine that our feelings are worthwhile and natural to us? What can such deep and incessant disapproval do to our sense of self-esteem?

It is this very vulnerability that the "ex-gay" enthusiasts home in on. They have an agenda dictated by the Bible which says that homosexuals must not follow their emotional impulses. If the Bible says it's

wrong, then it must be opposed.

Yet, in the light of modern knowledge, biblical laws are often ignorant and cruel. The ex-gay movement says that homosexuality is caused by a child's upbringing and that it can be corrected, but recent research seems to indicate that homosexuality is much more likely to be influenced by genetic considerations. An American biologist, Professor Michael Le Vay, recently announced that he had discovered a small difference in the brains of homosexual men when compared to those of heterosexuals. He could not state categorically that this was genetic proof that homosexuality is a physical phenomenon, but other research involving twins, published two months ago, found the genes men inherit may account for as much as 70 per cent of the probability that a man will be gay. At Tufts University, Massachusetts, 167 men and their brothers were studied — 56 pairs of identical twins, who develop from the same egg in the womb and thus share the same genes; 54 pairs of fraternal twins, born simultaneously from separate eggs and as genetically similar as any siblings; and 57 pairs of adoptive brothers, who had nothing in common genetically. The scientists showed that the more genetically similar each subject was to his brother, the more likely he was to be gay himself. Fifty-two per cent of the identical twin brothers of gay subjects were also gay, compared with 22 per cent of fraternal twins and only eleven per cent of adoptive brothers. This indicates strongly that there is at least a genetic component involved in the homosexuality of some people.

If this is the case, where does this leave the ex-gay movement, whose very existence depends on the theory that homosexuality is caused by faulty upbringing? How much cruelty is being inflicted on people who can do nothing about their sexuality — however hard they pray and however much hateful propaganda they are subjected to?

The Channel Four programme featured an interview with Michael Busse, co-founder of Exodus International, a coalition group of ex-gay organisations. He said that he had "counselled" hundreds of gay men, and not one of them had changed their orientation. Some, he said, had become celibate, some had married — although they felt no sexual attraction for their wives — and some had become even more disturbed and unhappy with their sexual orientation. Mr Busse told the story of one man who felt so bad that the "therapy" was not working that he slashed his genitals with a razor.

Also on the programme was the Rev Tony Higton, a leading Evangelical and a text-book fanatic. This is a man impervious to reason and indifferent to logic. His mind is chained between the covers of a single book.

There is no evidence or proof, however irrefutable, that could disturb his serene conviction that the Bible is always right. That this man should purport to give "help" to others, when he is so obviously in need of it himself, is a true irony.

However, there is one small service that the True Freedom Trust and Exodus and Pilot and all the other "ex-gay" maniacs serve, and that is to turn people from religion. A young man in the television programme stated categorically that after a brush with one of these organisations he was no longer a Christian. He had found that the answer to his torment was to embrace his personality wholeheartedly and to reject those who would try to make him hate himself. A much healthier option which I hope other homosexuals who are unhappy with their orientation will chose.

No Time for Religion

Tommy Steele, whose new show, *Some Like it Hot*, opens at the Prince Edward Theatre, London, on 19 March, has no time for religion.

In a Sunday *Observer* interview, the 55-year-old star revealed that his parents died of cancer within a year of each other. "I began to question religion", he said. "I couldn't understand why two wonderful people had to go through the process of dying."

Tommy Steele said he was also influenced by a documentary on the composer, Sir Michael Tippett. His answer to the question why he was an atheist stuck in Tommy Steele's mind. Sir Michael said: "When I witnessed the death of a child and the famine in the world, I said to myself, why do I have more compassion than my saviour. Once I decided that I did have more compassion, I decided he didn't exist."

Asked if he was an atheist, Tommy Steele replied: "I always believed there was a superior being, but after my parents, I decided I wasn't going to be a hypocrite and use prayer as a crutch. I've decided that of all the beliefs, only an atheist isn't in it for what he can get."

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.

THE FREETHINKER

Volume 111, 1991

Bound in dark blue covers with title and date.
Price £9.95 plus £1.15 postage.

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

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (Near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 5 April, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. John Hart: Humour.

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

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

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

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road Romford. Tuesday, 7 April, 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.

The Humanist Society of Scotland. Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 25 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 26 March, 8 pm. David Seymour: Suffering — A Fact of Life.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 19 March, 7.30 pm. Ruth and Neil Blewitt: An Evening With Chapman Cohen.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 8 April, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Don Pincham: Child Care and Development: a Community Responsibility?

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include
A. N. WILSON

The Bonnington Hotel, London
(Southampton Row,
near Holborn Underground)

Saturday, 11 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £18. Vegetarians catered for
(advance notice essential)

NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL,
telephone 071-272 1266



Sorcery and Freemasonry Rumpus at the Vatican

It is not only in some English shires that blood sports are popular at the moment. Things are looking decidedly messy at the Vatican, with an archbishop and a cardinal in the firing line.

Archbishop Emmanuel of Zambia has received a severe blast up his chasuble from another member of the Pope's staff, Cardinal Silvio Oddie, who publicly described his fellow prelate as "that African clown". Furthermore, Cardinal Oddie declared that "the devil works alongside the sorcerer Millingo to discredit the church and to ridicule its representatives."

Archbishop Millingo caused considerable controversy in Africa with his mass exorcisms and crusades against demonic possession. Nine years ago the church authorities brought him to Rome — much against his will — in an attempt to curb his fervour and influence. Instead he has attracted a large following and is accused of trying to establish "a church within a church."

The archbishop reminded 80-year-old Cardinal Oddie that he is "at the threshold of the after-life. So think about it well, because at the last moment of life, it is still possible to cross into eternity with Satan at your side."

(continued from front page)

"As an atheist, I am not injunctioned to evangelise and convert. . . people can believe in whatever they choose, so long as they do not seek to impose their beliefs to the detriment of others. Time and again, religious tolerance has been shown to be skin deep."

Referring specifically to the Movement for Christian Democracy questionnaire, Colin Challen says that mixed in with simplistic For/Against questions about redistributing wealth are others which clearly have a singular significance for religionists.

"Questions about abortion are cheek by jowl with reducing third world debt and increasing public transport.

"But why not a question about extending the availability of contraception? Would it offend your Christian colleagues too much to recognise that their faith is a direct contributor to world poverty, caused by the population explosion?

"Needless to say, your conscience dictates that people in terminal agony, suffering long, lingering deaths, must not be able to avail themselves of release. I assume that's the point of the question — to know how many MPs you could count on to stop the legalisation of euthanasia."

Mr Challen concludes that the Movement for Christian Democracy begs more questions than it answers.

"Democracy is a political, not a religious concept. Democracy should guarantee the rights to freedom, not serve a religious master."

He thoughtfully offered to perform an exorcism on the good cardinal should this become necessary.

Monsignor Pietro Pinuts, Bishop of San Lorenzo in Rome, has added to the fun by producing a document adorned with occult symbols and signed by Cardinal Camillo Ruini certifying him a "Secret Master, Fourth Grade" of a masonic lodge. Cardinal Ruini, an advisor to Pope John Paul II, has hotly denied that he is a Freemason. But it's being whispered that there's no holy smoke without fire. So with one thing and another, Vatican tittle-tattlers are having a field day.

Arsonists Wreck Shop

Another New Age shop, the Bridge of Dreams, in Lincoln, has been wrecked after a fire-bomb attack instigated by Christian fundamentalists. The attack was the culmination of a campaign which was conducted by Jesuites who target shops selling New Age books and merchandise.

From the start, Bridge of Dreams attracted the hostility of Christian opponents. They picketed the premises and distributed scaremongering leaflets which strongly implied children were at risk. Pretending to be customers, they inserted Christian tracts into the books. Abusive and threatening telephone calls were made to the owners.

The fundamentalists' campaign enjoyed extensive coverage. Encouraged by favourable publicity and the local authorities' indifference to harassment of the shop's owners and customers, Christians stepped up their activities with petitions and complaints to the council. When these tactics failed they resorted to arson, causing damage estimated at £50,000.

Commenting on this latest outrage, the Sub-Culture Alternatives Freedom Foundation declared: "The petrol-bombing of the Lincoln shop was the latest piece of victimisation in a catalogue of emnity from Lincoln's fundamentalists and evangelicals. . .

"There is an insidious wave of intolerance coming towards us which, if not checked, will destroy co-existence between competing facets of our society at all levels and including all minority groupings."

The local council in Chelmsford, Essex, is helping the community to combat effects of the recession. It has withdrawn funds from the Unemployment Centre, plans to increase rents by 20 per cent and sell parking spaces to residents outside their homes. And in a special gesture to the deserving poor, it has donated £20,000 to the Cathedral organ fund.