

The Freethinker

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RELIGIOUS SLAUGHTER: GOVERNMENT IGNORES MEAT IDENTIFICATION LAW

The British Government has capitulated to the religious and meat retailing lobbies by refusing to implement a new law passed by the European Parliament. The Ministry of Agriculture announced that regulations compelling shops to identify meat produced by religious slaughter would not apply in Britain.

An official of the Board of Deputies of British Jews said the Government's decision was "a very welcome move".

At its monthly meeting in August, the council of the National Secular Society passed a resolution calling on the Government "to reverse its decision to reject the recommendation of the European Parliament that it be made compulsory for any meat that, having been produced by Jewish or Muslim methods of religious slaughter, is offered for sale to the general public to be clearly labelled as having been killed without pre-slaughter stunning, so that those who feel strongly about cruelty to animals may avoid it."

Kathryn Donachie, press officer of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, confirmed that the Society is opposed to religious slaughter.

"We would like to see all animals stunned before killing," she said.

"Scientific evidence shows that religious slaughter causes unnecessary suffering.

"We are disappointed that consumers will not be able to choose meat from animals which have been humanely killed."

Other campaigners against religious slaughter have welcomed the European Parliament's new labelling law. A representative of one group said: "If people are aware how the animal was killed, it will put them off buying it." Certainly few who have seen a video just released by the Compassion in World Farming organisation, which shows sheep being slaughtered according to religious ritual in a Paris abattoir, would choose to buy meat from that source.

Teams of rabbis lobbied the European Parliament in a last-minute attempt to stop the law being passed. And it is highly likely that religious pressure groups, encouraged by the British Government's decision, will continue their campaign against labelling. Jews refuse to eat the hindquarters of a carcass that has not been "porged". But it is an expensive process, and religious slaughter is a profitable business with large quantities of the meat being exported.

Jews and Muslims claim that the humane treatment of animals is important to them. However, they clearly regard religious rites as even more important, and previous attempts to ban religious slaughter have been described as attacks on religious freedom.

Exemptions from pre-slaughter stunning were made in 1908, 1928 and 1933. While Jewish slaughtermen are thoroughly trained and licensed by the Chief Rabbi, no such regulations apply to Muslims. The only requirement is that the name of Allah be invoked before killing.

Seven years ago the Government ignored a report by the Farm Animal Welfare Council which recommended an end to slaughter without pre-stunning. The report resulted from a three-year investigation. It also resulted in increased lobbying by religious pressure groups determined to retain a method of slaughter rooted in barbaric tradition.

The FAWC also found that approximately two-thirds of the weight of animals slaughtered by the Jewish method was rejected as being non-kosher. It was then sold on the open market with no indication "that such meat has been obtained by religious methods of slaughter so that people who object to eating meat slaughtered by religious methods can choose not to buy it".

Protests against the Government's decision to flout the European Parliament on the issue of meat labelling should be sent to MPs at the House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1 0AA.

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NEWS

TELETRICKSTER

There are stringent rules which must be observed by every medical practitioner. An unqualified person posing as a doctor can expect little sympathy from the courts, particularly if he has caused death or injury. Yet in the name of religious freedom any charlatan can financially and emotionally exploit the sick by promising miracle cures — in Jesus' name, of course. And when a young woman dies because she has discontinued medication after being caught up in the euphoria of a faith healing meeting at Earls Court, no action is taken to prevent similar tragedies.

During his recent Mission to London, the American evangelist, Morris Cerullo, compiled a list of 476 people supposed to have been cured of a variety of ailments. But when he appeared on a BBC Television programme, *Heart of the Matter*, Cerullo was totally unable to substantiate his grandiose claims.

In a newspaper interview, Cerullo was at his most brazen when he said: "We never made any claims in any way or form. These people come on to the platform of their own accord to say that something has happened to them." However, when it is announced that "hundreds are being healed right now" and that "some will see miracles", it is hardly surprising that the desperate and fearful will clutch at any straw, particularly in the atmosphere of near hysteria generated by Cerullo and his associates.

Of the 26 cases submitted for investigation — or attempted investigation — by the BBC, 14 were unavailable and two refused to allow the programme makers to speak with their doctors. Of the ten remaining cases — and five which the BBC tried to investigate independently — research failed to discover evidence for miraculous cures.

Dr Peter May, a Southampton GP, an evangelical and a member of the Church of England General Synod, is one of Cerullo's most persistent and effective critics. He says: "I've been examining so-called miracle cures for years, and have never found one that doesn't have a medical explanation." Dr May described Cerullo's denial that he had promised miracle cures as "extraordinary double-think". And when confronted with the results of Dr May's and the programme makers' researches, Cerullo accused them of "not having the right attitude". Put another way, they are not gullible simpletons.

Following a bad press and abysmal performances on

AND NOTES

radio and television, Morris Cerullo might be expected to stay away from Britain for a time. But the brash televangelist is back this month to launch his European Family Network, which will be relaying his mischievous nonsense into two million British homes.

However, there is one major problem for Cerullo whose family business is funded by appeals to the viewer. Such appeals are prohibited in Britain. But the miracle man is ever optimistic and hopeful that the ban on televised fund-raising may eventually be lifted. "We're not going to lobby about it," he says. "But we sure hope others will, and we will be the beneficiaries."

Cerullo's optimism may not be misplaced. He has potential allies in the network of evangelical churches and pressure groups. They could easily forget their differences and join Morris Cerullo's World Evangelism Inc to campaign for the right to solicit donations from the viewing public. All in the name of religious freedom.

FAMILY FAVOURITE

While their real objection to Sunday freedom is based on a biblical injunction, religious crusaders like the Keep Sunday Special Campaign constantly proclaim that they are motivated by concern for family life. But these self-appointed defenders of the family backed a loser, in a manner of speaking, by opposing Sunday racing. For Britain's first Sunday meeting, at Town Moor, Doncaster, turned out to be a great family occasion.

The huge attendance — higher than at the Derby — included thousands of parents and children. Officials broke the taboo on payment for admission by charging to hear the band, not to watch the races. Those who came to Town Moor got value for money, with competitions, bouncy castles, fashion displays and mime artists. Other entertainments included a religious service.

Sunday racing has proved to be a great family attraction. Perhaps the Government will take notice and repeal antiquated legislation like the Sunday Observance Act 1780. And perhaps the Keep Sunday Special Campaign will spare us their humbug and spurious concern for the family.

A Day of Healing to be conducted by Ron Brown at the National Spiritualist Church, Hinckley, Leicestershire, was cancelled — due to Mr Brown's illness.

CARDINAL'S ERROR

An almost unnoticed announcement by the Roman Catholic Church has poured cold holy water on the anti-abortion lobby's "murder of the unborn child" propaganda.

American Catholics were planning to build tombs in cemeteries all over the country for the interment of foetuses. This tasteless gimmick was thought up by Cardinal John O'Connor, of New York. The annual convention of the Knights of Columbus voted unanimously in favour.

But to the anti-abortionists' chagrin, the Church has rejected the idea. Fr Richard O'Brien, chairman of the Department of Theology at Notre Dame University, said: "Children are only children if they are born before they die."

CANON'S CONFUSION

Canon Charles T. Sharland, of Norwich, has been sounding off in the Letters page of the *Eastern Daily Press*. The poor man's cassock is in a twist over the shortcomings of society and his wits confused as to their cause.

"Satanic forces are controlling our young people. . . and the Christian way of life is rejected," he laments. "It is the ignorance and rejection of the Christian faith which is the cause of riots, hooliganism, thefts, cruelty, violence, fraud in high places and murders."

The Canon fondly recalls the blessed time when "children were taught the Ten Commandments, the Scriptures, prayers and hymns; in fact Scripture was an examination subject". He appeals to church leaders to "leave their conferences, councils, conventions and concentrate on conversions".

Canon Sharland seems to be somewhat out of touch with reality, otherwise he would know that for more than two decades violence and murders have been more prevalent in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the British Isles. Yet Northern Ireland is one of the last outposts of Canon Sharland's fundamentalist faith. The place is crawling with converted, born-again Christians. Children are systematically taught the Ten Commandments, the Scriptures, prayers and hymns. They are also taught to hate.

It is a great pity that Canon Sharland's pessimism is not fully justified. Unfortunately his views are finding favour with some Government ministers, particularly John Patten at the Department of Education. Increasingly children are being subjected to Christian indoctrination in the classroom. Outside school, many more are victims of brainwashing at child abuse centres known as mosques and evangelical churches.

A MODERN CRUSADER

"What these dreadful people are trying to do," fumed Dame Barbara Cartland in *The Times Educational Supplement* last month, "is make children make a decision about their belief in God at 10 or 11, which is an age when you should be told that you have a belief in God." The "dreadful people" in question are the British Humanist Association, producers and distributors of a video, *Humanism—the Great Detective Story*, which is selling well to schools.

"If children don't know about religion they can never know our history," continued Dame Barbara, whose latest work (the 13th this year!) is entitled *Wanted—A Royal Wife*. "If you think about the Crusades, they are all part of our history."

The Crusades, or Campaigns of the Cross, are indeed a part of our history. But most modern Christians would prefer to forget about murderous expeditions by knights, mercenaries and assorted cut-throats in response to papal appeals to subdue the infidel.

According to *The Times Educational Supplement*, Dame Barbara believes she contributed to Labour's General Election defeat by writing to every newspaper in the country — all 910 of them — alerting the nation to Neil Kinnock's agnosticism. "I got an enormous amount of letters back from people saying they had voted Labour before but wouldn't do it again," she says. But the Christian stalwart is somewhat miffed by the Archbishop of Canterbury's frosty reply that "Mr and Mrs Kinnock's private views are their own concern" — which some may interpret as a hint that the Dame should mind her own business.

Meanwhile, Matt Cherry, the BHA's public relations officer, reports that an increase in enquiries and sales of the video has coincided with publicity resulting from the romantic novelist's anti-humanist crusade. The video, which is suitable not just for schools but a wide range of organisations, is priced £10 and obtainable from the BHA, 14 Lamb's Conduit Passage, London WC1R 4RH. It can be usefully supplemented by copies of Margaret Knight's excellent *Christianity: the Debit Account*, free supplies of which are obtainable from the National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

A pastor and two members of his congregation were drowned during a baptism ceremony in a river near Johannesburg.

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.

HOW SHOCKING!

Cardinal Basil Hume, Labour MP Paul Flynn and Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells, have been protesting against a Spitting Image tableau at the Barbican Centre, London. It is part of "The Cutting Edge", an exhibition of contemporary satirical art.

The offending item is a parody of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper". Margaret Thatcher takes the place of Jesus (complete with crown of thorns) with a number of Conservative politicians as her disciples. On the table lies a Water Into Wine List and a platter on which reposes the head of John the Baptist (easily recognisable as the upper portion of Neil Kinnock).

Cardinal Hume wrote to the Barbican authorities expressing his "shock and sadness" at such irreverence. No doubt he prefers the jolly crucifixes and Stations of the Cross which adorn most Catholic churches.

By all accounts the whole exhibition is a hoot. So hurry along to the Barbican Centre while there is still time to catch it.

SICK

As six-year-old cancer victim, Mark Pilford, lay dying in a south London hospital, members of his family cheered. The boy's parents stood around his bed in Greenwich Hospital, and in the words of his grandmother, "we cheered and cheered and shouted". His mother is a "psychic medium" and the noisy death-bed demonstration was "to cheer Mark to heaven".

Freethinker Fund

The need for a monthly publication committed to the battle against religious superstition and irrational attitudes is as great as ever. So is financial support for a paper which has a limited circulation and no advertising revenue. Every issue of *The Freethinker* includes a list of contributors to the Fund. Its readers' and writers' generosity keep the paper solvent. Our thanks to all who support it.

W. Beninson, A. D. Gore and D. Pickett, £1 each; E. Douglas, C. Jones, M. W. Smith and J. M. Woodman, £2 each; P. Proctor, £3; A. Varlet, £4.40; J. W. Aldam, C. Bayliss, R. Bell, M. A. Betts, G. Blakey, N. V. Cluett, H. N. Feather, G. J. H. Forrest, J. Gibson, N. Haemmerle, J. Hemming, K. Hudson, P. N. Irving, C. Kensit, P. J. Kerr, K. J. Manning, A. Negus, P. Payne, R. H. Pierce, J. A. Ryder D. L. Seymour, M. A. Shaikh, J. Wimble and R. G. Wood, £5 each; Anonymous, J. Charles, A. Glaiser and O. Thompson, £10 each; E. Stockton, £11.67; Lewisham Humanist Group, £15.

Total for July: £205.07

A Cracked Trumpet

R. J. CONDON

An advertisement in a local newspaper announced that the impressively named Archbishop Dr Benson Idahosa is to preach at Peniel Pentecostal Church in Brentwood, Essex. Nothing unusual in that, you might think, but His Grace is described as "A man used by God to Raise the Dead. Heal the Sick. . .". Raise the dead? This should be worth seeing. There is, however, no promise that Dr Idahosa will resuscitate a corpse at any of his services — we are merely invited to hear his words of wisdom.

Peniel sounds like one of those once-common "tin" chapels. It is in fact a fairly large complex of buildings on the outskirts of Brentwood. The church accommodates more than 400 regular worshippers, whose children are educated in a school which is said to get them two years ahead of those in State schools.

There is clearly an enormous amount of money at the back of Peniel. A 16-page free newspaper in colour, with a print run of 50,000 and little advertising revenue, doesn't come cheap. Neither does a bookshop-cum-cafe right in the town centre. Cash is also available for the globe-trotting activities of the pastor, Michael Reid, a truly prodigious labourer in the Lord's vineyard. In recent years he has been to North and South America, Europe, the Middle and Far East, and to a number of African countries. His paper, *Trumpet Call*, says crowds flock to hear him and receive the miracles which God is performing through his ministry.

Miracles of healing are ten a penny at Peniel. *Trumpet Call* is full of them, but most appear to be the usual results claimed by faith healers, sick people who feel better in the emotional atmosphere of a Pentecostal service. A headline shouts: "New legs, new shoulders, new ears!" Those would be real miracles, but they turn out to be just old parts refurbished.

Miraculous cures are claimed for conditions that can have spontaneous remissions. We are not told who diagnosed them. Faith healers have been known to accept a patient's own diagnosis. There is vague talk of hospitals and doctors, but none are named. Pastor Reid likes his healing to stand up to medical scrutiny, but instead of bringing independent doctors he refers his cases to one connected with Peniel. Dr Esquivel writes: "It has been a thrill . . . to take a close look at the healings God has done in our church." The objective outlook essential for assessing the results of faith healing is completely missing here.

Pastor Reid has just acquired an honorary doctorate, presented to him out of the blue by none other than Archbishop Idahosa. Dr Reid looks every inch the academic, posing learnedly in cap and gown before well-stocked bookshelves. The great man's study, no

doubt — or could the photograph have been taken in his bookshop? His doctorate is one of "practical theology", whatever that may mean, and comes from the Oral Roberts University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, of which the Archbishop is a "regent", Roberts-speak for overseas representative.

This involvement with Oral Roberts indicates a probable source of Peniel's wealth. The transatlantic preacher and reputed miracle-worker is chiefly known for the incessant begging which nets him millions of dollars each year — he asks his followers to give more than they think they can afford. One wonders if, as in the United States, they pass buckets round at Peniel.

Roberts, too, claims to raise the dead. His son Richard tells us Oral has restored to life "dozens and dozens and dozens". I make that at least 72. Not one latter-day Lazarus has ever been produced, but it doesn't matter — the money rolls in.

Archbishop Idahosa is quite safe from challenge at Peniel. He says he can raise the dead, so he is believed. He won't be performing at the geriatric hospital just along the road. Peniel, by the way, means Face of God. In this instance a thoroughly unacceptable face.

End Sunday Boredom

The English Tourist Board says it is encouraged by moves to brighten up the weekend. These have included Sunday opening of the Tower of London, Sunday racing and more theatre performances.

Speaking at a press conference in London to launch the Board's annual report, ETB chairman William Davis called for a more determined effort to make the weekend attractive.

"We support the idea of Sunday shopping, but we also want to see more attractions, theatres and restaurants open for business on Sunday," he declared. "We don't seek to discourage people from going to church, but there ought to be more things to do and see at weekends. There is no reason why Sunday should be boring."

Mr Davis suggested the setting up of an action group, chaired by a Government Minister, covering tourism, arts and sports interests. Its role would be "to cooperate on joint campaigns and to recommend the removal of antiquated legal obstacles".

The name of a public house in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, has been changed in deference to the sensibilities of Muslims who worship at the mosque opposite. The Flying Pig is now called The Ale Cart.

The Vatican (and Other) Billions

DAVID TRIBE

It was said to have been the biggest conference in the history of the world. It attracted some of the world's biggest names. Its discussions generated enough carbon dioxide to alarm anyone concerned over global warming.

As T. F. Evans observed in "Thoughts After Rio" (July), the UN Conference on Environment and Development ("Earth Summit"), its *Rio Declaration, Agenda 21*, Sustainable Development Commission and conventions on climate change and biodiversity produced "some glimmers of hope". Important issues were discussed at the highest level, albeit with only a fraction of the publicity attending the Barcelona Olympics. And although the developed nations have so far pledged only \$2 billion of the \$125 billion a year needed to implement *Agenda 21* through the World Bank's Global Environment Facility (another \$475 billion a year is needed from the environmentally degraded countries themselves), it's at least a start.

I haven't yet had an opportunity of seeing *Agenda 21*, but one resumé is significant. The nub of the section on "poverty" is apparently "no one solution will apply globally, specific programmes are needed in different countries". Let's try "population": "Strategies are needed to mitigate the adverse impact on the environment of human activities and the adverse impact of environmental change on people."

Does something seem to be missing here? Of course, one would need to read the text to see what "human activities" are described. But I'm ready to bet copulating isn't at the top of the list, and probably gains no mention at all. Is this clairvoyance? Not quite.

Older readers may recall the launching 30 years ago of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Though the FAO's first director-general was a humanist (Lord Boyd Orr), the FFHC instructed its speakers to avoid the issue of family planning. Why? Because this was the trade-off for Vatican support of the campaign.

The Vatican has of course denied charges that it has similarly intrigued to keep birth control off the Earth Summit agenda. But shortly before the summit it sent a confidential memorandum to embassies in Rome and its diplomats abroad.

This brazenly asserted: "Population growth, of and by itself, is seldom the primary cause of environmental problems. In most cases, there are no causal links between the numbers of people and degradation of the environment. In fact, the less populated nations of the North are directly or indirectly responsible for most of the abuse of the global environment." A Reuter's report added that "the memo said the real solutions must involve sound economic planning, technology, justice

and distribution of wealth from the rich North to the poor South."

While conceding that the suggested "solutions" have a part to play — and, in the case of technology, a large part — we need to look at the extraordinary claim that "in most cases" population numbers and environmental degradation are unrelated.

First, it must be noted that this attitude — which, I suggest, is no aberration but has always been the long-range goal of Vatican diplomacy — goes way beyond the Roman Catholic Church's "traditional theological" opposition to artificial contraception. It's part of a policy that led Pope John Paul II on his last visit to Kenya to hold a special mass of blessing for women who'd produced ten or more children.

To some extent artificial contraception may involve genuine theological problems, for some forms of it prevent the implantation of — or "abort" — a fertilized egg. This is no problem for freethinkers (and apparently for large numbers of educated Catholics), who regard a human being as someone capable of independent life. But if it's someone endowed with an immortal *soul*, when is this soul acquired?

It can hardly be at the time of birth, for this simply changes the mode of oxygenating the blood; or at the time of "quickenning" (to which it used to be dated), for this is a simple muscular reflex. Clearly, the most logical time is conception. Please don't ask me to explain how this occurs, for the whole notion is nonsensical. All I'm saying is that induced abortion is a genuine theological problem.

But many forms of contraception work by preventing the sperm from reaching the ovum. If this is sinful because it flouts Divine Providence, then every cathedral chapter that attaches a lightning conductor to a steeple and every pope that has a tumour surgically removed from his bowel is so guilty. And what about the old favourite, "natural" contraception — otherwise known as the rhythm method or "Vatican roulette"? Nothing of this, apparently, in the confidential memorandum. No, merely a bland statement that the population explosion isn't a problem.

One is irresistibly forced to the conclusion that the Vatican recognizes that it's having only limited success today in converting adult "heathens", and is even finding it hard to retain the adult allegiance of brainwashed children in rich countries whose populations are stabilizing, and has thus adopted the cynical stratagem of increasing its constituency by trying to induce the largely Protestant and sceptical "North" to fund the fertility of the largely Catholic and superstitious "South".

What's more, it's a stratagem that's succeeding. As with the emasculated (or should one say "masculated"?) Earth Summit, international diplomats, politicians and civil servants are readily persuaded that the Vatican can ensure that Latin American and many African and European countries will boycott any world event or activity it disapproves of and so deprive this function of global significance. The threat is probably mere bluff, but it works every time.

Nor is the Vatican alone in opposing moves to try to solve the population problem or even discuss it adequately. In Northern Ireland and other enclaves, fundamentalist Protestants are busy extending their constituency by exhortations to "be fruitful and multiply". And Christianity isn't the only religion to subvert sane population policies.

Hindu fundamentalists and Sikh extremists had many reasons to oppose and ultimately destroy the Gandhi dynasty in India, but one of them was the family's brave attempt to curb large families. Similarly, Muslim fundamentalists believe such families are "the will of Allah" if not indeed "the gift of Allah", whether or not they can be properly supported. Animistic cults in faraway places are eager to acquire the trappings of "civilization" but not so willing to accept the pill, even when they migrate to Western (Northern) countries.

There are, of course, a number of "cultural" reasons, which may have originated in religion but now seem to be divorced from it, and some economic ones why people in the South oppose contraception. In the Arab world the cult of masculinity glorifies procreation, especially of sons. Even though it's the husband's "fault" offspring have two X chromosomes (and so are girls) and not an X and a Y (boys), Arab men whose wives have borne only daughters will often acquire additional or alternative wives — depending on their means — in a restless quest for sons. The same phenomenon is found in India and China, where the cultural (religious) motivation is to have the "proper" person to conduct one's funerary rites.

In all poor countries large families, with a good sprinkling of sons, have attractions for many. Even though they involve extra mouths to feed when the children are young and the division of family land into uneconomic parcels when they grow up, the parents often have two overriding fears: infant mortality and the absence of a Welfare State, especially in their old age. So they have many children on the lottery principle that one or two should survive into their old age, and they like boys because a girl will join her husband's family and help to support his parents and not her own.

Clearly, organized religion has powerful forces in the South to support its opposition to birth control. Unfortunately, there are equally important forces in the North.

Factions support faiths, and not merely the Christian Democratic parties that are Vatican fronts in Western Europe. The far Right and the far Left agree on practically nothing, but one of the few points of consensus is opposition to effective population control. Fragmented into old, new and extreme, each containing many sects, the Right is hard to categorize; but groups like Food for Peace regard the United Nations, the World Bank and the "new world order" as a Jewish conspiracy trying to foist international paternalism — including tacit programmes of population control — on hitherto independent nation-states.

The Left is similarly fragmented into various brands of anarchism and Marxism. Since the collapse of most of the Socialist world (including the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) and the Communist parties which used to support it in the West, only the brave would try to identify any socioeconomic agenda of the Left. Further, many ex-Soviet leaders seem to have found Jesus, but not the celibate One. One abiding feature of Marxism, however, is — or at least was — a denunciation of neo-Malthusianism as a *petit-bourgeois* conspiracy to divert attention to the number of mouths to feed away from an inequitable allocation of food bowls.

Between these extremes of Right and Left are a number of radical liberals who support the Marxist view on potential plenty for all, or divert the North's energies to stop-gap measures, or have obsessive agendas of their own. Many humanists fit into one or more of these groupings.

The first points to periodic gluts in food production and what seems to be the wicked destruction of granary contents to keep prices up. My pulse also surges with these flames. Yet the reality is that relatively small increases in many commodities can cause dramatic falls in wholesale prices and thus imperil the economies of countries which support the World Bank and other outlets for international aid; while the type of food destroyed (say, maize) may be different from what the famished will eat (say, rice). Moreover, those who think only in terms of food distribution have forgotten the pressures of population on pure water supplies, forest cover, soil fertility and a hundred other factors. In these "post-Marxist" days the second group is more insidious, and will no doubt rush to denounce me if the editor bravely publishes this article. Thinking only with their heart, they say: "You rationalists are all the same. You talk about Malthus while these people are starving! Haven't you seen the images on television and in the press? Why can't you be like the Salvos or Mother Teresa and actually do something to help? We suppose you'll claim the wonderful Bob Geldof Band Aid concert was just a band-aid measure." Alas, that's just what I do claim. And, sinking further into the sewer of cynicism while not impugning the motives of Bob

Geldof himself, I wonder how much of the money raised at such concerts or through the myriad international charities actually reaches the people in need. Apart from what's siphoned off for organisational expenses, a large dollop is likely to end up in the black market and the pockets of the assorted dictators, hereditary parasites and jumped-up generals who run so many countries of the South. (Oh dear, now I've become a racist as well as a rationalist.) It's been well said that a lot of Third World aid consists in poor people in rich countries supporting rich people in poor countries. But if free food does reach the masses of the South, the first to suffer are its farmers, who then swell its cities.

The third group consists of greenies and others who support causes I believe in. They don't want "contentious" issues like birth control to distract attention from the ozone layer, or acid rain, or some other environmental problem. With some measure of justification they blame land degradation in the South on monocultures fostered by the North when its nations were colonial masters or on the drug dependence of middle-class America. Yet how can they ignore the environmental effects of a population doubling every 30 or 40 years, trying to farm ever more marginal land, drifting into mushrooming shanty towns, needing more roads and railways and undercapitalized factories without sophisticated pollution control? To say nothing of the human misery entailed!

Now, I realise the neo-Malthusians have overstated their case in the past. A simplistic conclusion that a geometrically (exponentially) growing population would soon exhaust an arithmetically increasing farm acreage didn't allow for, in some cases, a geometric growth in productivity through hybridization, genetic engineering and other scientific advances. One recalls *The Population Bomb* by "green guru" Dr Paul Ehrlich in 1969 and *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome in 1972.

Not only did they predict food shortages worse than we've experienced through the intervening population growth, but there were precise and alarmist predictions in other areas. Dr Ehrlich foretold all life would be dead in the sea by September 1989, while the Club of Rome had us with few mineral resources left in 1992. Using the known reserves in 1970 and projecting exponential consumption growth in line with population, it said the world would run out of gold by 1979, silver and mercury by 1983, tin by 1985, zinc by 1988, petroleum by 1990, copper and lead by 1991 and natural gas by 1992. Using five times the known reserves it secured a couple more decades. But the poor may justly claim five times their traditional use of resources.

Despite these hyperbolic lapses, the fact remains that there are limits to growth and the population juggernaut is potentially more explosive than the atomic or hydrogen bomb.

Never the Man Who Was

CHARLES WARD

From an unbeliever's point of view, the Christ of the Christian churches could never have existed. He was a theological fiction.

Odd as it may seem, there are some modern Christians who would agree with that statement after a fashion. They admit that the Church's Christ is a doctrinal creation which, as academics use the word, is correctly described as a myth. Nevertheless they hold that this myth serves to convey an insight which is not to be done without. Pious casuistry, one might say, manages to eat its words and still have them. But more of that later.

One point at a time, though. The next thing to note is that the phrase "the Christ of the Christian churches" is not strictly accurate. To be exact, one should use the plural, "Christs". Among all Christian denominations and sects a superficial similarity of phraseology, borrowed from the New Testament, masks divergence of opinion concerning the central figure of the faith.

The numerous Christologies represent the current varied outcome of historical processes in which power struggles of a mixed ecclesiastical, political and personal

nature have always been prominent.

They go back therefore, generation by generation, to the ambitions, prejudices, superstitions and religious speculations of particular individuals at various points in time. These contributions to what today's believers inherit as their "traditional" faith in one form or another are claimed to have been divinely inspired. Archaic ideas are thus surrounded by a nimbus of sanctity which invites uncritical reverence.

The religious establishment is set in its ways and bent on maintaining control. Thoughtful people, however, increasingly question inherited assumptions. Scholarly quests have been undertaken to discover, if possible, the historical Christ. Tortuous and inconclusive they have been. On this bandwagon have climbed proponents of many bizarre theories. Reliable evidence productive of new understanding is hard to come by. Practically all the records we have bear the marks of long editorial handling.

Christians boast about the world-wide influence of Christ. What they do not recognize is that this comprises

influences exerted by the churches' images of Christ. Included in these may sometimes be a vestige of the character of the man who originally bore the title. But how is one to tell?

Probably we shall never know for certain what he was really like. Many manuscripts are too corrupt, their interpretation inevitably too subjective.

The true Christ may be beyond our reach but, by examining the image that we have of him, something about ourselves may come to light. For we bring to contemplation of any character not merely preconceptions which may have been fed into us, but also qualities of thought, feeling and will of our own.

This is particularly evident when we admire the person. Here it is likely that we have already made some effort to acquire and develop in ourselves aspects of character we see in the object of our respect. How otherwise could we recognize them or be drawn to praise them?

The Christs that people believe in can mirror the sort of people they are. The immense shock to a religious mind of realising the fictitious nature of belief involves self-revelation, but this may be therapeutic.

To some, Christ is a gentle, kindly, even sentimental figure, tolerant towards the weak and those who repent of their misdeeds; to others he appears as a severe moral judge, whose threats may be used to frighten sinners into compliance with his "holy will"; he may be regarded as a sort of magician, possessing occult powers, able to make beneficial events happen for those whom he favours (and conversely!); belief in such thaumaturgic gifts may be thought a test of one's loyalty or devotion; or perhaps he is seen as a saintly mystic calling one to missionary endeavour, feats of insight or self-sacrifice; as a social leader whose dicta have to be accepted blindly; or a teacher who invites us to think for ourselves; an exponent of selfless love — or of spiritual self-interest; a Friend, a Lord, a Lover, a Protector, a Supplier, a Guide, a Saviour (from whatever we fear). . . variations are endless.

Acknowledgment by Christians of "the myth of God incarnate" (this was actually the title of a symposium published by SCM in 1977, which caused a few tremors at the time but soon followed by jesuitical reappraisals of Christianity such as James Mackey's *Jesus — the man and the myth*) is by no means *avant garde*.

Almost half a century ago my former college principal, Dr N. Micklem, wrote: "With few exceptions these myths of salvation" (he was alluding to the mythologies found in many religions) "can make no possible claim to historicity; they deal with fancies, not events; they cannot, therefore, in any literal sense be true, and may easily be set aside as mere wishful thinking, self-deception."

"But", he went on, clearly anxious to defend the

Christian myth, with its claim to historicity, from such a charge, "... any such condescension of the Divine, if it took place, could only be expressed by human beings in the terms of myth." (p. 204, *Religion*, OUP, 1948)

That is incontrovertible, while plainly not obvious to everyone. But how sad it is that Christians — here no different from other religious believers — "myth the point". (I beg you to excuse the atrocious pun; it was too apt to miss.) They feel it incumbent upon them to express the spirituality of man, not in terms of the known realities of human life and understanding, but in terms of what, at best, could have been no more than some early Christian's fanciful interpretation of a singular human life — a notion which (as these things sometimes happen) found favourable acceptance among a number of first-century contemporaries, and passed from one to another until regarded as a truth in its own right.

Beachy Head Suicides

David Wadman, the Eastbourne coroner, has returned a verdict of suicide on a mother and daughter who jumped together off Beachy Head. He said of Mrs Anita Halliche and her 25-year-old daughter, Marina: "These ladies had discussed spiritualism and life after death. This they made clear in notes they left.

"There is no doubt they believed they would still be present in the same way they were before they came to the end of their natural lives."

Mrs Halliche's husband said he moved out of the family home and was living with a daughter in north London.

Asked by the coroner about changes in his wife's personality, Mr Halliche replied: "I can't say she was the same woman as a few years ago. She was so confused and involved in spiritualism."

An important new book was published by Virago on 2 September. *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain* demolishes the myth that religious fundamentalism is confined to Islam. It includes essays on Catholic and Jewish fundamentalism. Edited by Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy Orders* will be reviewed in *The Freethinker*. It costs £8.99 and is obtainable from Virago Press, 20-23 Nelson Mandela Street, Camden Town, London NW1 0HQ.

Pakistan's Senate has unanimously passed a Bill providing for a mandatory death sentence for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. A similar Bill has already been passed by the National Assembly, the country's lower house of parliament.

BOOK

SECULARISM, ART AND FREEDOM, by David Nash.
Leicester University Press, £39.50.

Although Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake were both invited to speak at the opening of Leicester Secular Hall on 6 March 1881, it was the latter's brand of secularism that the local society preferred: what David Nash calls the "chapel type" as opposed to the "mission-type". Josiah Gimson, who was the guiding force behind the building of the hall, even called upon Bradlaugh to resign as president of the National Secular Society following the Knowlton birth control case, and when the unseating attempt failed, joined several others in the breakaway British Secular Union.

Where *Secularism, Art and Freedom* deals with the local Leicester Secular Society and its relations with the national movement, it recounts "old unhappy, far off things, and battles long ago" with, I feel, a bias against Bradlaugh. Did he, for instance, have a "strident personal style"? And while I'm niggling, who has decided that Thomas Paine should not be "credited with an reputation with a profound thinker. While I'm niggling, who has decided that Thomas Paine should not be "credited with any reputation as a profound thinker"?

Bradlaugh and Holyoake represented, if you like, the active and passive voices of the secular movement, and Leicester Secular Society was distinctively passive. Like Holyoake, it had "no desire to empty churches and chapels, but only to improve the kind of instruction given in them"; it mirrored them in form, with its Sunday school, "readings", hymns and the like, but it set an example with an open platform. It managed, as David Nash says, to "institutionalise" the Holyoake approach, though there was one occasion when it threw over its reserve.

Leicester members attempted to play cricket on corporation land on three consecutive Sundays in June 1885, significantly "in Charles Bradlaugh's colours", to demonstrate that "the first day of the week might profitably be devoted to amusement, outdoor as well as indoor". On the first Sunday the police stopped the match; on subsequent occasions play was prevented by sabbatarians.

And we are rightly reminded of the dangers of acknowledging secularism in the nineteenth century. The cricketers who were physically attacked had no redress in law; dismissal from employment was frequent; and "what amounted to exclusion from society could have dire consequences for the individual whether a local secularist or a national figure". David Nash

REVIEW

likens the situation to that of "minority groups such as homosexuals in our own century".

Many must, he suggests, "have been compelled by their sheer isolation into a life of outward conformity or indifference". The importance of a local organisation, "a support network", cannot therefore be overstated. A hall of its own was, of course, an additional blessing.

When the Leicester Secular Hall was built, it was embellished with terracotta busts of Paine, Owen, Socrates, Voltaire — and Jesus! In the ensuing controversy with local Christians, the presence of the last named was justified by Josiah Gimson on the somewhat spurious grounds that the others didn't deny the existence of god "but believed in it". In later years, to my knowledge, the bust was considered something of an embarrassment by presidents like Harry Hassell and Geoff Kirk. But by their time Leicester had become affiliated to the National Secular Society and the Bradlaugh-Holyoake split largely forgotten.

There can be no doubt, though, that Josiah Gimson gained some sort of respectability for secularism. In 1884 his sons Sydney and Ernest took a less respectable step by inviting William Morris to lecture on "Art and Socialism", a visit which, in David Nash's words, "had a profound effect on the thinking of most members of the Society, leaving an indelible imprint on Leicester secularism, and indeed wider Leicester society, for years to come".

The nineteen-year-old Ernest Gimson was particularly affected; he moved to London and joined the Arts and Crafts movement, specialising in handmade furniture. And he built Stoneywell Cottage in Charnwood Forest as a retreat for his brother. Sydney kept open house there, and the visitors' book includes the names of Annie Besant, J. M. Robertson, Bernard Shaw, Stanton Coit, F. J. Gould and Ramsay MacDonald.

For Leicester secularists, says David Nash, Morris recreated the "Owenite dream" which had inspired their founders, and it provided them with "a more positive version of the 'here and now' ". Nash also notes the links between Comtean Positivism and craft-orientated socialism, as exemplified by the artist Walter Crane, whose "Garland for May-Day 1895" graces the cover of this book, and F. J. Gould, who preached the Religion of Humanity while full-time organiser at Leicester (1899-1908), where he followed Harry Snell and Joseph McCabe.

Priced as it is, *Secularism, Art and Freedom* is a book to borrow from the library, rather than buy. But it is well researched and annotated, and it is valuable as a record of the oldest Secular Society in the country, and the only one with its own hall.

COLIN McCALL

Letters

CERULLO'S VICTIMS

The front page report (August) on the confidence trickster, Morris Cerullo, serves as a timely reminder of the danger such liars and purveyors of false promises pose to the disadvantaged, in this case disabled people.

I suspect that Cerullo's poster campaign offended me more than most. First I saw the discarded wheelchair and a few days later the broken white stick. But I fumed in total disbelief at the smashed hearing aids. A hearing aid is an indispensable part of my life. I certainly wouldn't have heard Morris Cerullo's television interview without one.

Disabled people want to be free to get on with their lives. To some, their disability is a big deal; to others it is irrelevant. Either way we have no need for charlatans of any description.

Let us hear more from disabled humanists — especially those with some knowledge of religious bigotry — and of positive attitudes to life. Morris Cerullo appears to be more disabled than any of us, unable to see people for what they are rather than as victims for his circus.

DAVID L. SEYMOUR, London SE4

BROADCASTING STANDARDS

I congratulate Terry Sanderson on his article about the Broadcasting Standards Council (August).

What infuriates me, I think, even more than the attention paid to religion, is the way in which the broadcasters are regularly admonished on the complaint of less than a dozen objectors out of the tens of thousands or millions who have seen a programme.

The classic case was, of course, the appearance of the male strippers — The Carpenters — on *Breakfast TV*. Hundreds of people apparently took the trouble to ring up and ask for a repeat performance but the whole thing was found to be in "bad taste" because of a handful of complaints.

I fear, however, that from some of Mr Major's comments, it is highly unlikely that he will see fit to save a little public money by abolishing the BSC.

C. J. CHARLES, Stoke-on-Trent

CHARITY FAVOURITISM

Nicolas Walter's welcome article, *Charity and Education*, (August), failed to mention that Eton and Winchester, and some Oxbridge colleges enjoy Exempt Charity status, which means that they do not come under the supervision of the Charity Commissioners and their financial affairs are secret. Eton College, owners of much valuable land and properties in London, Eton and elsewhere, the profits from which are exempt from tax, is very big business, and it is a scandal that it does virtually nothing to meet the requirements of its Charter, which is to provide free education for 70 boys from local poor families. There does not appear to be one such boy at the school.

In effect, the public in general, through the tax system, and the people of Berkshire, in particular through the rating system, subsidise the education of boys from wealthy families who go on to take up high positions in a system that keeps the poor "in their station". More than incidentally, Eton College has two Chapels.

In his book, *The Alms Trade*, mentioned by Nicolas Walter, Ian Williams has this to say: "As recently as 1960, the public schools were granted rate-relief of 50 per cent — or even more if the Local Authorities were compliant enough to do so, and with the implementation of the poll tax they will have 80 per cent relief. Anomalously, county schools still pay full rates".

ERNIE CROSSWELL, Slough

HUMANIST CHARITIES

Nicolas Walter has not quite got the charitable status of the British Humanist Association right. ("Charity and Education", August) Our principle object is "The advancement of Humanism", not "Education". This is charitable because it is analogous to "The advancement of Christianity", or whatever, which is the object of a religious organisation.

Our Memorandum of Association actually says "The mental and moral improvement of the human race by means of the advancement of Humanism". The prefix makes explicit the analogy with religion, because the characteristic in common between the advancement of Humanism and the advancement of religion is that both (claim to) promote the moral improvement of mankind. *We* say that the religions are not very good at this; but the law is impartial.

The analogy with religion is important to us, because it means we can claim the same rights as the religions in the way we seek to advance our object; anything else would constitute religious discrimination. The freedom of action of a religious charity is greater than that of an educational charity, as Walter noted.

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

COMING OUT

In his recently published autobiography, *A Divided Life*, Bryan Forbes, the film director, proves himself a thoughtful man as well as a highly successful producer when he writes: "At an early age (I had confirmed) a deep and lasting dislike for the trapping and rituals of Christianity, obsessed as it is with images of death rather than life, allied as it is to the symbolic eating of flesh rather than blood, accompanied by intoned mumblings that suggest a throwback to Medieval times. When I listen to the intoning voice of the Church of England, I do not wish to deny the faithful their beliefs, I just feel sorry that they are denied joyousness. . . I have never found sufficient cause to alter my opinion of Canterbury and Rome. For they have a lot to answer for in the sum total of human misery".

Following Tommy Steele recently coming out of the religious "closet", as reported in your columns (March 1992), perhaps *serious* thought goes some way to alter the general belief that actors, and others attached to the media, are for the most part escapists from reality and duck many serious issues in which they might be adjudged to be considered out of step with the Moral Majority. Mr Forbes's book deserved consideration for the independent manner in which religion, amongst other matters — philosophical and cinematic — are candidly discussed.

PETER COTES, Chipping Norton

RELIGIOUS TV ADVERTISING

During a recent visit to Canada, I was surprised by the sophistication (in several of its series) of some of the religious advertisements there.

Expense was clearly no object for one advertiser in particular. They showed long "moral" advertisements — being kind to old people; making the world a kinder place, etc. No mention of God or the Bible — the advertisement could almost have been Humanist — until the last five seconds when a gentle attractive voice told us: "This was brought to you by the Church of Latter Day Saints."

They obviously believe — enough to spend millions — that the soft sell brings in the customers.

K. PORTEOUS WOOD, London W5

National Secular Society. Annual Outing, Sunday, 13 September. Booking: telephone 071-272 1266.

“We Walked in Clouds”

MARGARET McILROY

Over the summer and autumn of 1692 a Puritan community in America was blighted by a witch-hunt. The last eight “witches of Salem” were hanged on 22 September that year.

Three hundred years ago a witch scare in Salem, Massachusetts, led to 23 deaths, if we include a short-lived baby born and died in prison. It seems odd that this minor episode has attracted, and still receives, so much attention when the number of victims of European witch-hunts, which raged for more than two centuries after the publication in 1486 of *Maleus Maleficarum*, runs into millions. In Europe generally, but not in England or America, torture was used to force the accused to confess and then continued, with unspeakable brutality, to extort accusations of people who could be compelled to accuse more and more supposed witches. This was a horror of such magnitude that the European imagination would like to blot it from memory and pretend it never was — as we can see beginning to happen with the Holocaust.

Why, then, is Salem still remembered? Perhaps the small scale of the tragedy makes it, and the personalities involved, more comprehensible, particularly as it is well documented. It is satisfying, too, that within a few months the wrong done was recognised, and the honourable men involved tried honestly to understand where they had gone so terribly astray. “We walked in clouds and could not see our way,” confessed the Reverend John Hale, a witness against Brigid Bishop, the first of the “witches” to be hanged.

Contrary to what is now a widely held opinion, the Salem witch hysteria cannot be blamed on Puritanism. Catholics and Lutherans in Germany each accused the other of being in league with the Devil and competed in cruelty towards those they alleged to be his agents. The Massachusetts clergy and magistrates were not the instigators of prosecutions, but angered public opinion by putting a stop to it. The girls who made the accusations were genuinely suffering and were not motivated by attention-seeking or malice. A few of those condemned were in fact guilty.

The trouble seems to have started with a bit of innocent (to modern eyes at least) fortune telling. This became less innocent when Ann Putman, wife of a leading citizen, an unhappy woman who had suffered numerous stillbirths and other bereavements, dreamed she saw her dead making accusing gestures and imagined they were calling for vengeance on a murderer. She therefore sent her only surviving child, another Ann, aged twelve, to join the hitherto playful fortune-tellers, to enquire into the death of her kin. This was indeed the

stuff of tragedy and madness, and madness and tragedy duly followed.

The chief fortune-teller was Tituba, a Carib slave who cooked for the pastor. She entertained his daughter and niece and a circle of their friends in the kitchen. Very likely there was an element of voodoo in the proceedings. When the girls showed signs of mental disturbance, Tituba was named and arrested. She soon realised that confession was the way to save her neck and spoke of a Tall Man, presumably the Devil, who tried to persuade her to sign his book. She saw nine names there, but never having learned to read she couldn't say whose. And as she had now confessed and repented, she no longer had access to supernatural information! A number of arrests followed; eventually the accused and the girls confronted each other in court.

Salem was now faced with terrifying phenomena. The symptoms of the afflicted girls were quite horrific. They were contorted into impossible and painful attitudes, choking, unable to swallow. Marks of bites and other injuries appeared on their bodies; an accused was seen to bite her lip and a corresponding bite appeared on the lip of the accuser. How could this be accounted for except by witchcraft? In the 19th century the psychiatrists Janet and Charcot observed the same hideous contortions from which the Salem victims suffered among their hysterical patients. (It should be remembered that hysteria properly refers to a severe mental illness, not a momentary loss of self-control which lay people generally take it to mean.)

Of what were the few genuinely culpable among the accused at Salem guilty? Guilty of making an image of an enemy in the belief, of course shared by the intended victim, that injuring the image could injure the person; guilty of exploiting, for personal advantage, the neighbours' belief in their powers. Thus Dorcas Hoar stole, threatening to bewitch a child if she reported the theft. Dorcas Hoar escaped hanging by confessing.

Thus a guilty enough woman escaped, but such an escape was not possible for totally innocent and upright person. Lying was one of the gravest sins to a good Puritan. The most certainly innocent of the accused could have saved their lives by false confessions, but knowing quite well that they were no witches, they dared not, for their souls' sake, say they were. Rather than have that sin on their consciences, they chose to hang. So the saintly Rebecca Nurse, a 70-year-old grandmother, charitable and pious, a model of virtue, went to the gallows. So did her younger sister, Mary Esty, who shortly before her death wrote to the magistrates who had condemned her: “I petition not to your excellencies for my own life, for I know I must die

and my appointed time is set. . . But by my own innocency I know you are in the wrong way." And she begs them to change their methods.

The prayerful dignity on the gallows of such as these was probably the main reason why the hangings on 22 September were the last.

Without the benefit of modern psychiatry, the Massachusetts authorities found a formula that allowed justice to be done. The sick girls were indeed victims of the Devil — no one could doubt it! — but his satanic majesty had no need of human intermediaries, since, as Hamlet observed: "The Devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape." Thus it could happen that the victims in their fits thought they saw good Christians tormenting them, but the Devil in his malice aimed to destroy simultaneously the accuser and the accused. Once this

was agreed, the trials could be stopped. And once the stimulus of court-room confrontation was removed, the hysterics could recover in peace.

One reason for the tragedy's continued hold on our minds is Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, in which the Salem events are used as a metaphor for the McCarthyite anti-Communist witch-hunt of the early 1950s. Not surprisingly, this excellent play throws more light on 20th-century American intolerance than on Salem witchcraft. One is forced to conclude that American public morality and sense of justice have not improved over the last three centuries. Ultimately, the bereaved families of Salem received some compensation. I have yet to hear of compensation being paid to the many people who had their careers and family lives ruined by the McCarthyite goings-on.

They Said It: a Press Digest

TERRY SANDERSON

Time for another trot through the papers to see what they've been saying recently of interest to readers of *The Freethinker*.

The Independent's writer, Sandra Barwick, alerted us to the existence of the Association of UK Sceptics by interviewing one of its most effective members, Richard Mather. Mr Mather is a conjuror, but more than that, he is a debunker of those other prestidigitators who claim their mysterious feats are the result of "psychic" powers rather than sleight of hand.

Mr Mather is an expert spoonbender and at 16 was investigated for spoonbending by the psychology department at Edinburgh University. "Weeks of experiments ensued," the article tells us, "and all tests were triumphantly passed." No one, says Mr Mather, ever asked him outright if he was lying. If anyone seemed doubtful, he threw a tantrum. He was eventually caught out when the University installed a hidden camera. From that time onwards he has devoted himself to becoming a "buster of the bogus". He treated Sandra Barwick to an incredibly convincing "psychic reading" and then disappointed her by revealing how he played on her gullibility to do it. He also demonstrated the art (and craft) of "psychic surgery" which, in the Philippines, generates enormous amounts of cash from the sick and dying. It's just another piece of showmanship.

The most depressing element in all this is what Richard Mather calls the Pollyanna Effect. "Those who are told good things want to believe them. On this, and on natural human arrogance — the unwillingness to believe it is so easily possible to be tricked — many in

the fortune-telling business depend. . . There is no limit to public credulity."

And this is a theme that runs through other matters, not least the Republican Party Convention in Texas last month. A more dispiriting display of self-delusion, cynicism and outright lying it would be difficult to imagine. I don't know how it was reported in the United States but in Britain the press reaction was uniformly unfavourable. Bush and his band of pseudo-religious maniacs were savaged by commentators in almost all the papers, even those whose own political affiliations seem so far Right they almost fall off the scale.

Martin Walker in *The Guardian* wrote: "Whereas the Democrats' more extreme activists were muzzled in New York, in Houston the Christian fundamentalists have been ignited by their success in taking over the party platform, the manifesto on which Mr Bush will run."

He noted that the "Rev" Jerry Falwell, he of the Moral Majority (an organisation which makes Christianity sound like a branch of the Nazi party), was sitting with the Bush family and is now organising a new movement "Evangelicals for Bush-Quayle". He says sinisterly: "While religious conservatives may not be the majority in the country, we are by far the biggest single minority voting block. With our grassroots organisation in our churches and with our dedication and discipline, we are the difference that provides the margin of victory. We like what we hear at this convention on the family, the right to life of unborn babies, that homosexuality is a deviant lifestyle, just like the Bible says."

Party moderates are alarmed by all this. The former mayor of Indianapolis was appalled by the convention's formal "invocation" which compared abortion to the Jewish Holocaust and demanded that God be partisan and help the Republicans win. He described it as the "most offensive prayer I have ever heard". Washington representative Louise Miller was dismayed by the take-over of the Republican party by fundamentalists: "They are a theocratic party. I wish they would go away and start their own party."

Clifford Longley, in *The Times*, wrote about the strange American anomaly which demands that Church and State remain separate, but which seems to find the two increasingly difficult to tell apart. He thinks the Republicans might well regret their flirtation with fundamentalism, and offers hope it won't happen here. "America is commonly seen from Britain as embodying Britain's future, as if what happens there today is bound to happen here tomorrow. In fact America, in its core values and beliefs, is about a century behind Britain." He thinks in the end the American desire for fairness and generosity will triumph over the hate-filled shallowness of the Crazy Gang.

Kate Saunders in *The Sunday Times* was less mealy-mouthed about the whole affair: "Nutcases from all over America crowded into a huge stadium for the pre-election Republican Convention. All the delegates seemed like enormously fat people in fancy dress, gibbering inanely about tax cuts and anti-abortion laws. Witnessing this freak show of Right-wing aberration, we can only pray that the Great American Public will let Governor Bill Clinton and his Democrats keep their lead in the polls." She says the Americans want change, but doesn't think that is remarkable in "a nation with the attention span of a gnat".

The Sunday Times, in the meantime, carried a feature on a new book which would no doubt please a lot of the followers of Falwell. It is called *The Facts of Life — Shattering the Myths of Darwinism*, by Richard Milton. "The world of science this week faces the biggest challenge yet to one of its basic beliefs," *The Sunday Times* announced portentously; but it turned out to be nothing much more than a silly season space-filler. By the end of a long exposition of Mr Milton's unconvincing theories, Dr William Hamilton, Professor of Evolutionary Biology at Oxford University, commented: "Every year there is more confirmation of the general concept that it [Darwinism] employs, such as the basic randomness of genetic mutations." And Dr Steve Jones, reader in genetics at University College, London, said that there was an enormous amount of evidence to support the theory that we evolved rather than were created. "Darwin has been killed hundreds of times, yet he refuses to lie down."

Over in *The Sunday Telegraph*, Claire Rayner

explained why she will be appearing in a Channel Four programme this month that puts "Religion on Trial". She will be "giving evidence for the prosecution".

"There are a lot of things I've always thought were stupid about religion," says Claire. "Religion never says you're important because you're you. It says you are important because you are one of God's children and that offends me." The article tells us that she doesn't believe in absolute morality but in situation ethics — that in every situation you should consider the well-being of everyone involved, including yourself.

Now to *The Sunday Express* which carried a review of a new biography of the evangelist Billy Graham. The reviewer, Alice Thomas Ellis, finds it difficult to take the good doctor seriously. After all, he has already announced the measurements of Heaven (a 1,600-mile cube, if you must know).

"Billy Graham is now in his seventies, the communism he considered one of Christ's greatest enemies has failed, but so it seems has he. . . Looking around at the materialism and lawlessness of the First World. . . one can only conclude that Billy Graham's hopes, visions, aspirations, labours and all the hype, amount, like the book, to very little."

Finally, to that other great exploiter of "unlimited public credulity", Morris Cerullo — the evangelist with the hide of a rhino. Miraculous Morris, who inexplicably has not yet been deported, despite his flagrant exploitation of the feeble-minded, is now offering his Miracle Book — free of charge. "In this book Morris Cerullo reveals how God still performs miracles today, just as he did in the Bible," say the newspaper ads.

No doubt one of the miracles Mr Cerullo hopes for is a reversal of the lousy press he's been getting. And an upsurge in donations, of course. If you would like to help increase Mr Cerullo's losses, why not send off for the leaflet (Freepost, Mission to London, PO Box 300, Hemel Hempstead HP3 8UU), and then promptly take it to your nearest paper recycling centre, where it will do far more good.

Government leaders in Afganistan have given way to hard-line Muslims in the coalition and banned female news readers from the State-run television service.

Shots fired into the Tokyo home of a tyre company chairman have been linked with Muslim anger over a car tread design. Islamic zealots claim that the pattern on one of the Yokohama Rubber Company's tyre resembles the word "Allah". They object to "the name of God" being pressed into the dust. The company insists that the pattern was designed by a computer. But it has been forced to withdraw its product from Brunei and other Muslim countries.



A Pain in the Back

Over the years Lourdes has developed from a rather remote place of pilgrimage attracting a handful of gullible mystery-mongers into a large holiday resort economically dependent on visitors. But there are still those who turn up — usually in parties organised by dioceses — in expectation of being cured of anything from AIDS to ulcers. Invariably they return home, poorer if no wiser, taking their ailments with them.

Some visitors to the Lourdes shrine came back feeling a lot worse than when they departed these shores. Such was the experience of 15-year-old Christine Coyle, of Romford, Essex, who returned on a stretcher.

Miss Coyle was described as "perfectly fit" when she joined a 200-strong party of pilgrims. At Lourdes she developed "a niggling pain" in her back. It became rather serious but, rather than being referred to Our Lady's Miracle Health Service, she returned to London and remained in the Westminster Children's Hospital for a month.

Commenting on her experience, Christine Coyle said: "People go to Lourdes to ease their suffering. I can laugh about it now." No doubt the church authorities, business community and citizens of Lourdes are laughing too.

Reminding Sun readers of the death sentence passed on Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*, the Rev David E. Gardner, of East Barnet, Hertfordshire suggests: "Christians should demand the same for Dr Barbara Theiring, who claims in her book that Jesus did not die on the cross, but married Mary Magdalene and had three children before divorcing." (Barbara Theiring's *Jesus the Man* was published on 10 September.)

The manager of the Hotel Banfora, Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast, called the police when a woman who had stayed for five nights refused to pay her bill. She still refused, insisting that Jesus would pick up the tab.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has changed the name of his campaign to win converts. It was realised that Spearhead is also the name of a Fascist magazine.

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.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49.) Sunday, 4 October, 5.30 pm for 6pm. Peter Heales: Rhyme and Reason.

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.

Harving and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 6 October, 8 pm. Del Smith: Rainham Marches.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Southsea, 24-28 December. Bookings must be received by 1 November. Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 13 October, 7.30 pm. J. G. Moore: Money is the Measure of all Things?

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 24 September, 8 pm. Public Meeting and Discussion: Good Without God.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 17 September, 7.30 pm. Jonathan Hooton and Helen Boreham: A Humanist Wedding.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 October, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Peter Draper: Health Through Public Police — the Greening of Public Health.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group. Autumn programme obtainable from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HD, telephone 0926 58450.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Saturday, 10 October, 2.15 pm.

Members only. Current membership card to be presented.

Indoctrination in Class

NICOLAS WALTER

The new White Paper on education, announcing the Government's plans for yet further legislation in this area, was published while Parliament was in recess and the schools were on holiday, which effectively reduced the volume and intensity of criticism it would otherwise have received from many opponents. *Choice and Diversity: A New Framework for Schools* (HMSO, £8.60) signals the continuation of the work of the dozen Conservative Education Acts passed since 1980 — and especially of the Education Reform Act of 1988 — in reducing local and increasing central control of how schools are administered and financed, and in strengthening traditional elements of what is taught in them.

The Government proposes to make it easier for existing schools to opt out of the State system and become "grant-maintained" schools and for new "grant-maintained" schools to be started, to increase central control of the financing of schools and of the curriculum and the examination system, and to increase central interference in schools which don't do what the Government wants. The Government explicitly wants existing "voluntary" (i.e. religious) schools to become "grant-maintained" schools, and implicitly encourages new religious schools to become "grant maintained" schools — making it easier for religious schools which have failed to get public funding by opting into the State system, because they don't qualify under the present rules, to get public funding by opting out instead!

As was to be expected, the religious provisions of the Education Reform Act are to be strengthened still further. The obligation to promote the "spiritual and moral" as well as the "cultural, mental and physical development" of children is taken as a justification of specifically religious indoctrination: "Religious education and collective worship play a major part in promoting the spiritual and moral dimension in schools." No evidence is given for this, and the only moral values actually mentioned are not specifically religious at all: "respect for people and property; honesty and consideration for others; trust; fairness and politeness". (An interesting class exercise might be to study these values in the context of the policy of the Conservative Governments since 1979 and the Conservative campaign in the General Election of 1992.) The Government doesn't yet dare to impose an explicitly religious — let alone Christian — element on to the curriculum, but it seems to be building the foundations for such a move. There are passing references to "the individual religious feelings" of pupils and to "a context of mutual understanding and respect" between faiths — though not to other kinds of

feeling about religion or to other kinds of belief — but the persistent emphasis is on the enforcement of collective identity and observance and on the weakening of local or democratic control. There are vague references to "the moral dimension of a school", "the ethos of any school", "the nation's Christian heritage and traditions", and so on. There are also a couple of definite proposals — that local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education must review local Agreed Syllabuses, and that "grant-maintained" schools may either have more representation of SACREs or else opt out of local Agreed Syllabuses altogether.

The Department for Education followed the White Paper with a Consultation Paper on *Religious Education and Collective Worship*. This repeats the insistence of the 1988 Act that religious education must "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian" and that collective worship must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character". It announces that Local Education Authorities will have to adopt a new Agreed Syllabus within a year of legislation, warns that the Department for Education may use its power to intervene if the rules aren't followed, and also proposes to make complaints about religious education easier (not our complaints, of course, but those from people who want more of it).

The purport of all this holiday reading is that the existing educational authorities, with a new Secretary of State and a new Minister of State who both believe in old-time religion, wish to strengthen the generally religious and particularly Christian character of the national school system, say so as often as they can, and try as hard as they can, but can't do very much in practice because almost all educationists, most pupils, and many parents are highly and rightly suspicious of attempts to impose what has become minority belief on what is often the only form of moral education given to the majority of the children in the country.

Meanwhile the media are full of propaganda for more religion in education, Evangelical Christians, ultra-orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Muslims are campaigning for public funding for their sectarian schools, humanists are struggling to retain their places in local SACREs, and responsible educationists and teachers are looking forward to the new academic year with fear and trembling.

Free copies of the Consultation Paper may be obtained from the Department of Education Publications Centre, P O Box 2193, London E15 2EU. Comments should be sent by 25 September to Mrs F. E. Howe at Schools Branch 3, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.