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The Freethinker

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SHOPPING REFORMER CAMPAIGNS TO ABOLISH "HYPOCRITICAL RELIC OF ANOTHER ERA"

"I am one who has felt the frustration of not having freedom to decide for myself whether I can shop on Sunday", declares Margaret Jay, whose appointment as the new chairman of the Shopping Hours Reform Council has been announced.

Sir Basil Feldman, president of the SHRC, said he was delighted to welcome the campaigning journalist "who, as a working woman, will be a highly effective, authentic voice for the group which will particularly benefit from being able to shop on Sundays."

Margaret Jay said she would endeavour to represent "the overwhelming majority who have consistently said they want to be able to shop on Sundays."

"Since I first started to juggle a home and a job, thirty years ago, the numbers of women in full-time employment have grown considerably. Life styles have changes out of all recognition but the shopping laws have remained the same.

"Shopping is still stuck in the 1950s model. It seems that the majority of people are as frustrated as I am by this failure to change; the major surveys on reforming the shopping hours show an average of 64 per cent in favour of more shops being open on Sundays."

Margaret Jay agrees that convenience for the consumer should be matched by choice for people who work in shops.

"That's why I am a firm supporter of the SHRC's Shops Workers Sunday Charter", she says.

"The Charter insists that shop workers must be able to choose whether or not they want to work on Sundays, and must be paid a premium rate if they do choose to work. As chairman of SHRC, I will campaign to ensure that those rights are included in new legislation to extend shopping hours.

"I fully sympathise with those who feared that shopping hours reform might lead to shop workers being exploited, but I have far less patience with the vocal minority who threaten that some indefinable

'special Sunday atmosphere' will disappear in the wake of new laws."

Margaret Jay recalled that for substantial periods she had lived in the United States. She described it as "a country where far more people attend church on Sunday than do in Britain, but where supermarkets and department stores are regularly open. Anybody can buy anything on a Sunday and it is just a normal part of life.

"In my local market I would often see families in their best church clothes, some carrying bibles or prayer books, dropping in to collect a fresh pint of milk or even to stock up with a full week's provisions.

"There didn't seem anything hypocritical or unseemly about their behaviour and I'm sure their religious observances and special Sunday behaviour weren't diluted by doing some shopping as well."

With Sir Basil Feldman, Roger Boaden (director) and now Margaret Jay, the Shopping Hours Reform Council has a formidable team to lead future campaigns. Margaret Jay has had a distinguished career as a broadcaster and journalist in Britain and the United States. She was a reported on *Panorama*, specialising in social and medical questions. In 1986 she moved to Thames Television as a producer and reporter on *This Week*. In the United States she worked as a freelance reporter for ABC Television and the National Public Radio Network.

Director of the National Aids Trust since its foundation in 1988, Margaret Jay is a member of the Minister of Health's AIDS Action Group, the Central Research Development Committee for the NHS and the council of London Lighthouse.

Of her new post with the Shopping Hours Reform Council, Margaret Jay says: "I hope that I can represent the ground swell of majority opinion to achieve a common sense solution to a hypocritical, cumbersome relic of another era."



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Vol. 112 No. 44 CONTENTS April 1992

SHOPPING REFORMER CAMPAIGNS TO ABOLISH "HYPOCRITICAL RELIC OF ANOTHER ERA"	49
NEWS AND NOTES	50
Allah's Indoctrinators; Greenpeace Nobbled?; Unfinished Business; Unity in Adversity; A Late Repentance; Buried "Treasure"	
THE PRESS AND THE SUPERNATURAL	53
Terry Sanderson	
SOCIAL HUMANISM: A NEW DIRECTION	55
Karl Heath	
ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD	57
Charles Ward	
BOOKS	58
Annie Besant: A Biography	
Reviewer: Edward Royle	
The Freethinker, Volume 111, 1991	
Reviewer: Eric Stockton	
Pornography and Feminism: the Case Against Censorship	
Reviewer: Mary Hayward	
Permission and Regulation:	
Law and Morals in Post-War Britain	
Reviewer: Antony Grey	
HOME SCHOOLING	61
James Hemming	
MISCELLANEOUS	
Converts' Charity Scandal, 54; Sunday Racing Decision, 61; Letters, 62; More Knocks for Ireland's Pro-Ignorance Lobby, 64	

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NEWS

ALLAH'S INDOCTRINATORS

The Kalim Siddiqui Road Show, alternative title The Muslim Parliament of Great Britain, has issued what it grandiloquently describes as a White Paper on education. Entitled *Muslim Education in Great Britain*, its proposals are on the modest scale expected of the egocentric Dr Siddiqui and his "parliamentarians". Unfortunately some politicians on the left, fearful of being tarred with the racist brush, may take them too seriously. That would be detrimental to education, children's welfare and community relations.

It is undeniable that the Islamic fundamentalists are on firm ground in one respect. That is in regard to the discriminatory policy of successive governments in financing Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Jewish schools. The "white paper" declares: "A government that is ready to subsidise the privileges of some citizens should at least uphold the rights of others." It is pertinent to mention that "others" include non-believers whose taxes pay for denominational schools. But unbelievers' rights are of no concern to the Muslim "parliament".

Over twenty Muslim schools are attended by children whose parents "reject accommodation and compromise with secular and anti-Islamic values." The financial outlook for such schools is precarious, hence the fundamentalists' clamour for denominational schools funded by the State.

The "white paper" outlines a system of education for Muslim children, ranging from nursery schools run by Islamic housewives to an Islamic Open University. The mosques would play a central role in the system.

Shabir Akhtar, deputy chairman of the MPGB's education committee, says that opting out of local authority control could be one method of influencing what happens in a school. He gave as an illustration a school with a large proportion of Muslim pupils and a significant number of Muslims on the governing body. In such circumstances "the school could apply for a change of status, from mixed to single sex, for example." However, the disruptive confrontation at Stratford School, in east London, where a group of Muslim governors were in dispute with the headmistress, who is not a docile Islamic housewife, has highlighted the danger of Muslims using grant-maintained status to take over schools.

Although the Muslim "parliament" and other Islamic groups are making much fuss about the importance of

S AND NOTES

parents' choice in the matter of children's education, the reality is that even in Bradford the majority of Muslim parents do not want separate schools. They should be encouraged to resist pressure by the mosques and stand firmly against classroom segregation of their children, most of whom have been born in Britain, on grounds of religion, colour and gender.

GREENPEACE NOBBLED?

Just how "representative" of Greenpeace, the environmental organisation, was the speaker at a recent "pro-life" weekend at Ushaw College, Durham? The Roman Catholic *Universe* carried an advance announcement of the event which, it claimed, would be attended by "representatives from Greenpeace and the Movement for Christian Democracy". Readers were invited to obtain further details from one Tony St John Farnan.

In a later account of the weekend (theme: "A Celebration of Life"), *The Universe* reported speeches by Catherine Francoise, of the anti-abortion pressure group SPUC, and the prolifically fertile Victoria Gillick.

Father James Morrow said Christians should organise their own political party for their values to be adopted by other politicians. We already know something about Father Morrow's "values". He is prominently identified with a group of anti-abortion fanatics known as Rescue. Its members take "direct action" by harassing patients and staff at abortion clinics.

And who was the Greenpeace "representative"? *The Universe* reported: "Greenpeace member Tony St John Farnan urged pro-lifers to take up ecological awareness as part of their campaign."

Mr St John Farnan may be a Greenpeace member, but it is highly unlikely that he or anyone else "represented" the organisation at the "pro-life" gathering. Perhaps an official of Greenpeace would clarify the organisation's position.

Michael Fayter, an antiques expert in Torquay, Devon, claims he has discovered a fragment of the Virgin Mary's nightgown. No price for the relic has been agreed, but by way of a bonus the buyer will receive a letter of authentication written in Latin by the Bishop of Bruges and dated 23 November 1896. Big deal.

Last month's broadcast of *The Great Monkey Trial* (BBC Radio 4) was not just a dramatisation of the notorious case in 1925 when a young American schoolteacher, John Scopes, was indicted for informing his pupils of Darwin's theory of evolution. It was also a reminder that so many years after the trial in Dayton, Tennessee, small-town America's hymn-hollering, scripture-spouting Christian fundamentalists are still a malignant force in the country's education system.

The Dayton "monkey trial" remains the most celebrated of its kind this century, partly because it brought to the Tennessee backwater two of America's most formidable characters: William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow for the defence. Hundreds of "born again" preachers, religious fanatics and oddballs descended on Dayton, turning the town into what one commentator has described as a "madder tea-party than Lewis Carrol ever imagined".

The Scopes case was only one of many skirmishes involving fundamentalists and rationalists. During the previous half century the Bible had been subjected to rigorous examination by European scholars, while defenders of the Genesis account of creation were constantly being mauled by Darwinians. American fundamentalists were aware of developments and prepared to do battle with the ungodly infidel. Anti-evolution organisations sprouted like weeds on a dung hill. One was the American Anti-Evolution Association which barred from membership "Negroes and person of African descent, Atheists, Infidels, Agnostics, all persons as hold to the theory of evolution, habitual drunkards, profane swearers, despoilers of the domestic life of others, desecrators of the Lord's Day and those who would depreciate feminine virtue by vulgarly discussing sex relationship."

John Scopes was found guilty and fined a hundred dollars; William Jennings Bryan died within a week of the trial ending; Dayton was cleansed of the evolution taint and its godly citizens carried on with their normal activities like bootlegging, thieving and murder.

In recent times, particularly during Ronald Reagan's presidency, the anti-evolution fundamentalists have become increasingly belligerent. Their "know-nothing" creed is promoted by televangelists, hick politicians and organisations with virtually unlimited assets. The "communist" smear, having lost most of its potency, has been replaced by "secular humanist" as a term of abuse to throw at progressive educationists.

It is 67 years since Clarence Darrow demolished the anti-evolution case in Dayton, Tennessee. But belief in Adam, Eve and the Serpent still goes almost unchallenged in most US schools and colleges. American freethinkers have a fight on their hands.

UNITY IN ADVERSITY

Simple trust in the efficacy of prayer is one of the dottiest expressions of religious faith. Devout worshippers, be they Christian fundamentalists or remote jungle tribes, are convinced they can influence events by supplicating a god or a witch-doctor. However, it is questionable that an educated and intelligent churchman really believes talking to himself is likely to result in fine weather for the parish garden party.

So an appeal by leaders of the country's four main churches to "set aside March 15-17 as days of prayer for Ireland" was yet another religious sick joke perpetrated on the deluded citizens of the Emerald Isle. Calling the faithful to prayer, the Rev Winston Good, president of the Methodist Church in Ireland, said "Ireland for Christ is the desire of all of us."

Unfortunately that desire was achieved a long time ago, with disastrous results. In the Republic, the Roman Catholic Church is a power-house of superstition and a dominant force in health, educational and political affairs. In the Six Counties, Catholics and Protestants are segregated along religious lines from the cradle. Belfast, which has the highest rate of church attendance in western Europe, is divided by walls and security fences to keep followers of the "prince of peace" from settling their differences with the gun and the bomb.

This latest old pals' act by Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian leaders (but not the Rev Ian Paisley, although he commands an embarrassingly large following), is an indication they are familiar with the adage, "better hang together than hang separately". For there is a growing recognition of the church's poisonous influence on Ireland's social and political life.

A LATE REPENTANCE

An annual pilgrimage in the Bavarian town of Deggendorf has been abolished by the Roman Catholic Church. Linked to the murder of Jews in the Middle Ages, it attracted between 15,000 and 20,000 pilgrims every year.

More than six centuries ago, the Catholics of Deggendorf murdered local Jews. They tried to justify the atrocity by claiming that Jews had desecrated the "Holy Eucharist". But an eight-year study has proved there was no desecration. This finding was confirmation of a view long held by historians.

The diocesan Vicar General said of the killings: "It was an ordinary pogrom against the Jews, similar to what there was in many cities in the Middle Ages." The Jewish community had often criticised the pilgrimage and now the church plans to erect a memorial to the victims of religious intolerance and abuse.

BURIED "TREASURE"

L. Ron Hubbard was once a modestly successful writer of science-fiction stories. But nothing that he or other purveyors of such stuff could equal the fantastical capers of his brainchild, the Church of Scientology. This institution attracted the naive and gullible who paid through the nose for "counselling" and allegedly self-improving courses involving a gadget known as an E-meter. Hubbard was arguably the wealthiest of the religious quacks who emerged during the 1950s and 1960s.

Scientologists acquired an unsavoury reputation. Their fanciful claims, money-spinning schemes and threats to "destroy" critics were widely publicised. Former members had stories to tell which, even allowing for disgruntlement and exaggeration, showed up Hubbard and his henchmen as a grubby and unscrupulous bunch of charlatans.

But like most organisations of its kind, the Church of Scientology provided the outside world with many a chortle. Now comes the news that one of its off-shoots, the Church of Spiritual Technology, planned and supervised construction of a huge vault in California "to ensure that the works of L. Ron Hubbard do not fall to the ravages of time."

Hubbard's celebrated works — books, tracts, tapes of lectures — have been deposited in titanium capsules. The vault is 375 feet long, 25 feet wide and 40 feet deep. The steel walls are protected by layers of reinforced concrete.

All this should protect L. Ron masterpieces from the ravages of time. But even his most ingenious and fanatical disciples will not protect them from the effects of rigorous examination and analysis.

Crematorium officials in Sheffield have agreed to install a set of curtains at Hutcliffe Wood Crematorium so that the cross can be covered during non-Christian funerals. The move follows a protest about the cross which is so securely affixed that it cannot be removed and so high on the wall that it cannot be covered. John Batley, general manager of Sheffield cemeteries and crematoria, said they aimed to make the chapels suitable for funerals of adherents to all religious faiths and of non-believers. The cross at Sheffield's other municipal crematorium, City Road, can be removed without difficulty.

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 Press and the Supernatural

TERRY SANDERSON

The British press has a love-hate relationship with the supernatural. On the one hand, the tabloids enthusiastically promote the activities of psychics, astrologers and other assorted barmpots; on the other hand they just love to expose them as frauds and charlatans.

There was an example of this contradiction last month. *The Daily Star* did a front page story about Uri Geller, the man who claims to bend spoons with the aid of an unknown force. I suppose the capacity to deform cutlery must be useful to someone, but I can't imagine who. This time "the amazing Mr Geller" (as he likes to be called) claimed that he had been called in to track down a missing girl who is presumed kidnapped. The paper gave a further two pages inside to tell how Mr Geller had "found" an ear-ring that looked remarkably like the one the girl was wearing when she disappeared. He also came up with other "clues" which were vague enough to be uncheckable. This demonstration of Mr Geller's psychic powers was acclaimed by the *Star* as marvellous, mystifying, etc, etc. The bottom line, however, is that the girl is still missing and the police are no nearer to knowing what has happened to her. The only "power" this episode seems to demonstrate is Mr Geller's capacity for self-publicity.

On the other hand, the London *Evening Standard's* colour magazine carried a wonderful exposé, by Peter Martin, of the supposed miracle "healers" of the charismatic churches in London. He describes the rise of the "house churches" — small groups of fanatics who are disenchanted with the traditional liberal Christian establishment — and how they are coalescing into a powerful force. "Separately and together, these independent Christians came to the breathtaking conclusion that they were the New Testament church reborn, complete with their own divinely-inspired apostles, prophets, ministers and teachers," writes Mr Martin. "Radical charismatics now fully expect New Testament wonders to occur, encouraged by the teaching and visits to this country of America's John Wimber, the leading exponent of power evangelism. It has become a convention to finish charismatic meetings with 'power healing clinics', where odd members of the congregation, using 'words of knowledge', call out various ailments in the belief that the Holy Spirit is directing people with those ailments to come forward for healing. The Wimberite view is: if miracles aren't happening, it's not true Christianity."

There are, of course, claims of miracles galore. Mr Martin decided to investigate a few of them, including perhaps the most famous contemporary example of "miracle healing" — Jean Neil of Rugby, whose "cure"

was filmed at a meeting led by the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. The film — which has now become a best-selling video — shows Mr Bonnke "laying hands" on Mrs Neil, after which she leaps from her wheelchair and runs around the auditorium, apparently healed of what she described as "spinal injury, a hip out of joint, one leg two inches shorter than the other, and angina pectoris." The video claims that prior to her "healing" Mrs Neil's case was "completely hopeless" and says that over 25 years she has undergone 14 operations, spent four years in hospital, suffered three heart attacks, was confined to a wheelchair and took 24 tablets a day.

Mrs Neil's case was looked into by Dr Peter May, who has been described as Britain's leading investigator of miracles. He is a member of the General Synod of the Church of England and a GP. He managed to obtain Mrs Neil's orthopaedic notes from her medical records and found that the surgeon's report concluded: "X-rays have been repeated today and these confirm that there is absolutely no change from the X-rays taken prior to this evangelical healing." Of the "hip out of joint", the orthopaedic surgeon reported that three months before the healing her hips were "quite normal". As to the claim that one leg was two inches shorter than the other: "There is no record of a short leg." Of the heart disease claim: the medical record made no mention of heart attacks, but six months before the healing, her GP stated that "after vigorous investigation" the chest pains she complained of were not cardiac in origin.

Of the fourteen operations claimed in the video, Mrs Neil has records of four on her spine and two Caesareans, an operation for a hammer toe, some small surgical attentions to her elbows and having her appendix out — she has no memory of the others. Fifteen months prior to her "healing", Mrs Neil was getting about on walking sticks and was not "confined to a wheelchair" by any stretch of the imagination.

The article in the *Standard* says that there has definitely been an improvement in Mrs Neil, but says that this may be because "she got fed up of being fed up."

Dr May has been investigating "miracles" for twenty years and has not yet encountered a single medically proven claim. He is quoted as saying: "My experience teaches me that when God answers prayers, He normally respects the integrity of the created order He has set in being. He does not turn dogs into cats."

Dr May also investigated the case of Jennifer Rees Larcombe, who has just published a book entitled *Unexpected Healing*, with a foreword by Sir Harry Secombe. Mrs Rees Larcombe claims that she was healed in 1990 of "four near-fatal attacks of viral

encephalitis.”

Dr May was intrigued. Four attacks? A virus usually sets up an immune response preventing any subsequent infections; like measles, you get it once and then you're immune. When he confronted Mrs Larcombe with this knowledge, Dr May discovered that no doctor had ever diagnosed “viral encephalitis” — it was her own interpretation of the symptoms. Even so, Mrs Rees Larcombe's “case” garnered a great deal of publicity. With the publication of the book, the number of attacks of encephalitis which Mrs Larcombe is claiming to have had has risen to five. Mrs Larcombe gave Dr May permission to check out her claims with her doctor. In her medical notes — dated before her “healing” — there was one mention of “a nerve sign”, but a brain scan showed nothing, and follow-up medical tests were all normal. Meanwhile, the book is selling well.

The *Standard* cites several other supposed miracles which are promoted enthusiastically in evangelical circles, but which don't stand up to even the most cursory investigation. The author of the *Standard* piece approached many of the people behind these tales of modern-day miracles and found them to be either totally convinced of their authenticity, despite the evidence to the contrary, or cynically indifferent to the fact that they know them to be bogus. The other thing that comes over most worryingly is the way that inadequate people are being exploited by evangelical “healers”. The sinister ambitions of some of these churches are furthered by the manipulation of fear and superstition on people who don't seem to have the wherewithal to resist. Those who do manage to drag themselves away are generally scathing of the churches. One woman is quoted as saying: “After a few months of it, I had come to feel so isolated that I made a stupid attempt at suicide. Now that wasn't the house church's fault, but I had become so very desperate — all I'd wanted was an ordinary conversation, and I simply couldn't get it from these people. They would rush up to you after a weekend retreat and say: ‘Oh I think that I've made a real breakthrough into true lovingness’, and you'd be standing there going mad with loneliness.”

After such an uncompromising exposé you would have expected the *Standard*'s correspondence column to have been inundated by letters from outraged charismatics, making their usual claim of misrepresentation. But the only letter to appear was from Anne Bennett of Surrey who said she had been connected with the charismatic movement from its beginning, but had become disillusioned. She says, tellingly: “It would be interesting if you did a future piece showing how the so-called leaders of the movement have done, where they live and what they earn. Incidentally, I wonder if you knew that Jennifer Rees Larcombe is the daughter of an evangelist — Tom Rees

who ran Hildenborough Hall. She learned her trade at her father's knee.”

Mrs Bennett says she feels let down because her husband, who worked for the movement for 25 years, was “dropped like a hot brick” when he suffered brain damage following an operation. “They obviously know they cannot do anything for him.”

It seems that those who are duped by these churches are easy meat: often ill-educated, disadvantaged, lonely, unstable or simply unable to cope with modern life, they are generally empty vessels, ripe for victimisation and abuse.

Converts' Charity Scandal

The Converts' Aid Society, founded nearly a century ago to assist Anglican clergymen who converted to Roman Catholicism, is to be wound up. The decision was made after a commission appointed by Cardinal Hume produced an unfavourable report alleging “financial mismanagement” and “an apparent breach of trust” by the Society's former financial adviser.

The commission found that while priests were making appeals for the CAS in the belief that there was a desperate shortage of funds, it had assets of over £2 million and entertained on a lavish scale in London clubs, including the extremely exclusive Buck's.

More serious, however, was investment decisions which involved speculating in foreign currency. This practice is not approved by the Charity Commissioners who are monitoring developments. The Commissioners have advised the Society to pursue a claim against its former financial advisor.

The organisation has been renamed the Society of St Barnabas. He was an early Church father who may be invoked as a peacemaker, a rather appropriate choice in the circumstances.

The Converts' Aid Society has always enjoyed the support of upper-crust Catholics. Until the reorganisation and renaming, its president was the Duke of Norfolk.

Trevor Wilson, a 56-year-old Sunday school teacher, was jailed for ten years at Manchester Crown Court for offences against a girl in his Bible class. The court heard that Wilson raped the girl when she was ten and for several years afterwards filmed and photographed her in obscene poses.

A Roman Catholic college in La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA, has sacked the staff of its student newspaper for publishing spoof advice about the use of condoms. In one article it was suggested that people should wear them on their heads to ward off 'flu.

Social Humanism : a New Direction

KARL HEATH

Nigel Sinnott's article, *Why I am Not a Humanist*, published in November 1987, provoked an angry correspondence. But have Humanists taken stock of themselves?

Nearly five years have passed since Nigel Sinnott's attack on organised Humanism, but little has changed. Every week we have Funeral Humanism, Wedding Humanism and Name-giving Humanism. The pathetic farce of Life Stance Humanism still lingers on. We had Pastoral Humanism, self-righteously assuming that Humanists were the shepherds and others the sheep. We had Counselling Humanism, with sanctimonious self-appointed "experts" presuming to instruct others on how to grieve, shades of ghouls crouching or vultures hovering over hospital beds. And always there is Thanatos Humanism, preoccupied with death. There is an alternative to this ideological ragbag of pretentious trivia, something more substantial and fundamental — social humanism.

I can hear already the cries of outrage and complaints of "rocking the boat". What boat, and where is it going? Who are the officers and the captain and from where did they obtain authority to give orders? Furthermore, conformity and faith without reason are surely not the humanist way. Nigel Sinnott was right in calling for rationalism. We live in a world of ideological dissolution, of image-making, gimmicks and role-playing, of silicon chip-induced illiteracy, of technological wizardry which promises to close the gap between infancy and senility, ensuring a painless transition from the one to the other without awkward cerebration in between. In such a world we need clear pools of rationality. The way to understanding is through disputation and argument, arriving at new levels which embody more truth than their predecessors. By argument I mean informed debate, aiming to convince and not to coerce, aiming to reason but not to deceive. Communists who abandoned the classical Marxist dialectic in favour of imposed "democratic centralism" bear responsibility for recent events.

When humanists say that this is the only life we've got, they should concentrate upon life, the living, and lives to come. Nothing can be done for lives that have ended, except honouring their memory. If we know what is needed to make our own lives happy, rewarding, fulfilled and significant, humanists should actively seek the same conditions for all human beings. We are social beings. Most of what we consider to be our personality, our ego, our self, our individuality is socially engendered, and society should reinforce not threaten this individuality. Our problems cannot be solved in an

individualist, egocentric way. People's lives are determined by social conditions and for the world's billions nothing less than social transformation will solve their problems. The old religious line about "first changing the hearts and minds of men" is, at the most charitable, defeatist, particularly for believers in Original Sin. At the worst, it is a hypocritical excuse for doing nothing about the social conditions, preserving power, wealth and privilege on earth in return for a false promise of "pie in the sky".

All human beings are social from conception. Their genetic mix is derived from the social matrix of their parents. Their first food is socially-provided — even their mothers's milk requires social provision for the mother. Their first language is determined for them socially, almost as dictatorial and arbitrary as their birth itself. Yet that language embodies and transmits past culture, tradition and prejudice. Do we English-speakers ever get through a day without speaking or hearing something nautical, something biblical or something Shakespearian, even though we are not always conscious of the words' origins? And so on, through life. Our education, such as it may be, our health, our work and journeys to work, our food, our life-style, our homes, if any, our marriages and matings, our parenthood, our pleasures and enjoyment, our habits and prejudices, our understanding, are all derived from society. Our ability to reciprocate with our own contributions, enriching or modifying society, will depend upon how free and open that society is. As we acquire memories we build up an ego, a self, a buzzing consciousness. But if one were to remove the social contribution to this process, how much individual personality would be left? If not a *tabula rasa*, at least little more than the conditioned reflexes of some other animals. Individual and society support each other and there should be no conflict between them. Happiness, fulfilment, significance as a person, honour and respect as a person, and the opportunity to express one's talents all depend upon the individual's relationship with society. If that relationship is vitiated because the society in question is governed by an establishment ruling class, dominated by a minority owning and controlling the social wealth or coerced by dictatorship, then individual personality is the victim. Where the relationship between individual and society fails or breaks down, the conservative-minded, satisfied with existing society, and enjoying wealth, power and privilege therefrom, will blame the individual for some innate defect or evil. Social reformers will look to defects in social organisation.

So, where should humanists look? They should ask themselves — is present society neutral and impartial?

Are our affairs conducted by unselfish people, dedicated to serving the community and not serving self-interest? Is the State system itself designed to serve the whole community or geared to the preservation of a ruling class? Does the possession of wealth and control of socially-necessary resources confer political power, and, if so, who possesses that wealth? How does a humanist democrat view freedom of information, ownership and control of mass media, Government censorship through official Secrets? Are market forces, like God, an inexorable external determinant, or are economics devised and developed by humans, and changeable by humans? Should freedom of choice be graded by purchasing power, e.g. in education? Can democracy reflect the will of the people by an illiterate mark on paper every five years? Is a representative system the only form of democracy? In the past there was Humanist talk of pluralism and the Open Society. Have any details been worked out? There has been a Humanist fear of politics. Some years ago the British Humanist Association ventured into economics with a booklet called *The Collapse of a Myth*. It did not amount to much, but was never seriously discussed.

In advocating social humanism I am not calling for a humanist political party. Indeed, it is arguable that no political parties will solve our problems. But groups of people, trying to think rationally about those problems, will not be superfluous. In the 1930s Victor Gollancz started the Left Book Club. Groups of subscribers were formed, not at Gollancz's suggestion, but spontaneously throughout the county, at first just to discuss the monthly choices. They were very like humanist groups. But they became so concerned about the state of the world, about Fascism and Tory appeasement, that they began to organise. Within a year or two Left Book Club rallies could fill the Royal Albert Hall and the Earls Court Stadium to capacity. While Labour MPs were on their feet cheering Neville Chamberlain's trip to Munich, the Left Book Club did more than any other organisation to rally this country against Fascism and to thwart the betrayals of Chamberlain, Halifax and the Cliveden set.

In the humanist movement we tend to be rather elderly, including me. While regretting the absence of youth, and wondering how we can attract the young, I cannot blame any of us for enjoying civilised discussion at humanist group meetings. Indeed, those who participate are to be congratulated because they are not apathetic. But I cannot forget the unity of theory and practice, nor Olaf Stapledon, who, in *Philosophy and Living* wrote; "Someone who knew everything and did nothing about it would not be a philosopher".

If there is a single central theme it should be Human Rights. A humanist group need not duplicate Amnesty, civil liberty organisations, conservation and environmental groups, UNAs, Charter 88 groups or any

societies seeking to defend particular human rights. But every humanist group should seek to establish active relationships with these other bodies, and perhaps act as a central focus, as a watch-dog against infringements, and as a monitor of the policies, actions and statements of political parties.

This is a mere skeleton of social humanism. It may provoke discussion. If it fails to put flesh on the bones I will be guilty of adding just one more piece of jargon to the list.

Freethinker Fund

Pressure groups representing a wide range of interests will be mulling over the General Election results and before too long the various lobbies will be at work. A number of issues that concern secular humanists will be debated and decided by the new House of Commons, so it is essential the movement has a journal which appears regularly and publishes the carefully researched information provided by its writers.

Contributions to the Fund not only help to meet the annual deficit but also enable us to advertise and promote the paper. We appeal for continued financial support and express our thanks to the latest list of contributors.

N. Barr, F. Evans, S. A. Sheridan and T. Whitton, £1 each; Anonymous, M. A. Aitchison, J. Brooks, W. T. Ford, W. C. Hall and G. Miller, £2 each; A. E. B. George, £2.50; S. D. Kuebart and F. A. M. Stevenson, £3 each; A. I. McGill, £4.40; Anonymous, P. Barbour, R. C. and J. C. Baxter, R. D. Bittell, C. Blakely, E. Cecil, R. Cheesman, T. Cornish, D. L. Dean, S. Eadie, B. Everest, M. J. Fuller, C. R. Glaser, M. D. Gough, E. Hillman, D. Holdstock, J. Holland, G. R. Hopcyn, N. Huke, G. L. J. Lucas, S. J. Mace, H. Madoc-Jones, G. Mephram, R. Meredew, A. Negus, P. O'Hara, R. Paterson, D. Pollock, H. J. Taylor, K. M. Tolfree, R. K. G. Torode and G. Walker, £5 each; B. A. Burfott, H. J. Jakman, G. Lewarton, G. S. Mellor, A. Oldham, F. Pidgeon, P. E. Pointing-Barbour, M. D. Powell and J. C. Wright, £10 each; N. Moia, £14.40; D. Lennie, £15; Anonymous and W. Johnston, £20 each; Anonymous, £25; V. D. Brierley, £30.

Total for February: £403.30

Launching the Promise Year Appeal to raise £10 million for the Scout movement, Garth Morrison, the chief scout, denied it was a white, middle-class Christian organisation. He said: "We have all classes and religions, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim." He added: "There is no room for an atheist in the Scout movement."

All You Need to Know About God

CHARLES WARD

What's this? A digest of theology? "That's all I need", you might remark sarcastically.

But it's not what I have in mind. The fact is, we know nothing, precisely nothing, about "God", apart from knowing what we mean by the term. And that, as I am about to explain, is all we *need* to know. This is simply because, if we did not, no intelligible comment on the topic would be possible.

I am here using the word "God", as others do, to refer to whatever Absolute Reality is — What (or, if you like, Who) lies Behind or Beyond or Underneath everything there is, and may be held to be responsible for the whole Shebang, or Big Bang — as well as What Happens Next.

One is inclined to become somewhat light-headed while indulging this Great Thought. A condition is induced which you could describe as logorrhea, or flow of words, associated with extreme prodigality in the application of capital letters.

Still, it is, after all, only a word. We have merely given a name to this consummate Mystery and in doing so have been made not a whit wiser.

The religious believe we should know more than that. "God", they tell us is a Person responsible for our being Persons too and has a special interest in those who acknowledge this. Should that ploy fail, they may identify "God" with Ultimate Truth. Curiosity being part of our nature, it seems only polite to agree that we long for enlightenment. But if unprepared to counter the persuasive patter, it is easy to become a ready market for a product well-prepared and packaged.

Belief in the existence of this Being is thought by the religious to be so basic that they can sometimes manage to suppress or disguise their customary illiberality towards those who hold views different from theirs.

"God" wants people to have faith, they say. Some degree of credulity is no doubt felt to be a useful beginning. Room has been left for doubt, as they artfully concede, so that we are free to believe or disbelieve. ("But look out!", they threaten.) They have a strange conception of a Supreme Intelligence who wants us to be superstitious and frightened.

Undaunted by the intellectually insulting and morally demeaning inferences of their contentions, believers will confidently outline what "God" has done, is doing and is going to do. I never cease to be astonished at their unabashed familiarity with the Top Person. Do they not realise that such ideas spring from nothing more than human fears and hopes, to say nothing of vanity? When you give the matter some careful thought, you wonder

at the persistence with which the truth has been avoided.

Suppose, for argument's sake, that "God" exists. Is it not clear that, while atheism distresses the religious, it doesn't upset "God"? In respect of Creation, one must assume a high degree of forward planning. So to leave "His" presence or plans impossible of proof, must have been "God's" purpose.

Atheists are folk for whom the theological door must be considered firmly shut. Nothing "half open" or "off the latch" for them. It's an understandable state of mind. Since "God's" existence cannot be rationally proved, and familiar ideas of "God" are absurd and unacceptable anyway, that's that, as far as they are concerned. Agnostics, of whom I am one, agree that the case for "God" is negligible if not non-existent, yet decline to insist that the matter is settled beyond dispute. If one does not actually *know* the solution to a mystery, it seems honest to say so. That is not to leave the door ajar for explanations already soundly rejected.

This may be an appalling state of ignorance, but all we can say is, that if "God" exists, "He" must have anticipated — not to say, favoured — our human inability to know either "God" or the "Universe" (in the strict meaning of "All that is"). To survive physically man must learn to know his own world; his spiritual life depends on his knowledge of himself.

Backs to the wall, the religious re-echo the "divine revelations" they cannot do without.

They keep telling us (in their multi-coloured versions of the Truth) Who is and/or how many are "God" and why it is vitally important for us all to believe in Him/Her/It/Them, but the fact is that "God" has not told us even that.

While "God" has been silent, they have not. They furnish revelations "He" ought, as they believe, to have given (and must be supposed to have done so). Are there not "pointers" in Nature, angelic or human "messengers" who spoke, or acted, on "His" behalf, miracles that indicate "His" supernatural activity, sacred writings which "He" has inspired?

How can they admit that "God" wanted human beings to work things out on their own as well as they could and that "He" decided to keep out of the picture? They must keep trying to convince others (and themselves) that "God" is telling us all the time what "He" is like and what "He" is doing. It is up to them to do a better P.R. job.

Some of them will certainly insist on telling us that "God" is totally unselfish as "He" is Eternal Love. One aspect of Divine Love they seem to have overlooked is Self-effacement.

ANNIE BESANT: A BIOGRAPHY, by Anne Taylor. Oxford University Press, £25

Annie Besant joined the National Secular Society in 1874 and became a vice-president in 1875. She was sub-editor of the *National Reformer* from February 1877 and co-editor with Charles Bradlaugh from May 1881. Her fall was as meteoric as her rise. She gave up the *National Reformer* in October 1887 and left the NSS when G. W. Foote succeeded Bradlaugh as president in 1890. Disliked by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner for her presumption with regard to Charles Bradlaugh, and detested by G. W. Foote for her socialism and her rivalry, only the eccentric W. Stewart Ross of the *Agnostic Journal* had much good to say of Mrs Besant after her apostasy to Theosophy in 1889. The extraordinary woman who was, for a decade, second only to Bradlaugh in the Secularist movement, incredibly moved on to adopt Hindu mysticism, to advocate the caste system and to live out her brand of romantic Irish nationalism as the advocate of an independent India under the British Crown.

The paradoxes of her life were numerous. By birth she was English, by blood she was Irish, by adoption she was Indian. She became the most notorious advocate of neo-Malthusianism in Britain and yet spent the bulk of her life urging the necessity for sexual restraint within marriage and the superiority of celibacy. She was a republican who championed the Imperial Crown, a socialist who turned her back on the Indian labour movement; a democrat who behaved like an autocrat and accepted caste as necessary to spiritual order; a pioneer of women's rights in her own life but never a feminist; a scientific materialist who found no comfort in scientism but ended her days, as she began, in religion. She could not be a Catholic, for she could not be Pope, but one wonders if her one-time friend, George Bernard Shaw, had her in mind as he shaped the character of Pope Joan.

Sexual scandal followed her wherever she went. Lecturing in Leicester in 1875 she was accused of supporting the views expressed in George Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*, which commended masturbation to the young unmarried. In later life she stood by the allegedly homosexual paedophile, Charles Webster Leadbeater, who did the same in the name of Theosophy. She declared herself to be in love with a whole series of men, most of whom she invited to share her house — Charles Bradlaugh, Edward Aveling, George Bernard Shaw, John M. Robertson, W. T. Stead, Herbert Burrows — and her attraction to Helena

Petrovna Blavatsky has clear lesbian overtones.

With such material, Anne Taylor could have written a racy, spicy biography and doubtless made a lot of money. Thankfully she has not. On the contrary, this is a well-researched, scholarly, balanced — though never dull — assessment of one of the most fascinating people in our recent history. The theme is the inner consistency in Annie Besant's life. She needed her ideal man and, having failed to find him in the hapless Frank Besant (whom we can even begin to feel a little sorry for), she restlessly turned from one to another in search of the knight whose chivalric love she could share and with whom she could enter the lists. Her headstrong energy and compassion for the poor drove her into the major movements of her day, from Secularism and Socialism to Indian nationalism and yet, in all these things, she was searching also for her inner self. Her devotion to the various movements for which she worked was an expression of her own character and need. She could have no place in them unless it were a commanding one. Her quest was for spiritual satisfaction. She could not find it in Christianity, with its teachings on sin and guilt and unsatisfactory account of the origins of evil, and so she rejected it for Secularism. Science appeared to offer her the answers which Christianity had failed to provide and yet it too could not satisfy her spiritual hunger. She was a millenarian, ever seeking the clue to the perfect society. Socialism appeared to offer the way forward and yet it too was found wanting. And so in her early forties she discovered Theosophy and the Hindu religion which appeared to satisfy her for the rest of her long life.

Eastern religion had long had attractions for freethinkers, for it offered superior insights into those issues about which western Christianity claimed to offer dogmatic and unique answers. Theosophy in itself was an open system and had natural attractions for enquiring minds — hence the sympathy shown to her conversion by her erstwhile opponent, Stewart Ross. But Annie Besant could not long be an agnostic. She needed certainties, rationally and scientifically founded but nevertheless sure foundations for her life. Once convinced of the truth of Theosophy she espoused it with a dogmatism which eventually split the movement. Anne Taylor's case is that every change of opinion was undertaken, not on impulse, but after long and painful thought leading to conviction. Annie Besant was nothing if not absolutely honest with others and herself. In that respect she was always a freethinker.

Her life as an agitator also had a consistency. She was always a politician. Charles Bradlaugh taught her about popular politics and how to move a mass meeting of

REVIEWS

poor people to swell the numbers of a cause. This lesson was never lost and in this sense the spirit of Bradlaugh lived on in Annie Besant until her death in 1933 — a concept which would have appealed to her if not to him! She took the same popular crusading zeal into socialism and then Indian nationalism. She found the leaders of Indian opinion, rather as she had found the Fabians, confined to small intellectual meetings and constitutional niceties. She went out into the villages and appealed to the people. What she had learnt about journalism on the *National Reformer* she applied with devastating effect in her *New India*. Her experience as pupil and tutor at the Hall of Science schools in London was put to good effect at her Central Hindu College (later, Hindu University) at Benares. As a friend of Michael Davitt and cousin of Kitty O'Shea (mistress of Charles Stuart Parnell), she took her aspirations for Ireland to India and stirred the Home Rule movement there. Her detention in 1917 made her a focus of nationalist attention. She was rewarded with the presidency of the Indian National Congress at the end of that year.

As an old lady, Annie Besant could appear a failure. The Indian Nationalist movement moved on in other hands, notably those of Gandhi and the Nehrus. Though the latter might be thought to have embodied her admiration of Brahmin superiority, they were secular politicians in a different mould and the India they created was not that of Mrs Besant's fervent imagination. Yet almost to the end, as an orator on the platform she could rouse an audience and inspire great loyalty. She was a great woman and this biography gives an excellent and highly-readable account of her.

EDWARD ROYLE

THE FREETHINKER, VOLUME 111, 1991. G. W. Foote & Company, £9.95

It is impossible to summarise a whole year's contents of the magazine, now in its 112th volume, and unhelpful to attempt to select my favourite pieces for special mention. A few comments about the general character of our oldest secular magazine might be in order from the editor of the newest, *The Scottish Humanist* (whose issue number 14 is in preparation.)

First, as to general presentation, I applaud the somewhat old-fashioned character of *The Freethinker*. The "media" are obsessed with glossy gimmickry; style often submerges substance and, very often, any old tired cliché is used where clear, taut and fresh exposition

would be so much better. If thought is to be truly free it must be clear; and the mutual support of clear thought and clear exposition should not be compromised. The present editor and writers score well in this matter of format and style. May there never be a punning headline in *The Freethinker*. I would however suggest one practical concession to modernity — may the magazine be despatched flat rather than folded and in weatherproof plastic? Not all readers live in the kindly climate of Watford and points south!

In my own editorial capacity, I have had little success in recruiting a cartoonist; *The Freethinker* could do with one too and might find one more easily. Some more satirical writing would be good to see. More letters to the editor would be welcome.

The content of Volume 111 is varied and balanced and, in particular, some of the telling small items about the gratuitous absurdities and nasty little cruelties of religion are very necessary. Believers have made some progress in making their religions house-trained, but the need to expose holy horrors great and small is always with us and not a few liberal believers recognise that need.

With the increasing stridency of "fundamentalism" it is very necessary for us to do nothing to drive liberal religionists back to "old-time religion". It is true that the intellectual dishonesty that is the downside of liberalism is a real danger to clear thought, but it is also true that the liberals are genuinely appalled by the brute inanities of the religious right. Very often these liberals are our natural allies in matters of immediate practical importance.

I have to declare an interest here — my home is a plural society in microcosm, my wife being a very liberal Elder of the Kirk — but surely it should be obvious that sectarianism is not a vice confined to religious people and that it is one that we should try to avoid. I think that some of the *Freethinker* editorials do sometimes stray a little into the "unholier than thou" tendency.

That said, Volume 111 is a good one and it shows the need for only quite modest self-reform in a pampered "western" world that has gone mad with change for change's sake.

ERIC STOCKTON

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

PORNOGRAPHY AND FEMINISM: THE CASE AGAINST CENSORSHIP, edited by Gillian Rodgerson and Elizabeth Wilson. Lawrence & Wishart, £4.99

For years the anti-pornography, pro-censorship feminists went around like Margaret Thatcher proclaiming: "There is no alternative". There was, there is and this clear, concise (and inexpensive) book sets out what it is. As the authors put it: "pornography is not a straightforward evil and... increasing legal controls are not the answer". Like all feminist works on pornography they draw on the American experience, but they are careful to point out the ways in which it does not apply. For example, in Britain there is no constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. After a brief history of pornography in Britain (which, sadly, contains one factual error; the British Board of Film Classification is not a statutory body where cinema film is concerned, only for video) they set out to demolish the anti-porn case on feminist grounds, showing how the multi-faceted campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s for increased rights in the home and opportunities at work have been dumped in favour of a concentration on "porn" which actually undermines women's confidence by insisting that all men are predators and all women victims. Worse, the anti-porn feminists have given a new lease of life to traditional, patriarchal right-wing morality and are supported by conservative and

PERMISSION AND REGULATION: LAW AND MORALS IN POST-WAR BRITAIN, by Tim Newburn. Routledge, £10.99

Why do sociologists dress up their ideas in such pretentious theories and obfuscating jargon? Do we really need to read papers with titles such as "Goal Displacement and the Routinisation of Charisma in the Nationwide Festival of Light", or to plough through lengthy comparative analyses of Marxist-Gramscian, Foucauldian and Eliasian approaches to permissiveness, to gather that their Christian beliefs are the primary motivation for people like the NFOL and Mary Whitehouse, or that "permissiveness" is a vacuous concept mindlessly employed by politicians and journalists to belabour those whose personal tastes and behaviour they dislike?

Fortunately, after a preliminary canter over such arid ground, Tim Newburn gets stuck in to narrative chapters about Mary Whitehouse and the Moral Majority, the Wolfenden Report, and law reforms and legal battles around homosexuality, obscenity, prostitution and abortion. Having been actively involved in the first two of these issues during the 1960s and 1970s, it is intriguing to find the protagonists' actions recounted here in far more abstract terms than I experienced them at the time.

Sociologists — Newburn is by no means the only one

fundamentalist groups whose ideas about sexuality and its depiction they share. They ignore the much more pervasive images of women in advertising, fit neatly into the long tradition of elitist attacks on popular culture as demoralising, propagandist rubbish and ignore the fact that the clergy who oppose the ordination of women also oppose porn.

The writers go on to expose the flaws in the so-called "evidence" against porn; the loaded nature of the research, the lack of any real carry-over from sexual fantasy to day-to-day living and the uncomfortable fact that many women actually enjoy sex. Parallels between racist and sexist language, images and behaviour will not serve to justify legislation, because hatred and sex are not the same thing. Laws, whether existing or proposed, will be used against minority and alternative explorations of sexuality rather than traditional images. The anti-pornography feminists are in danger of becoming women who oppress other women.

It may seem strange to compile a whole book on a subject you see as a distraction from real issues and stranger still to recommend it. However, if feminists and people who support feminism can face the fact that they have been taken for a ride, sometimes in very inappropriate company, the bandwagon can be halted and the real battles can be fought and even won.

MARY HAYWARD

to do so — struggle to understand the political process but rarely grasp its real nature, which is far more muddled, fortuitous and often unexpected than their neat theories suggest. While the likely reaction of people who hold certain views can of course be anticipated, it is impossible to foresee the specific events which will trigger off *causes célèbres* such as Mary Whitehouse's blasphemy prosecution of *Gay News*. I am sure that this was the last thing the paper expected when it published Kirkup's poem.

Newburn's narrative chapters are generally accurate (though a large chunk of the manuscript seems to have been vaporised on page 57, where his account of the parliamentary debates on homosexuality leaps abruptly from 1957 to 1965). He breaks little new ground for anyone familiar with these events, but provides a useful reference point for students wishing to dig deeper. In the two concluding chapters, he discerns persisting cross-currents of "permission" and "regulation", and rightly judges that things were never as clear cut as the myth-makers of "traditional family values" declare. Despite much more open chatter, the sexual revolution is still a long way off, and arguments over permissiveness — or, as I prefer to put it, the limits of personal democracy — are set to continue indefinitely.

ANTONY GREY

Home Schooling

JAMES HEMMING

The first issue of *Cutting Edge*, published by The Foundation for Christian Reconstruction, consists largely of an item entitled "Home Schooling and the Battle Against Humanism". This is an extract from David Paul's lecture given at a conference on Christian education. James Hemming considers its implications for children and society.

David Paul and his wife, Ruth, are intent to remove the "evil" of Humanism by establishing home education in place of State education, basing their teaching at every point on the word of God as set out in the Bible.

I have always supported home education as such when it is appropriate, and have defended in Court parents who wished to exercise this right against the opposition of the Local Education Authority. But basic conditions are essential: a spacious home with quiet rooms for learning; plenty of books and equipment; outdoor space to play in; and parents who are themselves well educated, and sufficiently secure economically to have time available for teaching in relaxed circumstances. Unfortunately these conditions are available in only a minority of families, so that home education cannot be offered as a general solution.

There is another vital condition to be met, one which the Pauls are not prepared to fulfil. It is to provide children with an open climate of ideas in which they are encouraged to think for themselves in association with sympathetic adults, whose aim is to stimulate, not to dominate.

David Paul's piece is founded on the assumption that every word of the Bible is true. He also states that children "are born sinners". This does not add up. Jesus is reported to have said: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for such is the kingdom of God" (Luke chapter 18, verse 16). Nothing about being born in sin there! But it is this very accepting, respecting attitude to young children the verse refers to which lies at the heart of good teaching, as is demonstrated by the most successful nursery schools up and down the country.

The Bible, we would all agree, is right some of the time. But David Paul proposes to teach children that the Bible is absolutely right all the time. This is seriously uneducational. Good learning is a search, not the unquestioning acceptance of "certainties". Moreover, some of the "certainties" David Paul wants to teach the young are false: for example, that husbands should "rule over" their wives, as in Genesis chapter 3, verse 16 (OK by you, Ruth?) or that Man should subdue the Earth for his own purposes — which justifies the planetary mutilations of greedy multinational

enterprises. It was a deadly mistake on the part of the Bible to invite humans to exploit the natural world.

We must also note that David and Ruth Paul exemplify the Bible's order to "increase and multiply". A family of six, and the youngest aged one! More to follow? May they all prosper, but what would happen if all families followed their example? A large family, within the context of home education, helps to avoid the risk of social isolation, but it does nothing for the greatest human danger — and responsibility — of the present time: over-population.

Like most fundamentalists, David and Ruth Paul are trying to live by a set of principles some of which no longer make sense. They are obviously sincere and honest, but have they the right to impose on their children an interpretation of life in our mysterious cosmos that is not consistent with how things are? Apparently they want to generalize indoctrination throughout the community. Such a situation would not be in the interest of goodness or of truth. Measuring up David Paul's message, one is left wondering whether his real *bête noire* is not Humanism but Humanity.

Sunday Racing Decision

Britain may have Sunday racing this summer. David Pipe, the Jockey Club's director of public affairs, says: "It's odds-on that a Sunday meeting will now go ahead." The Stewards of the Jockey Club decided to give Sunday racing a trial after considering a paper which Mr Pipe presented.

It is expected that races will be held at country courses, well away from built-up areas. No doubt the Keep Sunday Special Campaign lobbyists will complain about extra noise and traffic congestion. But there have been few problems in areas where football matches and other events are held.

Race organisers will have to devise a method of collecting money without actually charging for admission. This is not a new problem and has been overcome on many occasions. Selling programmes at inflated prices is one ruse that usually works.

A tribunal has been told that members of the choir at Westminster Abbey were sometimes so tiddly they could hardly get through evensong. John Buttery, a choir member for 27 years until he was sacked for singing out of tune, told the tribunal it was unfair to single him out. The Dean of Westminster admitted: "There were accounts of people not being able to sing because of drink."

Letters

CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANITY

Your editorial in the February issue refers to the innumerable pronouncements of religious leaders and authorities which, over the centuries, have opposed or inhibited the realisation of truths, the implementation of justice and freedom and the relief of suffering.

It would be very useful to have an anthology of such pronouncements — brief quotations with carefully documented sources, taken from the two centuries of Christian propaganda. Few people realise, for instance, that the church once taught that women did not possess souls or that, as you report, there was clerical opposition to the use of anaesthesia. Few are aware of the statements which provided theological justification for slavery.

The established and "respectable" churches are not challenged sufficiently frequently or powerfully in these matters, which lends them a spurious authority — the maintenance of influence by default. An anthology would be a most useful corrective tool. Do any of your readers have the erudition, time and motivation to produce one?

PETER GALBRAITH, Northampton

HUMANIST MAJORITY SUPPORT FOR GAY RIGHTS

I welcome Terry Sanderson's exposé of the Christian "counselling" organisations which aim to turn lesbians and gays away from their "wicked ways" via "faith in Jesus" (*Cruelty in the Name of God*, March issue).

However, I am concerned that he makes an unqualified reference to "the humanist movement" as being responsible (along with the tabloid press, Parliament, etc) for "aggression and negativity" towards lesbians and gays. I feel that this may give the totally false impression to your uninformed readers that the Humanist movement is generally hostile to lesbians, gays and their rights.

The fact is that the main organisations in the British Humanist movement — the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association, and South Place Ethical Society — have all demonstrated solidarity with the lesbian and gay rights movement, as have many local Humanist groups and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

A resolution passed unanimously at the British Humanist Association's conference in 1990, affirmed its support for the rights of lesbians and gay men and deplored the hostility directed against them, particularly from religious sources and the tabloid press. It called upon the Humanist movement "to do everything possible to counter such hostility and to promote lesbian and gay rights as human rights".

The National Secular Society passed a similar resolution some years ago. In 1982 at its Congress in Germany, the IHEU urged its member organisations worldwide "to advance the possibilities for gay men and women to develop themselves fully with regard to their sexual life-style" and to combat legal and social discrimination against them. The IHEU Commissioner for Human Rights has taken action on a number of gay and lesbian cases involving individuals, as well as the Gay's the Word bookshop case and Clause 28.

Terry Sanderson is nevertheless quite justified in drawing attention to the homophobia of some individual Humanists, including those who have made their views plain in letters published by the Humanist press. I maintain that, as is the case with the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties, which have a pro-gay rights policy, there will always be a few dissenters in any organisation, however liberal its official stance may be. Moreover, their hostility is negligible when compared to that of

the vast majority of Christians and their institutions, whether they be the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, or the "ex-gay movement" which Terry Sanderson so rightly condemns.

GEORGE BROADHEAD, Secretary, Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, Kenilworth, Warwickshire

SEXUAL VERSATILITY

Terry Sanderson (*Cruelty in the Name of God*) criticises others for being "impervious to reason and indifferent to logic"; but he makes a pretty big logical gaffe himself. Homosexuality cannot, as he suggest, be transmitted genetically for obvious reasons. Even allowing that homosexuals (if indeed such exist) might occasionally bring themselves to do what we are told is distasteful to them, and actually procreate, their fertility would be so low that a gene carrying this character (if such could exist) would be unlikely to survive. Ironically, something much more likely to have been genetically transmitted, but ascribed by Sanderson instead to religious indoctrination, is the taboo against homosexuality. This is because such a taboo is likely to improve fertility, and so has survival value.

The gay and lesbian community have conned the world for long enough into believing (in the face of reason) that they are somehow physically or psychologically different. They are not. They are bisexual like the rest of us. If they choose to emphasise the less usual side of their bisexuality, then that is their affair; but they have no right to special treatment in consequence. I have not had the opportunity to study Le Vay's research; but I assume that he did not find "gay" engraven upon the brains of his subjects. This being so, any significant differences that he found could have indicated something else: for instance that those who claim to be "homosexuals" are constitutionally hornier than other people.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

ALL IN THE MIND

Those Muslims who support the fatwa against Salman Rushdie claim to be offended that their "gods" should be imagined as indulging in human activities. Surely it must be even more offensive to them that, in this country alone, hundreds of thousand of people — writers, scientists, philosophers and quite ordinary people — consider that belief in a god is nonsensical, viz. that it cannot be verified through the senses. Nevertheless they do not seek to persecute or in any way to make life difficult for those who have such beliefs.

Gods, like fairies, leprechauns, goblins and all the myriad of beneficent and malevolent fantasies created by the fertile imaginations of people in all cultures, are as insubstantial as the rest.

Are we then to except a worldwide fatwa to be pronounced on the thousands of atheist, humanist, communist and other writers who relegate a belief in a god to the realm of childish superstitions or literature?

MICHAEL DUANE, Teignmouth

THE DANGER OF POWER

David Webb (*Letter*, February) is the first person I have encountered who denies the connection between wealth and power. He also lives in blissful ignorance of the way opinion and demand can be manufactured by those who have power. A striking example is the motor car industry, where people are persuaded to buy 150-plus mph machines which are not permitted to exceed 70mph on motorways, and are commonly reduced to stalling speeds in towns, meanwhile causing mayhem and pollution.

I am all for publishing explicit material, whether it applies to sex or motor cars, but the fact is that both industries concentrate

upon the dubious pleasurable aspects; car salesmen pay scant attention to the dangers of speed, and sex salesmen play down the dangers in sex-for-kicks.
E. F. CROSSWELL, Slough

An American paperback edition of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* will be on sale in Britain.

BOOKSHELF

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EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 3 May, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

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

Gay and Lesbian Humanist 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.

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.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swartmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 12 May, 7.30 pm. Granville Williams: Freedom of Information.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 30 April. Denis Cobell: In Praise of Idleness.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 16 April, 7.30 pm. John Aldam: Humanism — A Personal View.

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, 13 May, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Nick Selley: Genetic Research and Development — Promises and Fears.

Blanche Riley, 56-year-old leader of a Pentecostal sect, told her four adult children that God would cure the brain cancer from which she was suffering. Eighteen months after she died, police entered their home in East Flatbush, New York, where they discovered her decaying body washed and tended by the family.

Roman Catholic priests have ruled that a crucifixion scene and six other works of art on display in Czechoslovakia are obscene and may be viewed only by those over the age of 18. And at Jaena, in Spain, church authorities decided eight nude boy angels, carved for an Easter procession, are too realistic. The sculptor was told to remove their what's-its.

More Knocks for Ireland's Pro-Ignorance Lobby

Ireland's Catholic bishops have denounced the Supreme Court's ruling which allowed a 14-year-old convent schoolgirl who was raped to have the pregnancy terminated in an English clinic.

Speaking on behalf of the bishops at their three-day spring meeting in Maynooth, Bishop Joseph Duffy told reporters of the hierarchy's "dismay" over the court's ruling. Emphasising that "respect for human life begins at conception", he asserted that no court judgement or act of parliament could make abortion morally right.

Bishop Duffy said the bishops understood the anguish and distress of pregnant women who might wrongly feel that abortion was the only solution open to them. He did not explain how celibate males could understand the feelings of a woman who, for whatever reason, found herself in that situation. Nor did he refer to the large numbers of unwanted pregnancies and abortions which result from his church's glorification of sexual ignorance and Catholic pressure group's relentless campaign against birth control clinics and advisory services.

But the bishops are not having it all their own way. Public demonstrations against the constitutional ban on abortion, unthinkable a few years ago, have taken place. Newspapers, notably the *Irish Times*, have carried scathing criticism of the church and the pro-ignorance lobby.

The Government has indicated that the ban on counselling and information about abortion facilities in Britain is to end. Prime Minister Reynolds has the support of his coalition partners on this question.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association, published an Open Letter to the Catholic hierarchy accusing them of responsibility for the constitutional amendment "under which an unknown number of innocent women can be, have been, are being persecuted in the name of a supposed absolute: 'the right to life of the unborn' ". This was a reference to the 1983 referendum.

Conor Cruise O'Brien told the bishops that the case of the young rape victim "severely embarrassed" the lobbyists who led the campaign for the eighth amendment to the Constitution.

"Your lordships, however — the prime movers in that campaign, as we all know — have been largely immune from criticism. Old habits of deference die hard. I address you, therefore, rather than the lobbyists. If one has complaints about the monkeys, it is more sensible to address oneself to the organ grinder, rather than to the little creatures who pass the cap around for him. . .

"I accuse you of abusing your power by causing to be inserted into the fundamental law of the state, binding on all citizens, a simplified version of the teaching of your church, and yours only. This is manifestly unjust to those of us who conscientiously reject your teaching in that matter."

Describing the claim that a foetus is fully human from the moment of conception as "a crudely simplified version of Catholic teaching on this matter", Conor Cruise O'Brien told the bishops: "For most of your church's long lifetime, its teaching was quite different, and much closer to what people outside your church believe today. Until the 19th century, your church's official teaching was that the abortion of a male foetus up until forty days after a conception and of a female foetus up to 80 days after conception carried no penalty with it. In practice this meant — since there was no way of determining the sex of the foetus — that abortion was exempt from punishment for the first eighty days of pregnancy.

"In the late 19th century, for reasons unknown to me, the Catholic church decided that what it had been infallibly teaching up to then was now infallibly wrong. From this late period in the history of your ancient institution dates the doctrine of the right of life of the foetus from the moment of conception."

Reminding the bishops that the church has turned a blind eye to abortion, Conor Cruise O'Brien recalled what happened when a number of nuns were raped in the Congo (now Zaire) in 1960. They underwent operations to ensure that they would not give birth.

"The right to life of those particular foetuses was not respected. I don't know what sophistries were invoked to pretend that abortion was not abortion in those cases. You and your somewhat less obnoxious Catholic counterparts in other lands have always an abundant supply of sophistries and sophists at your disposal.

"In any case, you made no specific exception for the benefit of rape victims in the law you foisted on us in 1983."

Conor Cruise O'Brien suggested to the Irish bishops that they should take a rest.

"Specifically I suggest that you refrain in future from efforts to shape the laws of this state, which are for all the citizens, and not just for you and what you call your flock. Your flock is increasingly less flock-like. It no longer follows your teaching on contraception. . .

"You may preach your peculiar doctrines to those who are willing to listen, but please don't try, any longer, to impose those doctrines on the rest of us by manipulating the laws of the state. Hierarchy and democracy go ill together, both in theory and in practice."