

The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 112 No. 7

JULY 1992

40p

KEEPING SUNDAY SPECIAL: A QUESTION OF CHOICE, NOT LEGAL COMPULSION

The Government's inertia over introducing measures to reform the Shops Act 1950 has come under strong attack from a member of the Auld Committee which recommended in 1984 "the abolition in England, Wales and Scotland of all legal restrictions on the hours for which shops may open to serve customers."

Addressing a packed Westminster Hall audience which included MPs and Home Office advisers, Frances Cairncross said in a lecture, hosted by the Consumers' Association, that there had been a revolution in retailing and shopping practices which was not reflected in shopping hours. She recalled that the essence of the Auld Committee report was if people want to keep Sunday special it should be a matter of choice, not of legal compulsion.

Frances Cairncross said the nostalgic world for which the Shops Act was designed has gone for good.

"Only a quarter of married women worked. Today the proportion is over 70 per cent. Hardly any families had a refrigerator, which meant that most housewives shopped almost every day at their local butcher, baker and greengrocer. In those days, more than five out of six retail outlets in Britain were independent. In the whole country, only six hundred self-service shops existed, almost all of them co-operatives. Most shop assistants worked full-time. Even in the late 1950s, when retailing had begun to change, only just over a quarter of employees in retailing worked part-time. . .

"The pattern of work has changed. Two-thirds of those employed in retailing are women and almost half of all retail workers are part-timers."

Frances Cairncross referred to a striking change in the traditional character of Sunday.

"In the 1950s, most school children would probably have known who first decreed that the Sabbath day should be remembered, and when. Today, only a rare

child can recite any of the Ten Commandments. The plain fact is that fewer than one person in ten goes regularly to church. Muslims, whose holy day is not exempted in the 1950 Act, as Saturday is for the Jews, observe their faith in greater numbers than do Christians. . .

"Although the pressures for change are strong, and although everybody agrees that the law needs to be changed, repeated parliamentary attempts at reform have failed. Why has the muddle survived for so long?

"First, the broken-backed law has suited many retailers. Sunday trading is not equally profitable for all kinds of shops. For DIY shops and furniture stores, Sunday can easily account for 25 per cent of the week's takings. For other shops, especially the big food shops, sales on Sunday simply represent spending shifted from other days of the week, when staff do not have to be paid a premium wage."

Frances Cairncross said proposals for partial reform of the Sunday laws were impracticable. Recalling her experience as a member of the Auld Committee, she said that many of those who gave evidence "put forward ingenious schemes to alter exemptions under the Act, either by changing the goods that could be sold, or the kind of shops that could sell them, or the hours when shops could be open. . .

"Most reforms are still based on the notion that most British people go, or ought to go to church on Sunday."

Turning from the issue of practicality, Frances Cairncross raised what she described as a basic ethical question.

"On what grounds should the law come between a willing buyer and seller? It may well be there are legitimate interests that need the protection of a new Shops Act.

(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.

Vol. 112 No. 7 CONTENTS July 1992

KEEPING SUNDAY SPECIAL: A QUESTION OF CHOICE, NOT LEGAL COMPULSION	97
NEWS AND NOTES	98
Dr Carey's Chestnuts; Stirrings in the Isles; A Futile Crusade, Mr Murdoch Objects; "Socialist Saviour"	
PROPHET OR PROFIT?	101
Terry Sanderson	
APOLOGIA OF AN ANTI-SECTARIAN HUMANIST	103
Eric Stockton	
THOUGHTS AFTER RIO	104
T. F. Evans	
BOOKS	106
Diderot: a Critical Biography	
Reviewer: Jim Herrick	
Freethought on the American Frontier	
Reviewer: James MacDonald	
SILVER JUBILEE FOR HOMOSEXUAL LAW REFORM	108
Antony Grey	
CAPTIVE MINDS	109
Charles Ward	
MISCELLANEOUS	
Law Lords Back RC School, 102; To God — a Daughter, 102; Letters, 110; Obituary, 111; Conjuring "the Root of all Religion", 112; Versatile Soap, 112	



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

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

ANNUAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

Printed by Bristows Printers, London.

NEWS

DR CAREY'S CHESTNUTS

Like one of his predecessors, Cosmo Gordon Lang, who put the boot into Edward VIII after he had abdicated and left the country, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, prefers to attack others where he is unlikely to be challenged. Delivering his Haberdashers' Company lecture last month to a safe and respectful City of London audience in the Church of St Lawrence Jewry, Dr Carey made a number of assertions which were remarkable for inaccuracy and triteness. He repeated the old, old story that belief in God is the one sure foundation for a personal moral code and social behaviour. This claim has become Christianity's last-ditch defence against scientific knowledge, scepticism and indifference to the alleged truths of religion.

While graciously agreeing that atheists are actually capable of behaving well, Dr Carey held that "altruism is best understood and encouraged through the eye of faith". Altruism is defined as "regard for others as a principle of action". The Archbishop implied that for nearly two thousand years the churches and church leaders, strong in the faith, have always acted in the best interests of others and never in pursuance of rank, wealth and power.

Dr Carey said "it is the believer and not the atheist who is more likely to go the second mile and do the good deed without personal reward". From there it was but a short step to praising the "truly selfless behaviour exemplified by Mother Teresa". She is well known for goodness and humility — virtues practiced in the glare of international media coverage — and is already being spoken of as a candidate for sainthood. However, her altruism is not totally founded on "regard for others as a principle of action". Her prime motive is foolish glorification of the Christian deity, advancement of her church's interests and her own personal salvation. She exerts her baneful influence to encourage excessive breeding and to undermine population control programmes initiated by hard-pressed governments and responsible UN agencies. Truly unselfish behaviour? Selfish and irresponsible behaviour, more like.

Dr Carey's second example of selfless behaviour was that of the Franciscan, Fr Maximilian Kolbe, who was murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz concentration camp after volunteering to take the place of another

S AND NOTES

prisoner. All honour to a great human being. But the Archbishop of Canterbury cannot be unaware that Fr Kolbe, like millions of others, was the victim of an evil system devised by Germany's mostly Christian leaders who were supported by the churches. Hitler travelled much further than a second mile to do evil deeds. And the ground was prepared for the Nazis by centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred fostered by Christians acting "through the eye of faith".

Dr Carey even produced the old chestnut that atheists who behave decently and responsibly act as if they have a (presumably Christian) faith. This is the reverse of the "Christians who behave badly are not *real* Christians" coin. But life is not that simple. People of all religions, and of no religion, can act atrociously in furtherance of their interests. However, one lesson of history is that a strong religious faith, more than anything else, produces fanatics who believe that any action, from the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to the murder of a novelist in the twentieth, is justified for the glorification of their god or prophet.

The Archbishop's lecture was widely reported and provoked correspondence in the national press. Dr Richard Dawkins, who recently mauled the Archbishop of York in a debate at the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, wrote in the *Independent*: "Religious people can behave well. Some have been known to live sober, honest and truthful lives. It is not actually compulsory for Christians to torture to death those with whom they have minor theological disagreements. Quite a few Christians have never actually vandalised rival religions' art treasures, incinerated dissenters, drowned suspected witches or dashed out the brains of 'pagan' children. Individual Muslims have been known to dissent from the principle that novelists whose books one dislikes should be murdered on sight."

Dr Dawkins conceded: "It is even possible for Archbishops to avoid being smug, sanctimonious, patronising and pompous."

But not His Grace of Canterbury, it seems.

Pauline Tabor Webster, one of America's most renowned prostitutes and brothel keepers, has died in San Antonio, Texas, at the age of 87. During a long career "on the game" her clients included leading politicians, military officers and police chiefs. In retirement she took up organic farming and joined the Baptist Church.

STIRRINGS IN THE ISLES

The arrival last year of the Rev Alex Buchan to be Church of Scotland minister on Sanday, one of the smaller Orkney islands, triggered off a series of disagreements that developed into a holy rumpus. From the start, there was discontent over his style of preaching which appears to include elements of 19th-century hellfire-and-brimstone fundamentalism and 20th-century American televangelism. His warnings of the wrath to come were, in the words of one church elder, "totally unacceptable to the majority of the population, which is made up from a very wide variety of denominational backgrounds". Members of the congregation have defected and hold their own services.

Far to the south-west of Orkney, the Rev Buchan's style of preaching would be very acceptable in the Outer Hebrides. Rigid of faith and long in face, the grimly God-fearing Protestants on those off-shore islands observe erring humanity with smug disapprobation. No doubt they would prefer to ignore the outside world, but that is not always possible in an age of technology. Consequently there has been much gnashing of teeth and gums over a television programme about the community.

The documentary featured no less a dignitary than Prince Charles. But — lamentations! — it was transmitted by Grampian Television on Sunday, an enormity that caused steam to emit from Sabbatarian ears. The keep Sunday specially gloomy fraternity on the Isle of Lewis — successful in preventing Sunday ferries and similar debauchery — had themselves missed the boat on this occasion.

"There were many of us who were most gratified to have Prince Charles visit our islands", smarmed the Rev Angus Smith in the Letters page of the *Stornoway Gazette*. But showing the film of his visit on Sunday was "insensitive. . . an insult to God and a slight upon the islands".

Another gentleman of the cloth, the Rev John MacLeod, said that Christians worthy of the name "would have resisted the temptation to view a production. . . which savours not of Godliness but of worldliness".

In reply to protests over the Sunday showing, a spokesman for Grampian Television said it was the only day when they could get a prime-time slot on the national Independent Television network. Moreover, a special weekday showing of the programme had been arranged for those whose strict observance of "the Lord's day" prevented them watching television on Sunday.

But of course a reasonable concession is not enough for those who seek to impose their brand of Christianity on society at large.

A FUTILE CRUSADE

Fr Patrick Peyton, who was known as “the Rosary Priest”, has died in San Pedro, California, at the age of 83. He started the Family Rosary Crusade which promoted rallies all over the world. His work was backed by church leaders, politicians and Hollywood stars like Bob Hope and Gregory Peck.

Fr Peyton coined the slick phrase, *The Family Who Prays Together, Stays Together*. The irony of his message was apparently lost on those who joined the Crusade. For the Rosary Priest was born in the west of Ireland where daily family prayers were the general rule. Yet few of the Irish families who prayed together, stayed together. High birth rates and poverty forced most of them to split and emigrate, often never to meet again as a family.

While studying for the priesthood, Fr Peyton was stricken with tuberculosis. He survived and started the Rosary Crusade in thankfulness for a “miraculous recovery”. There was no miracle for the thousands of young Irish victims of the disease who died in their teens and early twenties.

The only miraculous element in Fr Peyton’s recovery and his success in “promoting devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary through the Rosary” was that so many people were taken in by such superstitious twaddle.

MR MURDOCH OBJECTS

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has sacked one of his top executives. Stephen Chao arranged for a male stripper to illustrate a point he was making in a lecture on censorship.

Rupert Murdoch, a “born again” Christian, was said to be very upset over the incident. No doubt as owner of morally uplifting newspapers like the *Sun*, Mr Murdoch feels it incumbent upon him to maintain the highest standards at all times.

Most of the audience in Aspen, Colorado, took it in their stride when the stripper removed his clothes and revealed the bare essentials. Miss Patsy Chapman, editor of the *News of the World*, got carried away and asked if she could have his telephone number.

But an American lady, Lynne Cheyney, was very embarrassed “and didn’t know where to look”. Strange woman. As the wife of the United States Defence Secretary she had probably seen it — or something like it — all before.

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.

“SOCIALIST SAVIOUR”

Speaking at an awards ceremony in Israel, Mr Gorbachev has described Jesus as “the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind”. In justification of this remarkable claim, the former Soviet president mentioned the occasion when Jesus outdid Joe Lyons by providing a banquet for the multitude with five loaves and two fishes.

The claim that Jesus was the first to seek a better life for mankind is as absurd as were his catering arrangements. He taught that the poor should accept their lot with contentment. “Blessed be ye poor”, “blessed be ye that hunger”; the “first socialist” never suggested that the causes of poverty and hunger be investigated and remedied.

There is no evidence that Jesus was concerned with human welfare or justice. He enjoined his followers to “resist not evil”. Jesus and the early Christians, particularly Paul, preached the virtue of servility and obedience to “the powers that be”. Throughout history their teachings have been used to reinforce social and political tyranny.

If, as Mr Gorbachev claims, Jesus was the first socialist, he had some rather peculiar notions for a man of the Left. He was an early advocate of the free market in treatment of the sick: “They shall lay hands upon the sick and they shall recover.” This cost-effective form of medical care would be most acceptable to the present Government at Westminster.

His economic policies had a Milton Friedman tone. “That unto everyone which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him” — not much consolation from the “first socialist” for thousands of British people sleeping in shop doorways or being evicted from their homes through inability to keep up with the mortgage payments.

The Prince of Peace, as Jesus is also known, had a negotiating strategy that would have appealed to our last Prime Minister: “But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither and slay before me.”

Indeed it could be argued that rather than being the “first socialist”, Jesus was an early Thatcherite.

A Jehovah’s Witness in Taunton, Devon, who refused conventional hospital treatment on religious grounds, ran up a bill of £25,000. Health authorities have refused to pay and the cost will be met by the NHS Trust. When the man refused blood transfusions, surgeons were forced to use an expensive synthetic drug. He spent an extra six weeks in hospital recovering.

Prophet or Profit?

TERRY SANDERSON

Morris Cerullo is the latest in an apparently never-ending line of American evangelists who are set on saving the souls of the heathen British. Following in the footsteps of Billy Graham and Luis Palau, Cerullo has announced that he intends to have one billion "proper, born-again, Christian souls by the year 2000". He brought his "mission" to Earl's Court, London, in June and attracted tens of thousand of people who were drawn by his distasteful advertising and the hype that they would "see miracles". This is where Mr Cerullo scores over his predecessors; he promises miraculous healing right here and now, whereas the best the others could come up with was the boring old life ever after.

And so, in order to bring readers of *The Freethinker* the latest news from the dizzy world of miracles and wonders, I mosied along to Earl's Court to see it with my own eyes. I wanted to witness the great man in the flesh and hear his words with my own ears.

The hall was full by the time we reached the appointed hour. Ten thousand people gathered, at least eighty per cent of whom were of West Indian or African extraction. I saw little sign of doubters waiting to be converted, but I saw plenty of signs of people who would believe the moon was made of green cheese if Morris Cerullo said it was so.

First on the platform was a warm-up man, a slick, besuited American with the kind of inflated hairstyle much favoured by the cast of *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. His face was a ghastly shade of pale and I worried that, perhaps, he might be in need of a miracle himself quite soon. He was followed by another lesser prophet, a reassuring elderly man whose dulcet tones, dripping sincerity, urged us to think about the Lord's words on the subject of giving: "Yes, my friends, the privilege of giving." This prefaced the introduction of envelopes in which we could now place "pledges" of money. Underneath the flap of the envelope we were exhorted to give amounts varying from £1,000 down to a £10 minimum. These were then collected in a bucket.

Then came the man himself, who looked rather like Danny de Vito playing an American evangelist. As he spoke — in a strange sort of rasping sing-song — an unctuous smile spread across his face. Everything about him screamed PHONEY! His teeth were of such unnatural luminosity that even *their* authenticity had to be questioned.

So how would he go down with a British audience? I have to say that the reaction was curiously passionless. Even though almost everyone in the hall looked as though they were born-again Christians already, certificated in the art of speaking in tongues, rolling their eyes and shouting "Hallelujah!" in a loud voice, there was a slow response. I had been led to believe that

Morris could get an audience worked up within minutes, but he certainly had his work cut out on the afternoon I was there. His sermon was platitudinous ("God is a spirit, he is everywhere"/"The devil is the King of lies," etc, etc) and the congregation was restless. On several occasions he said, "Yoo-hoo, is anybody there?" He challenged the audience not to be "so British". The Amens were few and far between, whereas in the United States Hosannas punctuate every sentence. This audience had come here to see the miracles, not to listen to the same old stuff they could hear every week in their own churches.

After what seemed like hours of dreary hymn-singing, the halt and the lame were brought up on to the stage. But the miracles, I have to say, were pretty desultory. First up was Annie McDonald, from Northolt, who had abandoned her hearing aid after three years of deafness.

There then followed a long line of people testifying that they had been relieved of arthritis, that their bad leg was better, that their stiff neck had vanished, etc, etc. Sitting behind me was a girl with a mental handicap. The ushers had worked on her, laying on hands and so forth, but she remained resolutely mentally handicapped. She was not invited on to the stage.

All in all it was pretty sad affair, and I don't think I was only one who thought so.

Today newspaper followed up Annie McDonald's case. "I couldn't hear at all, but now I can hear the birds whistling and everything," she told the paper. But neighbours remained unconvinced. Her landlord, Pravin Patel, said: "I spoke to her when they moved in and she didn't have a hearing aid, and she didn't seem to have any hearing problems to me."

So who is Morris Cerullo, and why should God choose such a smarmy, creepy soul as his earthly representative? Are Morris's motives any different to those of the Swaggarts and Bakkers who went before him? In America his San Diego based organisation, Morris Cerullo World Evangelism, has an annual budget of \$12 million. He has his own television station (the Inspirational Network bought from Jimmy Swaggart), his own TV studios, offices in 30 countries, more than 500,000 specially trained "partners" preaching on his behalf in over a hundred countries. Shortly, his satellite television channel, European Family Network, is due to begin broadcasting 39 hours a week of religious programmes to more than two million British homes. By 1993 he hopes that EFN will be broadcasting 24 hours a day.

However, a former business associate of Cerullo told *The Observer* newspaper that the great preacher had failed to comply with an out-of-court settlement to refund up to \$2.16 million of public donations raised to

help pay for a Christian theme park formerly owned by Jim Bakker. The partner, Yet King Loy, sued Cerullo last year for fraud, conspiracy and breach of contract. He claims Cerullo has used mail-shots to raise money for a profit-making company — illegal in America. *The Observer* revealed that Cerullo, his family and senior colleagues have taken loans of hundreds of thousands of pounds from World Evangelism to buy houses. Cerullo's main residence is a palatial building in a posh part of San Diego. There are many other instances of sharp practices on the part of Cerullo, but he always seems to settle out of court, saying the name of the Lord should not be dragged through the mire of litigation.

But worse still is the fact that all this money — whatever its ultimate destination — is raised on the backs of the sick and disabled. One group of disabled people claimed that Cerullo had exploited them in his

advertising, which shows discarded wheelchairs, white sticks and hearing aids with the slogan, "Some will see miracles for the first time".

"This message tells people that disability is our own fault, that we are 'afflicted' because we don't believe enough. It also says that there is something inferior about human beings who live with disability. It's shocking and sickening," said one man in a wheelchair. The group has put down a £10,000 wager that Morris Cerullo cannot "cure" any of them. They are happy that their money is safe.

I'm not so sure about the cash belonging to the other mugs who have made "pledges" to Morris Cerullo, who have filled in bankers orders, deeds of covenant and sent off money for overpriced books. One had the distinct impression that the "giving" (as recommended by the Lord) is something of a one-way street in the world of Morris Cerullo.

Law Lords Back RC School To God — a Daughter

The Law Lords have ruled that governors of a Roman Catholic school in Tower Hamlets, east London, are entitled to reject applications for admission of children from two Asian non-Christian families.

The decision "is bound to have long-term repercussions", said Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society.

"Such a discriminatory ruling might have been justifiable in the days of comparatively small State subsidies to denominational schools", she added. But as denominational schools now receive such a large proportion of their capital and running costs from the taxpayer, "the grounds of pupil selection should surely be restricted by law to academic potential and geographical boundaries.

"The ruling, which now becomes case law, can only intensify and justify demands for public funding for separate Muslim, Sikh and other religious schools equivalent to that enjoyed by Roman Catholic and Church of England schools."

Elaine Sherratt, a solicitor for Tower Hamlets Law Centre, said the law on denominational schools may unwittingly become responsible for racial segregation in schools. Already nine church schools in the borough have no Asian pupils. She claimed that some parents undergo baptisms of convenience to get their children into what are seen as white schools.

The Rev Basil Jenkyns, of Ashton-under-Hill, Worcestershire, holds services for ducks. He says: "If there is reincarnation, I hope to come back as a duck."

Just over a year ago, David Icke, former sports commentator and professional footballer, dressed up in turquoise outfit and announced to the nation that he was the Son of God. Deborah Shaw, an early disciple (the other one lives in Ryde, Isle of Wight), moved into the family home with Icke's wife and two children. He dubbed her "the Daughter of God".

In his much-publicised book, *The Truth Variations*, David Icke claimed that he and Deborah were married in a previous existence.

While in Canada the couple occupied the same hotel room which had an extra large bed. They said the arrangement was "cost effective" and denied having an affair. Their purpose was to "unblock an important energy site". They appear to have succeeded. Deborah Shaw (now known as Shawsun) says that the Son of God is the father of her daughter who was born last Christmas.

Members of the Reigate and Banstead Borough Council have received an epistle from the Mayor, Councillor E. H. Waller, requesting "in the observance of common courtesy" those who do not wish to participate "do not fidget or talk during prayers". Perhaps the Mayor of Reigate and Banstead should be reminded that it is not courteous to inflict superstitious mumbo-jumbo on others. Moreover, the Town Hall is a place where business is conducted affecting a mixed community, which includes many non-Christians. There is plenty of room in local churches where those of a mind to do so can conduct business with their particular deity.

Apologia of an Anti-Sectarian Humanist

ERIC STOCKTON

The editor of *The Scottish Humanist* argues that in the struggle to combat religious fanaticism, secular humanists will find worthy allies among religious liberals.

I am a compulsive writer of "letters to the editor". So unprincipled am I in my choice of editors that I have even had published an avowedly atheist letter in *The Plain Truth*. This particular publication, for the information of those readers who are less than catholic in their reading habits or who are somewhat prissy liberal believers (and many of my best friends are one or the other) is a well produced glossy freemag, devoted to the task of asserting that the Bible is the sole and sufficient source of all the wisdom we need (by courtesy of the Great Inspirer).

Within the confines of this unpromising dogma *The Plain Truth* often argues its case well and, because there is more than one way of killing a cat, can sometimes arrive at startlingly reasonable conclusions on specific questions.

Two consequences have accrued from my letter: one is that I have been invited to embark on an ideological correspondence with a weird and wonderful lady in Yorkshire who evidently thinks that she and I are destined to meet in the Great Sorting Office in the Hereafter. The other is a cryptic little note from the secretary of the National Secular Society — no doubt in his personal capacity as a valued friend — enquiring how much I will pay for his silence about my appearing in the enemy's letters page. I undertake to pay the NSS a donation, in addition to my usual membership dues, equal to one third of the fee I shall receive for a forthcoming article of mine on *One Humanist's View of the Kirk* which will appear in *Life and Work* (the official organ of the Church of Scotland).

But that is all by the way. The serious point I wish to assert is that religious fanaticism of any kind is Ideological Public Enemy Number One — for those of us who live in relatively peaceful plural society. It is Blood and Guts Enemy Number One in those unhappy lands where pluralism simply means a plurality of threats to one's very survival.

To counter religious fanaticism is the principal task of secularists; we must rid ourselves of the illusion that we harboured in less brutal times, the illusion that the battle had been won. It has not; it is not that sort of battle.

We have to ask ourselves — what are the obstacles in the path of resurgent fanaticism? There are three, in my opinion. One, of course, is our organised secular selves. Another is good old apathy, a well-practised habit of not being carried away by high-powered

enthusiasms of any kind. Love may make the world go round, but it is apathy that stops it going off at every tangent.

The other one is liberal religion. It is obviously easy to dismiss liberal believers as decent windbags whose characters are as impeccable as their intellects are dishonest, as people who are kind to bairns and wee furry beasties — and very little else. But two things have to be said before we dismiss liberal believers. One is that when we, strictly as humanists, take up practical issues (the promotion of this, the reform of that and the abolition of the other) it is often liberal believers who are our allies on the matters in question.

That strictly practical consideration should not be overlooked as it so often is by armchair atheists, hidebound humanists and senile secularists. What is more important is to see exactly how liberal religion obstructs the advance of its fanatical cousin. It is customary in religious discourse to expound ideas by symbol, by metaphor, by any bloody thing except direct sayso. Let me play this game too.

Imagine a city whose main manufactured product is damp cotton wool and imagine that a column of well-armed desperadoes in personnel carriers is advancing to take the city. What can the citizens do? They can erect a perimeter wall of damp cotton wool fifty feet high and fifty yards thick all around the city. The enemy would be held up more or less indefinitely and, even if they tried to breach the defence by firing it, the smoke would likely suffocate them.

The city is liberal religion; the attackers are the fanatics. Would six humanists and a dog be a better means of stopping fanatics.

Another favourite of mine is to see the Kirk as, among other things, a sort of spiritual fly-paper. Fundamentalists buzzing around wondering where to deposit, whatever it is in their nature to deposit, get stuck and so do less harm than they would otherwise do.

We may prefer not to, we may be squeamish about it, but we have to regard liberal religion as a positive feature in a very negative world. Besides which, it is always interesting to hear what consenting liberals say in private.

A poster of Marilyn Monroe in a swimsuit has been banned in Israel. It offended orthodox Jews.

Over thirty leading Italian financiers have been convicted of fraud in connection with the Banco Ambrosiano's collapse. Several church officials, including Archbishop Paul Marcinkus, are wanted of similar charges. But the Italian authorities cannot put them on trial because of Vatican immunity.

Thoughts After Rio

T. F. EVANS

... it is decay caused by inertia, by ignorance, by utter irresponsibility.

Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, 1897.

... we are the cleanest people on earth, far and away. What other nation boasts more than 80 varieties of shampoo? Or consider our fastidiousness in the theatre of war; instead of leaving the desert full of enemy dead, we thoughtfully ploughed them under.

Barbara Ehrenreich, American journalist, 1992.

The concern of Dr Astrov in Chekhov's play, almost a century ago, was much the same as that which drove the United Nations to convene the recent "World Summit" in Rio last month. Today, however, there is an additional element. As far as we know, Dr Astrov did not fear for the continued existence of the world itself. The Rio conference represented a combined effort to avert dangers of almost the most serious nature imaginable. The combined dangers of global warming, damage to the ozone layer, the excessive carbon dioxide emissions and a multitude of threats to the natural scene and its inhabitants, human and animal, have been of growing concern in recent years and not only among those who would label themselves "Green". It was time for something to be done — or at the very least said or promised — on a world scale.

Of course there were those who questioned the idea of a World Summit, on the basis that political action could never solve anything. Presumably, it was thought that things should be left, as usual, to either God or private business interests to clear things up (the two terms are synonymous in the vocabularies of many newspaper commentators). It is not surprising that *The Times*, which usually shares its faith between God and private enterprise, considered at the end of the proceedings: "The Rio earth summit should finally put paid to the illusion that global problems are best addressed by mega-conferences on themes so all-embracing as 'environment and development'."

Yet, against this, Britain's Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Howard, stated at the end that more had been done than could have been expected and that the result was "rather remarkable". It is not quite clear what force "rather" has. In some dictionaries, the word is given to mean "to some extent" or "slightly". Perhaps we should give Mr Howard the benefit of the doubt and assume that he meant "really remarkable". Most countries in the world sent representatives, ranging from such as George Bush, Fidel Castro and John Major, to lesser or less well-known figures. All were generally agreed on the broad principle that something

or some things ought to be done.

Not surprisingly, there was a division of opinion between what might be called the developed and not yet developed, or developing, countries. There was a feeling among those in the latter category that the countries who were wealthy or wealthier than themselves ought to dig deeply into their resources and make substantial gestures of assistance to the less fortunate. Although it was not mentioned too often, there was some rough justice in this since many of the non-developed countries had been in the past possessions or dependencies of those most fortunate countries now in the big league of the developed.

Although such tenets are embedded in the holiest beliefs and thought-processes of the richer nations, it is a little too much to expect them to act in the way prescribed. There was consequently a vein of animosity underlying some of the proceedings and, hard though it is to accept this, the richest nation in the world, the United States came in for a great deal of harsh criticism. Nobody from an undeveloped country was heard to speak enviously of the 80 varieties of shampoo referred to in the second quotation above. But it was not hard to detect a feeling that a nation, proud of having given birth to foodstuffs in 57 varieties for example, might be able to help the weaker ones reach a total of, say, seven if not 50.

Things were not made any better by the somewhat quixotic behaviour of the American President, fun-loving George Bush. It is not unknown for a Western leader to make an impression on an international gathering by claiming the position of odd man out (or was it once odd woman?) but perhaps G. Bush may have gone too far at the very beginning. Not content with announcing that in his view the United States had led the world in international generosity, he let it be known at the outset that, while he was determined to protect the environment, he was also determined to protect the American tax-payer. In his view, "the day of the open cheque book is over".

Despite this somewhat frosty beginning, the United States came around by the end to agree with most of the principles accepted by the great majority of representatives (although there was one important proposition to which Bush would not subscribe). In addition, Prime Minister John Major did not follow the Americans' lead in their more retrograde stance on the one excepted issue. Japan promised large sums of money to the purposes of the final declaration; Germany also promised help. It is only fitting that the two strongest economies after the United States should be willing to help. Built up by international agreement and

action led by the United States, they were spared during the post-war period, the immense burden of expenditure on arms that has borne heavily on other countries.

To summarise a long list: the representatives of the countries of the world agreed to formulate and implement a programme for sustainable development and agreed also on funding new environmental aid for the Third World. Most countries signed legally binding conventions on climate change and biodiversity but, and this was the one significant exception, the United States refused to sign the latter.

In addition, there was a split on proposed measures to protect forests throughout the world. Ironically, the strongest objections came here from countries in Asia and elsewhere whose rainforest and other timber resources were most seriously threatened by economic development — or exploitation. The countries in question could see great losses if they were not allowed to sell their timber without restriction and no matter what devastation to the forests.

It has been claimed that “the Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”. The authority for this proposition may be shaky and hard to accept by a good many people whose “Green” credentials cannot be questioned. Yet, something of the same general all-embracing idea can be found in the religion of many people other than the ancient Hebrews and the central concept is one to which, if the touch of supernatural mumbo-jumbo be removed, most humanists would subscribe.

Concern for the future of the planet is a cause that should unite all members of the human species, whatever their sectional or otherwise limited interests. So it is a little surprising that deliberations at the World Summit did not receive the kind of publicity that might have been expected, especially from the British press that always has a clear idea of what is the most important news of the day.

We are not speaking here of those editors who, fearless in their search for truth, felt it their duty during the recent General Election campaign to support one side unequivocally and were duly thanked for their labours by the victorious party. It was among the more or less “high-minded” sheets as well that it was sometimes hard to find a report on the deliberations of those from all nations who had the future of the planet in their hands.

Of course there was so much other news of importance to which appropriate space ought to be allocated. Thus, on the Sunday when the Rio conference was drawing to a close, one great organ of fact and opinion gave the most prominence on its front page to the photograph of a west London family of mixed German and Scottish origin, two younger members of which were widely thought to be going through a difficult period in their marriage. There were references to what, only a little

while ago, had been called the “triumph” of the Prime Minister at Maastricht. Other space on the front page was given to Sunday trading, the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, a new drug that seemed to be killing rather than curing patients, and the theft of “up-market” clothes from shops near Ascot. Clearly, in the face of such important topics, the future of the planet could not expect front-page treatment. But it was found quite prominent, on page twelve.

It is sad to end an article on the Rio conference with some reservations. Good things were said, some of them by the British Prime Minister, in which hope for the future may be found. There was, however, one very serious omission. Nothing was said about the intolerable burden of arms expenditure which not only contributes to spoiling the environment and slaughtering human beings, but also makes it impossible for many countries to afford the financial resources for some of the desirable measures that are clearly necessary.

To go back no further than the Gulf War, it has been estimated that the cost of the sacred endeavour of liberating Kuwait and driving Saddam from power — which does not yet seem to have come about — was about six times the annual budget of the UN. This revelation appeared in an article by Bruce Kent, of CND fame/infamy, in the *Catholic Herald*, a weekly not often quoted with approval in *The Freethinker*. All too often the *Catholic Herald* concentrates its concern for the future on opposing any effort to restrict “the freedom of couples to decide the size of their own families”. In other words, it opposes birth control in the Third World (and elsewhere). Admittedly poverty encourages large families as a means of adding to the total earning power. But this does not affect the need for family planning facilities in those parts of the world where, for religious or other reasons, it is not available. Whatever, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, few would accept that the indiscriminate addition of millions to the world population is a progressive policy.

At the same time, not many will accept that weapons of mass destruction should continue to be produced on a massive scale. It is significant that no matter how poor countries are, in Europe, Asia or Africa, they always find money for armaments. There is always an open cheque-book to pay for weapons. As long as this is so, it will take more than Rio conferences to have any real effect on the problems of the planet.

Finally, in spite of some glimmers of hope that can be found in the proceedings at Rio, it is impossible to be wholly optimistic. It would be a very bold person who could declare that, in a half century or so, real progress will have been made towards the arrest of the decay noted by Dr Astrov and that the nations of the world would have taken really substantial steps to counter inertia, ignorance and irresponsibility.

DIDEROT: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY by P. N. Furbank.
Secker & Warburg, £25

While on a visit to Leningrad — as it still was eighteen months ago — I saw Diderot's library, which he had sold to Catherine the Great to bring himself financial independence. This shows how far the books of the Enlightenment spread, but when one considers the trip Diderot took to lecture Catherine the Great on how to run an ideal State, its influence might be questioned. To travel to Russia to exhort a despot to be enlightened exhibits a great optimism — and Diderot was perhaps the most supremely optimistic of the *philosophes*. He was also the most human, the most sociable, the most enthusiastic — indeed, if I had the chance to meet just one, he would be my choice.

P. N. Furbank, who has written a superb biography of E. M. Forster, one of the twentieth century's greatest humanists, has now turned his attention to one of the eighteenth century's greatest humanists. He has written a sympathetic study which, while it does not add much factual information to the standard biography by Arthur M. Wilson (1973, OUP), illuminates Diderot's imaginative writings with great skill. Furbank is at home with Diderot's ebullience, his quirkiness, his individual genius. He highlights those imaginative works, in particular *Rameau's Nephew* and *D'Alembert's Dream*, which deserve to be better known today. He also convinces us of the originality of the novels *The Nun* and *Jacques the Fatalist*, which also deserve a wider audience.

A *philosophe* was not quite a philosopher, like say David Hume, not quite a writer, like say Laurence Sterne (who influenced Diderot), but a man of all pens and all tongues, quivering with alertness to new ideas and new intellectual friends. Although Diderot did not write *Candide*, he is a figure of comparable stature to Voltaire; although he did not pour out his emotions like Rousseau, he was a man of astonishing variety of feeling. He was totally at home in the salons where the unofficial philosophic sect met. (The salons were often run by famous women — and a good book about female *philosophes* is yet to be written.) Diderot led one of the most freethinking of intellectual groups throughout all history. They were predominantly atheists, materialists, sceptics — although some remained deist or agnostic. They were not as political as some thought, particularly those who later excoriated them for causing the French Revolution; but Diderot, towards the end of his life and following the American War of Independence, became

more interested in political reform.

Diderot was born in Langres in 1713 and received an excellent education in the classics at a Jesuit school. The family had clerical connections, with an uncle as a canon (in due course his brother became a priest), although his father was an admired master cutler. Diderot tried to run away to Paris, but was later taken there by his father to study. He eventually gained a degree but then failed to follow his father's advice to get a profession or a trade. He drifted for ten years, tutoring and hack writing — he even wrote sermons for money. Indeed he had the sermonising temperament, constantly wanting to convince people of their capacity for virtue. One of his first substantial works of translation was the English *An Enquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, by Lord Shaftesbury.

The possibility of a translation of Chambers' Encyclopedia led to the suggestion that it would be better to compile an original French one. This became his life's work. It was to be a compilation of all knowledge — arts, trades, sciences — and it was a profoundly subversive work, famous for its apparently innocent cross reference, such as, for instance, "ANTHROPOPHAGY; see EUCHARIST, COMMUNION, ALTAR, etc". Diderot met many blows en route. He was imprisoned at a time when the Government was in a panic, contributors quarrelled with him and deserted the task, finally he discovered a collaboration between a police spy and a printer had brought in unwonted censorious alterations. Furbank thinks that courage was not one of Diderot's virtues, mainly because of his failure to publish many of his later writings. But I disagree, for his work in completing the *Encyclopédie* was truly heroic and the closet publishing of some of his more experimental works relates to his feeling that they were blown on the winds to posterity to take root and blossom as time allowed.

Just before his death in 1884, Diderot is alleged by his daughter to have said: "The first step to philosophy is incredulity." He had written earlier: "There is only one virtue, justice; only one duty, to be happy; only one corollary, not to overvalue life and not to fear death." Furbank admirably demonstrates that these precepts were followed by Diderot — and they can be commended to freethinkers today.

JIM HERRICK

Antony Grey's book, *Quest for Justice*, will be published later this month and reviewed in the August issue of *The Freethinker* (see article on page 108).

REVIEWS

FREETHOUGHT ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER, edited by
Fred Whitehead and Verle Muhrer. Prometheus Books,
£15.95

The conquest of the American frontier was always perceived as an ideological as well as a physical struggle. Anyone familiar with James Fenimore Cooper's novels will recognise the humanist message underlying the relationship between the early settlers and the primordial Indians. The repressive puritanism of the Pilgrim Fathers remained a feature of New England development, celebrated for all time in the pages of Nathaniel Hawthorne. But frontiersmen and women have always been renowned for their rugged individualism, their dependence on one another rather than a deity to sustain their march westward.

This collection of essays, letters to rational journals and folk poetry has to be seen as a primer rather than a comprehensive anthology of American freethought. It is true that Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* spoke equally of the American and of the French revolutionary movements. But Mark Twain, Brett Harte and Jack London all expressed the "golden age of freethought" in their novels and stories, and the secular nature of classic American literature is one of the central themes of Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, a seminal study not included in Whitehead and Muhrer's bibliography.

The editors include a few gems, like "Mark Twain's Creed" or his alternative Battle Hymn of the Republic ("Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword/He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger's wealth is stored"). It is very refreshing to learn that eminent stalwarts of the American judicial tradition like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Clarence Darrow were confirmed opponents of religious cant. Holmes is represented with two remarkably satirical poems, "The Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay'" and "The Moral Bully" (who baits "his homilies with his brother's worms").

Darrow writes movingly of his father's confrontation with the village preacher, matching biblical rhetoric with crudition from the Greeks and from John Stuart Mill. The division of the pieces provides a useful historical overview from early frontier days, through the "golden age" and "the revolt from the village". But this would be better as a companion volume to a full-scale history of the movement, with key sections focused round Robert C. Ingersoll, the *Truth-Seeker* and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, originator of the infamous Little Blue Books which did so much to undermine

parochial conformism on the prairie.

There are short, historical introductions to each contributor, but these are tantalising rather than informative, in that they merely survey important milestones like the inception of the *Truth-Seeker* or the St Louis Movement, leaving the reader to fill in the blanks or to look elsewhere for fuller background. This limitation is half-acknowledged by the editors when they admit their selections come mainly from one region's archives. It is almost as though they had found a few nuggets and had decided to make an anthology of them. An excellent social history from freethought in America needs to be written as a corrective to the contemporary myth of America as "God's own country". *Freethought on the American Frontier* argues the case for such a history by drawing together these forerunners of freethought and by emphasising that they were mainly from immigrant stock and brought European philosophy to bear on the American experience: the Civil War, for example, was seen by Henry Brockmeyer and other Transcendentalists as a perfect proof of the thesis/antithesis/synthesis method of interpretation.

Watson Heston's cartoons from the *Truth-Seeker* are perhaps the most illuminating items in this book. The editors ought to be encouraged by this effort to look more deeply into a valuable contribution to American cultural history.

JAMES MacDONALD

A portrait of the late Elvis Presley has been put behind reinforced glass to protect it from devotees, many of whom believe it has healing powers. An attendant at the singer's home in Tennessee said that many people "equate Elvis with God". One woman claimed she was cured of arthritis after touching Presley's crotch (in the portrait).

Good news for once. The Advertising Standards Authority has dropped its ridiculous action against allegedly blasphemous advertisements by Recruit Media (reported in May). Its letter announcing this alleges that "some readers are liable to take offence" at the use of such phrases as "Oh God" and "Oh Christ", but admits that there was only one complaint about the cartoons containing such phrases, and ends: "Whilst we are disappointed to note your unwillingness to heed our advice that gratuitous language of this nature should be avoided in advertisements, we do not see any useful purpose in pursuing this matter further. We shall be closing our file accordingly." The moral is that, if you are threatened in this roundabout way with the blasphemy law, don't give in but fight back. All credit to Victoria Lubbock of Recruit Media for showing how.

Silver Jubilee for Homosexual Law Reform ANTONY GREY

One of the major law reforms of the 1960s decriminalised homosexuality between males over the age of 21. A Bill introduced in the House of Commons by Leo Abse was given the Royal Assent and passed into law on 27 July 1967. Its success owed much to a programme of research and education by the Homosexual Law Reform Society. Antony Grey, secretary of the HLRS at the time, looks back reflectively — and forward hopefully.

Twenty-five years ago the Sexual Offences Act 1967 became law, making it no longer illegal for two men aged over 21 to have homosexual relations in private. Until then any form of physical sexual contact between men had been a crime since 1885, and one form of such behaviour, buggery (anal intercourse), had been a capital offence between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, incurring life imprisonment until 1967. It still does today if committed by a man and woman — an absurd state of affairs!

The new Act, though far short of what common sense and justice required, was a symbolic milestone on the road to a more humane society, and I am proud of the part I played as secretary of the Homosexual Law Reform Society in bringing it about. But my pleasure at this anniversary is tinged with regret that there has so far been little further progress towards saner sexual attitudes in British society.

Although the Victorian taboos of silence about sexual matters have now been breached to the extent that there is a surfeit of largely mindless media chatter about all aspects of the topic, persistent widespread ignorance and prejudice still cause needless unhappiness to untold numbers of people. As I write, yet another report has just been issued telling us that sex education is in a mess, largely because many teachers are too ill-informed and embarrassed to deal effectively with it. So, unfortunately, are many doctors and other professional people.

Yet the basic biological and anatomical facts about sexuality are clear and simple, and every human being has a right to know them. Indeed, in this age of AIDS, it is essential that they should. It is when we get into the area of emotions, behaviour and attitudes that the difficulties start. For while the direction and strength of anyone's sexual desires are irrational, we are in trouble if we do not apply thought and reason to their expression. Here, as elsewhere, the "morality" of religion lays down rules of thumb for which unreasoning obedience is demanded, while those of us who are not religious look for a humane and responsible ethic.

Where homosexuality is concerned a lot of the trouble stems from the Bible, with its condemnations of same-sex relations as an "abomination". It has often struck me as odd that these strictures are usually taken much more seriously by believers than obviously more socially important biblical fulminations against violence, greed, dishonesty and selfishness. Homosexual people have provided a handy scapegoat down the ages, and still do so.

Unfortunately, the mechanism of projection and alienation so familiar to psychologists has been aided and abetted not only by those antipathetic to homosexuality but also by some of its enthusiasts, who seem perversely determined to cock a snook (or vice-versa) at society by emphasising that they are not only different, but better. Yet homosexual triumphalism is as silly as heterosexist intolerance.

Of course the law needs further reform, in a wider and more radical sense than just a lower age of consent for gay men. The entire body of British law concerned with sex is in a sad mess, and the sooner politicians wake up to this and grasp the nettle, the better. It will probably be an even harder task to improve social attitudes, given the barmy maverick "popular" press we are blessed with these days; but the effort to do so is vital.

For me, three big differences stand out between 1992 and the days when we were successfully campaigning to modernise the archaic laws governing capital punishment, divorce, homosexuality and abortion. First, there was then no organised, vocal opposition to liberalisation like that whose rise in the 1970s and pernicious influence since is all too familiar to readers of *The Freethinker*. Secondly, the notion that one might be the target not merely of verbal abuse but also of physical violence because of one's publicly expressed views would have seemed far more outlandish in the 1960s than it does now. Thirdly, today's commonplace of people sleeping in cardboard boxes in the streets and begging on tube trains would have outraged all sections of society in those much-maligned "permissive" days.

I hope that the 1990s will turn out to be a more socially responsible and caring time than recent years have been. I trust that not only gay rights, but human sexual rights, will be more widely recognised and better provided for before this century ends. And I know that those of us who believe that morality is the responsibility of human beings, and not a gift from the gods to be used by their priests and mullahs as a weapon of social control, will be in the vanguard of further progress whatever ignorant Archbishops who sneer at our "defective" sense of goodness may say.

Captive Minds

CHARLES WARD

So we are freethinkers. "Isn't everyone?" I was once asked. My companion no doubt had in mind that the fact that most people fancy they are free to believe as they like.

Many certainly believe what they wish to believe. But it is hard to associate freedom with some beliefs — ghastly burdens from which, one supposes, any sensible person would dearly wish to escape.

Of course the believer's real desire is probably to be a secure member of a particular society, which happens to be ruled by a particular tradition. How else can one explain the harsh theologies, the demon-haunted lives, the moral darkness, the tedious liturgies, the insalubrious practices, which it is incredible that any should find agreeable?

The average person may not be much of an independent thinker, while often pleased to imagine otherwise. Comforting assurance is generally derived from the knowledge that there are others who believe and behave in a similar manner.

However, the organised religions, in which fellowship of this sort is found, are by no means the immutable monolithic structures some consider them to be. Like all social arrangements they are intrinsically unstable. There is always tension between the interests of the individual and those of the community, and also between radical and conservative elements. Changes occur, though maybe tardily and not necessarily for the better.

In modern times the spiritually adventurous, the desperate, the rash and the deluded on occasion switch their loyalties. Not all that long ago, people had few if any options. One was born into a way of life. Beliefs, traditions and customs were already in place, often with no alternative in view.

Few, in fact, have ever invented their religious beliefs. The more thoughtful, or the more rebellious, have at times attempted radical revision or even complete rejection of the dominant culture. Many have only been able to make minor modifications to some faith held in common. People also learn to accept, whether with discontent or satisfaction, those cumulative larger changes which take place all the time due to environmental, economic, political and social pressures.

The present generation has witnessed a huge development in world-wide communication which has fundamentally affected this process. The human race has become aware of itself globally. A multiplicity of ideologies, including religious ones, has been brought to public attention. It may no longer be taken for granted that an inherited system of belief has a final or absolute claim to respect. The absurdity of there being so many such claims accentuates the absurdity of each.

Today we have to rely on our own ideas, based on personal experience and reflection — not someone else's, not some trumped up set of suppositions to which lip-service is expected and by whose character or reputation one will be judged. Gone will be the mental dishonesties and verbal jugglery which all but the most unsophisticated devotion to a system produces.

Countless millions have drifted away from the religions in which they were brought up. As children or young people they gave what Cardinal Newman called notional assent, then found, when they were older, that they could not give real assent to the declarations they were expected to make. That they are all bold spiritual explorers is implausible. Yet some are, and world-wide they may well amount to "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues".

Are we among them? That is to say, are we committed people, committed to the pursuit of truth, liberty, happiness, goodwill — to pragmatic expression for the benefit of all of whatever understanding we have acquired? We are not of their company if we consider that the odyssey has ended because we have closed the door on our former beliefs.

Our links with the past need to be taken seriously. We are indebted to those who paved the way for our freedom; even to those who, in the midst of our captivity, gave us confidence, hope and inspiration though not liberation. While it is doubtless excusable and occasionally effective to poke a little fun, if we can do no more than denigrate those who still cherish what we have discarded, we are, I suggest, in a sense still captive — held by hatred if not by respect — to those ideas from which we boast to have escaped.

Sincerity and practical idealism, however limited in scope, should always be valued. We also owe a duty to the rising generation not only to explain with clarity the dangers of dogmatism from which we are glad to have fled, but also, if we can, to lay dependable foundations for a more magnanimous society.

How independent is it possible to be in our thinking? I recognise ingrained habits of thought in myself and suspect them in others. Full freedom appears as a goal rather than as a realisation. Like the apostle Paul — though no freethinker he — I would say: "Not that I have already obtained this. . . but I press on".

I cannot accept that we suddenly become wise, attaining Enlightenment like Gautama under the bo tree. We are fortunate if we become progressively less irrational, less confused and less inconsiderate of the real difficulties faced by those who have not as yet been able to agree with us.

LETTERS

VARIETIES OF ATHEISM

Ted Honderich's speech at the annual dinner of the National Secular Society (reported in the May issue) was a good example of dogmatic atheism. He referred to "atheist arguments against the existence of God" having defeated religious arguments for the existence of God.

Honderich's interpretation of atheism is akin to a religious dogma. His religious attitude is illustrated by his trust that there were "no lurking deists, holding onto some metaphysical idea, and no pious agnostics, still hedging their bets" in the congregation. This doctrinaire variety of atheism reminded me of the parson's sermon expressing the hope that there were no recalcitrant sinners or backsliders in his congregation.

Such exhortations to adhere to an atheist's catechism rely on a particular definition of atheism as the denial of the existence of God. It contrasts with George H. Smith's definition (in *Atheism: the case against God*): "Atheism in its widest sense refers basically to the absence of a belief in god and need not entail the denial of god." This seems a far more rational attitude, and more appropriate to a free thinker.

Ingersoll expressed it well in his essay *Why I am an Agnostic*. "Let us be honest with ourselves. In the presence of countless mysteries; standing beneath the boundless heaven sown with constellations, knowing that each grain of sand, each leaf, each blade of grass, asks of every mind the answerless question; knowing that the simplest thing defies solution; feeling that we deal with the superficial and the relative, and that we are for ever eluded by the real, the absolute — let us admit the limitations of our minds, and let us have the courage and the candour to say: We do not know."

Or, as Lao Tzu put it: "To know when one does not know is best. To think one knows when one does not know is a dire disease."

PAUL ROWLANDSON, Londonderry

THE NEED FOR RITUAL

In his interesting and informative article, *Ecclesiastes: Atheism in the Bible* (June), Karl Heath comments that reading *Ecclesiastes* gives one "... a sense of that extreme self-consciousness and egoism which seems sometimes to afflict those, including some Humanists, who appear to feel naked, vulnerable and exposed when they have lost the cosy cocoon shelter of the religious community." He then suggests that "... secular rituals to ease consciences..." demonstrate one form of this condition.

In the light of our partial understanding of the human psyche and the apparent deep-rooted and universal human need for some form of death ritual — exemplified presently in our culture by the spontaneous ritual that occurs at times of national disaster (particularly following the Hillsborough tragedy in 1989), which owes precious little to either religious allegiance or practice — does he not think this a half-baked and faintly arrogant theory? In any case, I can assure him that Humanist ceremonies, for various occasions, usually manage to achieve far more than merely massaging egos and easing consciences.

NIGEL COLLINS, Ceremonies Co-ordinator, British Humanist Association, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire

NOT FUNNY

Religious satire can be funny, but it can also be desperately unfunny, and you would have to go a long way to find anything less funny than the article, *Primitive Minds* (June), which apparently needed two persons to concoct.

If the authors can indeed read a book about the fascinating Ancient Egyptian culture and civilisation and come up with this

list of silly sneers they are to be pitied indeed. The only comparison I can think of is with the early Christian missionaries, who used to make a point of denigrating the cultures and religions that they set out to destroy: and that's an uneasy thought, since many existing "primitive" peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Australia could equally well have their religion and culture ridiculed by this sort of "humour".

The Egyptians had a wonderful civilisation and their religious symbolism is fascinating and interesting. Their beliefs were no more irrational, and certainly less dangerous, than, for instance, the belief that peace can be ensured by owning nuclear missiles, that health can come from cruel experiments on animals, or that a moral society can exist in which millions are denied the right to have jobs and homes. Perhaps if the Ancient Egyptians could see our Western civilisation they might not envy our "advantages".
E. M. KARBACZ, West Mersea, Colchester

CONFLICT

I am amazed at the ingenuity exhibited by apologists for the myth of homosexual orientation. But what need is there for ingenious genetic mechanisms when the simple explanation works? "Gays" are no different from the rest of us, sexual creatures with a taboo against homosexuality. Between that taboo and the unsettling knowledge that one is nevertheless capable of, and might (horror of horrors) even enjoy, homosexuality there is naturally a conflict, which different individuals resolve in different ways.

At the one extreme we have the homophobes. What these people are doing in fact is trying to exorcise their own homosexual potential. Then there are those who make a fetish of "manliness" and try to sublimate their sexuality by cold baths and outdoor pursuits. Finally there are the ones who concoct the great alibi. "It is not our fault", they say. "We are genetically, or by upbringing, oriented differently. You cannot blame us; and, what is more to the point, we cannot blame ourselves." David Christmas (Letter, May) says, "We cannot choose whom we fancy." Who can? That fact, after all, is the mainspring for a large part of our literary heritage.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

This correspondence is closed. *Editor*

INDICATIONS

May I suggest that those who wish to know more about the discussion before the Belfast City Council decision to allow the opening of a Brook Advisory Centre should write to The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor, City Hall, Belfast, for a copy of the 14 February meeting and the voting roll-call.

They might be surprised to learn that "... the indications were that in cities where such Centres had been provided for the past twenty-five years, there had been no decrease in teenage pregnancies. There had, however, been a significant increase in the number of abortions performed on teenage girls."
DAVE PARRY, Skene, Aberdeenshire

ELEMENTARY

Like other believers in astrology, all that Doris Dean (Letter, June) needs is to read a child's book on astronomy.
KARL HEATH, Coventry

Eleven Muslim worshippers were arrested at Hyde, near Manchester, during a fight over how the mosque should be run. A fractured skull, several broken arms and head wounds were among the injuries inflicted. Staves, bars and baseball bats were used on each other by followers of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

EDITORIAL VACANCY

The editor of *The Freethinker* is leaving the post in December and the publishers are accepting applications to fill the vacancy. Please write to Mr G. N. Deodhekar, chairman, G. W. Foote & Company, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

OBITUARY

Farag Fouda

The rising world-wide wave of religious fanaticism has claimed another victim. A leading radical and secularist intellectual in Egypt, Farag Fouda, was shot in Cairo on 8 June by members of Jihad, the Muslim fundamentalist organisation which assassinated Anwar Sadat ten years ago, and died the next day.

Fouda was a truly remarkable figure. He was born in 1945, became a poet at university, a leader of the student movement against Nasser's dictatorship in 1968, and a contributor to the "wall press" by which dissenting writings were put on walls all over Egypt during the 1970s. He took a doctorate in agricultural economics, and worked as a university teacher and business consultant, but he continued his dissident activity. He was well known as a powerful writer and speaker, and was the author of several newspaper columns and of several books which criticised the religious and secular authorities in Egypt from a liberal point of view and without fear of the consequences. He was also well known as a politician, who resigned from the Liberal Party when it made a pact with the Muslim Brotherhood, tried to form a more radical Future Party, and helped to run several organisations for human rights and national unity.

He was a secularist in the original sense of wanting a separation between religious dogma and social policy, but he remained a convinced and learned Muslim, which made him all the more dangerous to the fundamentalists whom he exposed so powerfully and publicly. He had received several death threats, but rejected police protection, and paid the inevitable penalty. Adel Darwish said in *The Independent*: "Their words and ideas were no match for his logic, and they resorted to bullets." Karim Alrawi said in *The Guardian*: "It is an unforgivable crime that has impoverished the lives of all who knew and admired him." The Egyptian Human Rights Organisation said: "This horrible crime is intended as a message of warning and as a threat to all advocates of human rights and of freedom of thought and belief." Few people in this country had even heard of Farag Fouda, but we should all salute his life and remember his death, and consider the implications of both.

NICOLAS WALTER

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone (0273) 733215.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 20 July, 7.30 pm. Karl Heath: "Social Humanism" — a New Direction.

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.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 4 August, 8 pm. Dr Michael Kehr: General Practice in England, Past and Present.

Norwich Humanist Group. Thursday, 16 July, an informal meeting. Details from Philip Howell, telephone (0603) 427843.

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 79829.

Freethinker Fund

The generosity of its readers and writers keeps *The Freethinker* on a sound financial footing. Once again the Fund has reached an excellent total. Warm appreciation is expressed to all who have sent donations this year, including the latest list of contributors.

P. Brown and C. Hole, £1 each; W. H. Simcock, £1.50; J. M. Cowley, S. Donald and M. E. Nottingham, £2 each; R. W. McCoy, £3; E. J. Willis, £4.40; Anonymous, N. G. Bagulay, J. A. Blackmore, A. Burton, J. M. Cardy, I. C. Chandler, £3; R. Downes, F. N. Fish, J. F. Glenister, D. Godin, K. C. Grierson, R. E. Ison, B. N. Kirby, P. J. Lee, E. J. Little, E. J. McCann, S. D. McDonald, H. Madoc-Jones, H. L. Millard, M. Mordew, M. Rees, R. Rowlandson, J. A. Stratford, D. A. Thompson, N. S. Thompson, R. J. M. Tolhurst, H. J. Wagerfield, R. W. Walker, C. Williams, D. Wright and H. Yates, £5 each; D. Harper, A. Negus and S. M. Williams, £10 each; W. H. Sefton, £15; D. M. Edwards and In Memory of G. Spiers, £20 each; Anonymous, £50; S. Dahlby, \$30.

Total for May: £306. 90 and \$30.

Conjuring "the Root of all Religion"

A retired Indian businessman who now devotes his life to debunking "miracles" recently visited London and demonstrated the tricks of the charlatans' trade. His good work will be applauded by many, including Christian missionary societies which still send proselytisers abroad to convert followers of false gods to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. But they will be less enthusiastic about the magician, Paul Daniels, who debunks all religion, including Christianity, with considerable verve.

"Jesus was nothing more than a magician, just like me," Mr Daniels told a Sunday newspaper.

(continued from front page)

"Anybody who argues that the law should be used for such protection has a duty to explain why such protection is not deemed necessary in other areas of economic activity.

"On Sunday, after all, it is possible to place a telephone call, take a train, eat in a restaurant and go to hospital. Journalists spend their Sundays writing the newspapers that people read on Monday; television reporters compile the news bulletins that people watch on Sunday evenings. People work on Sunday in factories, down mines, on farms, in sewage works, at tourist attractions. Why does the law treat all these activities differently from retailing?

"What about the need to keep Sunday special? I suspect that most people in Britain, seeing a picture of the streets of down-town Tokyo jammed with Sunday shoppers, would recognise that as a thing they don't want the British Sunday to become. But would Britain go the way of Japan? Go to any Scottish city on a Sunday, and it is almost as quiet as in the days of my childhood. . .

"If most people believe that the best way to keep Sunday special is to stay at home and not to shop, then few shops will find it profitable to open on Sundays. If most people want to shop on Sundays, then the law should not stand in their way.

"The Auld Committee argued that the law should not interfere in the conduct of human affairs unless it serves a justifiable purpose in doing so. In this case, it serves none."

The law has become more confused by a Law Lords' decision on 25 June. It enables local councils to prosecute Sunday traders without risking large compensatory payments should the European Court eventually rule against the Shops Act 1950. The Shopping Hours Reform Council says the Law Lords' ruling makes it vital that the Government reforms "a totally discredited and unpopular law."

"Conjuring, what I do for a living, is the root of all religion. The Old Testament tells how Moses threw down his stick and it became a snake. That is still a documented trick in the Middle East. There is a certain kind of snake which if you put on its back goes absolutely rigid and looks like a stick."

Paul Daniels says that myths are created even today. People believe because they want to believe.

"People come up to me and describe tricks I am supposed to have done that I know I never did. They insist they were there. If they do that with me, it's very likely they did it in ancient times."

As a youth, Paul Daniels went through what he describes as "the brainwashing of religion". He became a Methodist at the age of 13 and a lay preacher in his early twenties. But doubts began to creep in, particularly after he went on a trip to Egypt.

He recalls: "I was horrified to learn that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ was not unique. Kings and Pharaohs of ancient Egypt were all given virgin births and deified. 'Just like your Jesus Christ', an Egyptian historian told me."

Paul Daniels now describes himself as an atheist. His philosophy for living is simply "do what the hell you like so long as you don't hurt anybody".

Versatile Soap Seized

West Sussex trading standards investigators have seized two hundred bars of soap which arrived at Gatwick Airport from West Africa. Peter Green, head of trading standards in the county, said the soap was being examined to ensure that it complied with safety regulations.

"We are concerned about the safety of the ingredients and possible metal contamination", he explained.

"The packaging made a plethora of wild claims about the soap," he explained.

Alleged benefits from using the soap include protection from witchcraft, demons, poisons, satanic assaults and nightmares. It is also recommended as a cure for madness.

Belief in God amongst the people of the former German Federal Republic is declining to a marked extent. In 1967, 68 per cent of the population professed themselves to be believers. The figure is now down to 56 per cent. This fact has emerged from a comparison of two polls conducted by the Emnid-Institute in Bielefeld. Only 33 per cent believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus (down by six per cent on the 1967 figure) and 22 per cent in the virgin birth (down by 14 per cent).