

The Freethinker

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ANIMAL SACRIFICE: FUNDAMENTALISTS START NEW "SATANISM" SCARE

Britain may be in for another wave of "Satanic abuse" hysteria. This warning comes in a document issued by the Sub-Culture Alternatives Freedom Foundation (SAFF). But the new scare is not fostered by claims about alleged ritual abuse of children, investigations of which have drawn a blank and resulted in a vast waste of public money. Christian witch-hunters have now recycled the child abuse stories into the Satanic animal mutilation scare.

The witch-hunters are not deterred by inquiries which have dismissed their claims about ritual abuse of children. Nor are they concerned about the personal distress and public expense involved.

SAFF asserts that once again the attempt to cause a panic about Satanism has originated in the United States. Christian fundamentalists in America and Britain are attempting to hoodwink the public into believing that we are faced with a global Satanic conspiracy threatening society "which can be saved only by larger doses of Christianity.

"It is this self-same arrogance which is getting credence within politics with false panaceas of 'family values' and the imposition of 'moral standards' which are set to condone racial and cultural segregation, censorship and restriction of human rights, thereby breaking up the pluralist structure of our society."

By spreading rumours and false accusations, the "spiritual terrorists" use emotional blackmail rather than hard evidence, SAFF claims.

"It was the complete absence of valid forensic evidence of any kind which helped the idea of Satanic child abuse to gain acceptance. There were no bodies, no blood, no bones, no ritual impedimenta. Therefore nothing could be tested, but the fear of the consequences became very real in human terms."

However, there is evidence in the case of well-publicised reports of animals being ritually killed. But it is not of the kind to justify the witch-hunters'

allegations, as SAFF's debunking of such "evidence" clearly shows. One case at Stanstead apparently involved Satanic rites, church desecration and animal mutilation. It caused quite an uproar and there were dark mutterings about the work of Satanists. But the "Satanists" turned out to be two teenage girls, members of the congregation, who apologised after admitting they had set the whole thing up to see the reaction.

SAFF comments that such pranks might be considered harmless, even amusing. But they cause genuine concern and also provide Christian fundamentalists with an excuse to get the "Satanism" bandwagon rolling.

SAFF claims that just as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children rubber-stamped claims about ritual abuse of children, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is now accepting "prejudiced evidence" from the promoters of animal mutilation stories. The Satanic animal mutilation allegations have always been a peripheral component of the ritual abuse of children scare. But both the NSPCC and the RSPCA readily accept uncorroborated accounts of Satanic abuse.

The ease with which an atmosphere of hysteria can be created is shown in a case at Clevedon, Avon. The burnt carcass of a cat was found on the beach and the RSPCA declared it to be a victim of Satanic rites. Shortly afterwards a schoolgirl gave police the name of an 18-year-old man as the Satanist who had sacrificed the cat. Local newspapers publicised the allegation, the man was apprehended and questioned by the police. When released, he assaulted his accuser. In the subsequent court case the girl admitted to having made up the story.

The *South Avon Mercury* solved the mystery of the sacrificed cat by locating the owner. The newspaper reported: "The cat had nothing to do with Satanic ceremonies. It was disposed of by an elderly lady who owned it."

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GUEST NEWS

TELEVISION ON TRIAL

Beyond Belief: Religion on Trial was a rare occasion. A series of three television programmes, taking an hour of Channel Four on three successive Monday evenings (21 September — 5 October), in which religion was to be put on trial and humanism was to be put on view, gave an unprecedented opportunity to broadcast freethought to millions of people. Unfortunately the opportunity was largely wasted.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is ideological — the people who commission and produce television programmes will not let anyone challenge religion or champion humanism on the screen without the other side being given a hearing at the same time. The second is technical — the people who commission and produce television programmes will not let anyone explain any serious idea for more than a few minutes on the screen without being interrupted. So the series offered neither a clear criticism of religion, balancing the dozens of series and hundred of programmes expounding religion, nor a clear exposition of humanism, correcting the almost total silence on the subject on television. Instead it offered a series of debates or trials conducted between religious and humanist teams, each with a leading advocate and a panel of three assistants, each calling witnesses on film or in the studio. This artificial structure, as with most television programmes on such subjects, meant that the content of the discussion was overwhelmed by the form of the treatment.

The three programmes concentrated on three main themes — sex and women, violence and war, life and death (a fourth, on education, was lost along the way). Each one was presented as a formal confrontation between the two sides, presided over by a chairman, opened and closed by the advocates with set speeches, and punctuated by a bewildering sequence of examination and cross-examination of people and by people on both sides. Some good things did emerge from the ensuing confusion — the general conclusion, which is usually ignored on television, that there is much to be said against religion and by non-religious people about important issues; and several particular contributions, such as Anne Kelleher's formal statements opening and closing the humanist case, Robert Winston's accounts of his work both facilitating and limiting human fertility, Frances Crook of the

S AND NOTES

NICOLAS WALTER

Howard League for Penal Reform and Gita Sahgal of Women Against Fundamentalism, people struggling against both Catholic and Protestant fanaticism in Northern Ireland, people struggling against both Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism in the Asian community in Britain, counsellors and activists in the Dutch Humanist movement. But too many good people had no chance of a proper part in the forbidding format — above all the veteran humanist Harold Blackham was wasted by not being given the chance to put a coherent argument. And Anthony Scrivener, the leading barrister who presented the religious case, combined arrogance and ignorance to a remarkable degree.

Another problem was the factual inaccuracy of much of the material. An emotive issue raised by the humanist side in the first programme was the terrible practice of female genital mutilation — but this is a cultural custom which prevails in many societies but which isn't sanctioned by and can't be identified with any religion. The reference by a humanist speaker to Paine (inevitably and ignorantly called "Tom") as a witness against religion was rightly corrected by a reference to his passionate defence of deism in *The Age of Reason*. A similarly silly remark that most conscientious objectors in the First World War were atheists was not corrected. The discussion of life and death was based on the assumption that all religious people believe in an afterlife and that all religious people favour restrictive laws against abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, both of which are false. The discussion of euthanasia was vitiated by a failure to distinguish clearly between involuntary and voluntary euthanasia and by the absence of any expert advocate of the latter. Indeed one interesting feature of the whole series was that it didn't include any currently active member of the humanist movement in Britain (though the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association were both consulted during early stages); this might not be a bad thing (considering some of the people in question!), but it was a strange thing, giving viewers the impression that there are humanist individuals but no humanist organisations in the country.

All this may be disappointing, but it shouldn't be surprising. An important fact about the media — which is known by many outsiders but few insiders — is that what is called "good radio" or "good television" is

generally bad communication. It is fun to make and watch, no doubt, but it doesn't increase knowledge or understanding — it is noise rather than information. This is implicitly accepted in most programmes about religion, which don't attempt to be "good radio" or "good television" and in which people who hold various views or take part in various activities are able to express their views or present their activities in a positive way without constant interruption or interrogation. If only this were possible for programmes about humanism! We don't ask for the equivalent of party political broadcasts, but for the equivalent of religious broadcasts — or just for programmes which enable people to take part in sensible discourse rather than silly debate.

In the end, we must be grateful to have so much attention given to our ideas, though we may regret that the result was so unsatisfactory. Humanist individuals and organisations have often been approached by people from television who are interested in making such programmes, and the BHA and RPA have recently been making many approaches the other way. Freethinkers have devoted much time and energy to getting our ideas and activities on to the screen, but something always seems to go wrong somewhere, so we end up either with nothing at all or else with something annoyingly bad. What is most annoying about this series is that it will be cited as an example of how humanism is treated on television, and will be used as an excuse to avoid any further programmes for several years in the future. It is up to us to do and say what we can to prevent this from happening.

THE SPIRITUAL JUNGLE

John Patten, who began his career as Secretary for Education with an article in the *Conservative Spectator* (17 April) arguing that religion is necessary for morality, has now written an article in the *Catholic Tablet* (10 October) moderating his argument a little. "Don't Sell Pupils Short" repeats the emphasis on the "spiritual and moral" aspects of education given in the recent White Paper (see *The Freethinker*, September). Patten wants these elements to be expressed not only through the formal curriculum but also through "the general ethos of the school"; he wants schools to give pupils both "a clear and consistent set of values and attitudes" and "the opportunity to be opened up, full throttle, to the amazing, unanswerable, fundamental questions concerning the existence of God; to how to relate to God; and to an understanding of spiritual life if they want to have one". The last phrase marks the beginning of Patten's withdrawal from his previous position, which continues as follows: "Some may turn out not to

want it, but give me a hardcore, robust humanist with a strong set of shared values compared to a spiritually uncertain representative of one religion or another dripping in self-doubt, shedding religious certainty along with intellectual self-confidence; I would prefer to go into the spiritual jungle with Sir Hermann Bondi any day."

Setting aside the question whether Bondi would wish to go into the spiritual jungle with him, Patten's retreat presumably results from recent discussion between the two in which one member of the establishment apparently managed to persuade another that religion isn't actually necessary to morality and that humanism is a valid alternative to Christianity. However, the rest of the article doesn't show any further shift, insisting on the place of religious education and collective

worship in the "compulsory curriculum" (no mention of the right to opt out), on the place of spiritual questions in art, literature and music, and of moral questions in history and science. There is some recognition of the need for mutual respect between various religions, but little of the need for the same attitude to non-religious beliefs. The official policy of strengthening religion in schools is clearly maintained.

In the end, we must of course acknowledge any positive gesture in our direction from the established religious or political or education authorities, but we may well remain cautious. In Virgil's *Aeneid* Laocoon warns the Trojans against the wooden horse, saying: "Whatever it is, I fear Greeks even when bearing gifts". We should beware of Christians, even when paying compliments.

Christian Fiddlers Brought to Book

DANIELO'HARA

As if it were not enough that the Charity Laws of the country enable religious organisations to retain enormous sums of money that would otherwise be due to the State, two evangelical Christian businessmen took it upon themselves to divert further funds due to the Inland Revenue into "God's work".

Philip Raisey (39) and Stephen Wright (40) were respectively chairman and company secretary of the city securities firm, Fox Milton. After being convicted earlier this year of defrauding the Inland Revenue of more than £130,000, each was sentenced to six months' imprisonment at the Old Bailey on 20 October, and ordered to pay £30,000 in costs. Their trial had taken three months and the Serious Fraud Office investigations into their activities cost over £600,000.

His Honour Judge Capstick lifted a reporting ban on the case, and the press was thus able to report what the

court had been told about these Christian fraudsters. They started board meetings with prayer and encouraged noisy religious gatherings in their Carter Lane offices. Internal memoranda were headed "Dear Prayer Partners". Apart from details of their lavish personal lifestyle, the court also heard of £125,000 paid illegally from company accounts to the Ichthus Christian Fellowship in Forest Hill and the Evangelical Alliance in Kennington.

Raisey of Chislehurst and Wright of Orpington, Kent, were convicted of conspiracy to cheat the Inland Revenue over a four-year period on three charges relating to tax returns and company accounts. Like many people who think they are serving "God", they regarded themselves above the law. After all, if you believe you are serving God, you might find such risks worth taking.

New Editor for *The Freethinker*

The editor of *The Freethinker* from January 1993 will be Peter Brearey (see next page).

A reader of *The Freethinker* for 40 of his 53 years, Peter Brearey has been a professional journalist for more than 30 years, having worked as a staff reporter, columnist, sub-editor and editor on weekly and daily papers and periodicals in his native Yorkshire and the North-East. He has also worked as a freelance, contributing over the years to all the national dailies, and as press officer and editor in the health service. He is chairman of Wakefield branch of the National Union of Journalists.

He comments: "I want to turn my knowledge of journalism to the service of atheism and secularism, and to extend the influence of *The Freethinker*."

Announcing the appointment, Jim Herrick, chairman of G. W. Foote & Company, said Peter Brearey is a long-standing freethinker and a very experienced journalist.

"Although he will no doubt wish to stamp his individual mark on *The Freethinker*, he will want to continue the tradition of robust criticism of religion. *The Freethinker*'s critique of religion is not gratuitous attack, but a clearing of the ground for a more reasoned society and more human values.

"The Board of G. W. Foote & Company welcomes Peter Brearey and wishes him every success."

The present editor has joined in the welcome, urging contributors and readers to give Peter Brearey their full support.

Evangelicals and Tories Denounce Festivals

In recent years evangelical Christians have conducted a concerted drive against Hallowe'en "paganism". Shopkeepers have been requested not to sell witch hats and masks, while parents are urged not to allow their children to participate in the fun. The evangelicals' main target is education authorities, with demands that Hallowe'en activities should be prohibited in schools.

This year's anti-Hallowe'en whinge was somewhat muted, an indication, perhaps, that the protests have met with little response and the evangelical prodnoses have been told to buzz off.

But a blow was struck at another ancient festival when it was announced at the Conservative Party conference that the Government intended to abolish the May Day holiday. This may seem rather curious, coming from a party which regards itself as a defender of tradition and custom. But of course May Day celebrations since 1890 have taken on a leftist tone which is anathema to the Squire and his relations, not to mention Conservative Club yahoos and yuppies.

The May Day holiday is among the oldest survivals of our pagan past. It was an occasion for merrymaking when, as Stubbs, the Puritan writer, recorded disapprovingly: "... all the yung men and maids, old men and wives, run gadding about over night to the woods, groves, hils and mountains. . . and in the morning they return, bringing with them birch and branches of trees, to deck their assemblies withall. But

Islamic Dictatorship

Identity cards carried by citizens of Pakistan must in future include details of the holder's religious affiliation. This is the latest development in the Islamic State which is notorious for intolerance and repression.

At the recent annual general meeting of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the chairman, Justice Dorab Patel, said the religious intolerance in the country had reached alarming proportions. Discriminatory laws against non-Muslims and women were giving Pakistan "the look of apartheid in South Africa."

The meeting passed a number of resolutions, including one against blasphemy laws.

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the chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their May-pole. . . which they bring home with great veneration."

The Puritans recognised that the May-pole was the symbol of life and generation. Stubbs goes on to say that when it was raised the people "fall to banquet and feast, to leape and dance about it, as the heathen people did at the dedication of their idolles, whereof this is a perfect pattern, or, the thing itself". Small wonder the Puritans followed the example of a 13th-century bishop of Lincoln who banned May Day festivities as "heathen vanity".

London's last May-pole was taken down in 1718. It is commemorated in Pope's lines: "Amidst the area wide they took their stand, Where the tall May-pole o'erlook'd the Strand."

It is to be hoped that a future Labour Government will restore the May Day holiday. Furthermore, freethinkers and pagans should make common cause in resisting attempts to abolish or Christianise festivals which long pre-date the alien Jesusite creed.

Freethinker Fund

Launched in the 19th century, surviving for most of the 20th and approaching the 21st, *The Freethinker* is a unique achievement in radical journalism. Its unbroken publication has been made possible by the loyal support of readers and unpaid writers.

Without the benefits of a mass circulation or advertising, *The Freethinker* depends on donations and legacies to make ends meet. Despite recession (slump), redundancies (mass unemployment) and price revision (increase in the cost of living), readers continue to send donations to the paper that promotes "the best of causes". Our thanks to all supporters, including those listed below.

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Total for September: £448.30.

Democracy and Freedom of the Press

TERRY SANDERSON

Two years ago, in the wake of growing public concern, the Government asked Sir David Calcutt to investigate the activities of the press and its outrageous invasions of privacy. His committee concluded that legislation was not appropriate at that time and that the press should be given another chance to "put its house in order". This led to the creation of the Press Complaints Commission — a self-regulating body run by the newspaper editors themselves. One of the Commission's first act was to produce an impressive-sounding "Code of Practice" which was signed by all Fleet Street editors. The Code sought to tame the apparently out-of-control tabloid press; it seemed the lower end of the newspaper market had come to imagine it could do and say anything in pursuit of better circulation figures. No one was safe from its prying gaze, no one's privacy was secure. Be we Queen or commoner, if we had a titillating secret, we were fair game for the ritual humiliation which is the muck-raker's stock-in-trade.

The many instances of tabloid cruelty, mendacity, distortion and political partisanship have been well-documented elsewhere. The Press Complaints Commission, with all its po-faced seriousness, was utterly incapable of reining in the worst excesses and, indeed, it is since the PCC was set up that some of the most revolting cases of privacy-invasion have occurred. Consequently the Calcutt committee was reconvened to decide whether self-regulation has been effective. "The press is drinking at the last chance saloon," said David Mellor, the man who set the review in motion. He has paid dearly for daring to threaten the power of the tabloids.

It is a difficult line to draw. In a democratic society, the press should play an essential role as watchdog and protector, and there should be no restraint on its right to investigate. If we are being conned by politicians, then the press should tell us about it. If someone in the Government is getting above him or herself, then we need the press to alert us to it. If a businessman or institution is not to be trusted, then the newspapers should be there to let us know.

In some instances, the press still fulfils this function. But in others it does the reverse. The tabloid press is politically partisan and in the main, it supports the Tory Party. At important times for democracy, such as at elections, you might think that it was a newspaper's duty to provide the information we need to make an informed decision about those who seek to rule us. Instead, they feed us party political propaganda, biased reporting and, in some instances, downright lies.

The *Sun* was happy to claim, after the General Election, that they had "won it" for the Tories, and its

ceaseless attacks on the Opposition were frequently malicious and untrue. In the end, the tactics proved effective. As the press barons' self-interest got the better of them, the newspapers' "democratic" duty to inform their readers of the choices on offer went by the board. Rupert Murdoch was the leader of the pack, as usual. The Labour Party had promised that, if it came to power, Murdoch's ubiquitous media empire would be broken up. Roy Hattersley argued that it was not healthy for one man to control so much of the media; how could democracy flourish when so much information — printed and broadcast — came from one source, particularly a source as virulently Right-wing as the "born-again" Christian, Rupert Murdoch?

Nowadays television plays a much bigger part in the dissemination of information and, at the moment, television has a statutory duty to remain impartial. But Mr Murdoch has been working on the deconstruction of British broadcasting for some time, and his plans now seem to be coming to fruition. The BBC is under attack from the Government and Murdoch is waiting in the wings, ready to step in and inflict his execrable *Sky* Television on us. British culture? Forget it; this Australian-turned-American wants more money in his pocket, and this country is his milch cow.

The press, of course, has problems. The circulations of newspapers, broadsheet and tabloid alike, are declining. In such a climate, the temptation for the popular papers to out-sensationalise each other becomes irresistible. Sex sells, and if it's famous people's sex, so much the better. The public has looked on in horrid fascination over the past few months, as a parade of cruel "exposés" of private lives passed before them.

By buying newspapers which indulge in these degrading humiliations of public figures, we conspire with them to become little better than a lynch-mob. We snigger at the sexual foibles of those in power, as though we are totally without weakness ourselves. Any citizens of this country, whether royalty, Government minister or office cleaner, should be able to shut their bedroom door and be sure that the tabloids — and then the nation — are not peeping through the keyhole. What they legally do with their sex lives should not be the concern of the public at large. Nobody deserves to have their most intimate moments paraded for the rest of the population to scorn and revile.

The press itself is shrill in its demand that there should be no legal curbs on its activities. Kelvin McKenzie, editor of the *Sun*, has said in a submission to the Calcutt enquiry that self-regulation is working. The fact the *Sun* has had three times as many complaints against it upheld than any other newspaper seems to

suggest otherwise. Other European countries have long had right-to-privacy legislation and it seems to work for them without fettering the press.

Now an MP, Clive Soley, has pre-empted the Calcutt enquiry by publishing his own private member's bill (Freedom and Responsibility of the Press Bill), aimed at creating a statutory body, the Independent Press Authority, to handle press complaints and force newspapers to correct inaccuracies. Mr Soley's bill, which has cross-party support, proposes that if newspapers print lies individuals or organisations, those people will be entitled to a correction which "shall be given prominence equivalent to that of the material complained of and shall be of the length necessary to correct the material, having regard to its

original context". Mr Soley says that the IPA will be a "tenacious guard dog and not a toothless watchdog".

Editors will argue that their newspapers will be filled with boring "rights-of-reply", which readers don't want. But, of course, there is an easy way to avoid that — don't print lies in the first place.

Mr Soley's bill deserves to succeed because it has struck the right balance. The more outrageous instances of press mendacity will be curbed, but there is nothing in the proposed legislation which will prevent the investigation and publication of stories which are truly in the public interest.

I just hope that Clive Soley does not have any skeletons in his closet, because if he does, he can be sure they'll soon be seeing the light of day.

Yes Sir, Two Bags Full

R. J. CONDON

One of the lesser joys of writing for *The Freethinker* is the occasional requirement to study and comment upon a work of theology. I have just been tackling *The Miracle Book*, by Morris Cerullo, of whom some will have heard. A "miracle" book it certainly is, for the word occurs ten or a dozen times on nearly every page; before this piece is finished he'll have me doing it too.

The book begins as it means to go on with a facsimile handwritten dedication to the reader: "I am believing God to perform a miracle in your life!! All my love and prayers — Morris". Only one miracle? On the very next page the reader, as a "Dearly Beloved Partner", is promised a plurality of miracles each and every day.

If you can make head or tail of them, instructions for miracle-gathering are here, but since *Freethinker* readers are not in this particular market we won't go deeply into them. "Faith in God's power" is essential on one page, and on another it isn't. Knowing American evangelists, there is something equally important, but this wretched stuff goes on and on until one despairs of Cerullo ever coming to the point.

Here it is at last, halfway through the book: "... If you will give a tenth of your earnings into God's work, he will pour out a blessing upon you that you will not be able to receive." Morris doesn't mean that last bit, of course; it is just an unfortunate misquotation of Malachi 3:10. "The more you give, the more God gives back to you" — the bait held out by religious con-men the world over.

To give him his due, Cerullo shows remarkable restraint in his demands for money. Just one tenth? The late Herbert Armstrong would have wanted second and even third tithes, plus a bequest to him of anything remaining. Morris does ask for a "love offering", but

leaves the amount to his readers who will, hopefully, recall that one meaning of "love" is "nil".

Cerullo has been in the miracle business for 40 years. How did he get started? Well, he went to Heaven, dragged up there by God himself. The Almighty, it appears, is six feet tall, "maybe a little taller", and twice as wide as a man. He has neither eyes, nose nor mouth, yet he can talk. On this particular occasion he quoted Deutero-Isaiah, thereby authenticating that hitherto dubious prophet. Talking without a mouth is no problem for God. "He can do anything", says Morris. "Why he can even make a donkey talk." And write.

There is a hole in the floor of Heaven which gives a sight of Hell. God normally warms his feet in the hole, but he graciously stood aside so Morris could have a look. What he saw changed his life, and no wonder: "I saw the flames of fire that will never be quenched. I heard the cries of the damned and the lost. I felt the torment of the backslider: his cry was the worst of all." A nip from the worm that dieth not, I shouldn't wonder.

God then made our hero an offer he could hardly refuse: "Morris, will you give me your life?" He yielded — and stuck his own feet in the Hell-hole.

After a smack at secular humanism — it inhibits the production of miracles — Cerullo details the wonders a fully paid-up "partner" may expect. If you need money an angel will bring it, or God may use someone human. Be content with little miracles at first. Ask for £100. When that sum arrives you can touch God for £10,000!

Imagine that you and your family are without food and with no money to buy any. You starve for days, when suddenly the doorbell rings. It is someone you haven't seen for ages. "In his arms he is carrying two

bagfuls of groceries that God has told him to bring to your house." God doesn't do things by halves, or even ones.

"God is good to all those who trust Him." Job trusted God and received the worst drubbing ever experienced by a man. The Book of Job has God falling for the wiles of Satan, a blasphemy not noticed by Cerullo. Job loses his family, his wealth and almost his life, so that God can win a wager. Morris notes that Job eventually gets more sons and daughters, as if that could make up for everything he suffered. A bit rough, too, on the earlier family, destroyed without cause. The moral seems to be that if God cannot resist temptation he can hardly expect it of us.

The best things in this book, since they are the funniest, are the advertisements. A tear-out sheet is headed: "I need the following miracles in my life." Write them down and send to Cerullo. He has dedicated

Christians who will pray 24 hours a day for your needs — after telling you how to do it yourself!

Readers will naturally want more from the same author. A book order form has: "Please send me your free Miracle Plaque" (priced in dollars). "*The Miracle Book* was a great blessing and it ministered to me." The principal work on offer, *Proof Producers*, is described as "One of the most important books we have in Christianity today. . . challenging, revolutionary". Not for me, thanks — I'm still suffering from this one.

Religious charlatan Morris Cerullo has been deported from India. An audience of 30,000 turned up in ambulances and wheelchairs and on crutches and foot after the American evangelist had promised to cure them by prayer. He narrowly escaped being lynched when the "prayer and praise-the-Lord" prescription did not work.

Letters

BLOOMING ODD

I have long valued *The Freethinker*, appreciating it for the serious and necessary critique it provides of the widespread excesses of organised religion, as well as its generally good-humoured satire at the follies and foibles of religionists of most ilk. For those of us who still persist with some form of religion, however liberal or liberated, *The Freethinker* has the self-appointed job of keeping us all on our toes; may it long continue to do so under the new editor as it has done so well under the present.

By and large we Unitarians have fared quite well in its columns, perhaps better than we have deserved, but let it be said — inveterate tamperers with hymns as we are — that, as far back as 1927 at least, Unitarian hymnals have not featured "The rich man in his castle. . ." stanza of Frances Alexander's familiar hymn, neither at the Stannington Flower Festival (News and Notes, October), nor elsewhere.

Incidentally, the Unitarians were sometimes known as the "Whig Party at Prayer", but just as the Devil often had the best tunes so did the (Tory) Church of England produce some of the best hymns; Unitarians, it seems, had little conscience about purloining some of these — though amended of course. Nevertheless, a more characteristic Unitarian hymn might be:

"I hear my people crying in cot and mine and slum;
No field or mart is silent, no city street is dumb. . ."
KEITH GILLEY, Editor, *The Inquirer*, London N12

PRAISE TO BE TO JESUS

I am delighted that a populist book by an ex-Christian has come halfway to humanism and, what's more, has found its way into the bestsellers list.

Nicolas Walter's review (October) of A. N. Wilson's *Jesus*, while scholarly, smacks of sour grapes. To say that the book contributes seriously only to Wilson's career says more about the reviewer than the author. Thus, it is not an academic or analytical work, but it is at least eminently readable. Would that there were more humanist publications that had a broad appeal. We might then have a chance of convincing the world at large that humanism is not solely a subject for academic debate, but has universal relevance.
DAVID L. SEYMOUR, London SE4

HUMANISM NOT A RELIGION!

Nicolas Walter asks me (Letter, October) to quote some authority for my statement that Humanism is analogous to a religion, for the purposes of charity law. I have done so before, but am glad to do so again, here.

The authoritative textbook on charity law in England is *Tudor on Charities*. Mr Justice Dillon took "Tudor's" analysis of the fourth head of charity as the basis for his consideration of that head in his judgement in the South Place Ethical Society case. ([1980] 1 W. L. R. 1565, at 1574A) One of "Tudor's" divisions is "promoting the mental or moral improvement of the community", and after due consideration Dillon declared that South Place falls into this sub-head. (*Ibid.* 1577C)

"Tudor" sums the matter up in his revised edition after the South Place case. In his opinion: "Trusts for the mental or moral improvement of man are charitable in the same sense as trusts for the advancement of religion and so within the spirit and intention of the preamble." ("Tudor" 7th edn. p.134) "The preamble" is the preamble to the 1601 Act, which is the basis of charity law: "The objects there enumerated [ie in the preamble] and all other objects which *by analogy* 'are deemed within its spirit and intention', and no other objects, are in law charitable." ("Tudor" quoting Lord Simonds: 7th edn, p.82. Italics added.)

All this seems to make my point very clearly. The problem is not that "my imagination" sees what is not there, as Walter suggests; but that something in him prevents him seeing what is there. And the phrase "the mental and moral improvement of the human race" which is introductory to the statement of the principal object of the British Humanist Association, does make the point explicit, not merely implicit (as Walter suggests): for trusts which have this object, and those for specifically religious purposes, have the common characteristic that both tend to promote the moral improvement of mankind; and this is the ground for their being charitable. ("Tudor" p.134) This characteristic is a major feature of a life stance, and is shared by Humanism and religion. (I commented in my September letter that *we* do not accept that religions are very good at moral improvement but the law is impartial!) It may be noted that "Tudor" drafted the BHA objects.

Walter says that Dillon in his judgement "explicitly denied any analogy with religion". Is he thinking of 1572A-B,D, 1573H or 1577D? If so he is misreading the passages: what Dillon said was "I propose therefore to declare that the objects of the society are

charitable, but not for the advancement of religion." (*Loc. cit.* 1577D) Dillon does not deny *analogy* with religion, he denies *identity*: to advance humanism is not to advance religion. He was very clear on the difference between identity and analogy: referring to an American case that accepted a parallel with religion, he said that this "prompts the comment that parallels, by definition, never meet." (*Loc. cit.* 1571H)

Walter's final words are confusing, because *all* Humanists are "non-religious" in the legal sense of this word, which also is that general in Britain. Humanism implies rejection of god, and "religion" implies worship of a god. (Apart from Buddhism etc. Dillon accepted this might be an exception: 1573G.)

HARRY STOPES-ROE, Birmingham

Nicolas Walter comments: I am reminded of Byron's comment on Coleridge —

*Explaining metaphysics to the nation:
I wish he would explain his explanation!*

A HELPING HAND FOR AGONISING AGNOSTICS

A new help-line is needed — UU, standing for Unbelievers Unashamed.

The fact is that many decent sensible people are not much impressed by the god-based moralising and general pontification that the churches have appointed themselves to disseminate. These people are often slightly ashamed of their lack of belief, or rather Belief, and need reassuring that being decent and being godless are entirely compatible attributes.

Ironically, in these days of multi-faith and pious fudge, the pressure to feel that you must Believe in Something is stronger than it was when conformity ordained that you must believe This Thing. It is somehow felt that when nonsense comes in 57 varieties then it is thereby rendered less nonsensical.

The unhappy people, whom UU is designed to help, must be reassured and helped to make their want of Belief into a positive asset, helped to understand that all you need is commonsense ethics, Occam's Razor and the self-confidence to get on with life on a literally atheistic basis.

God, if any, would perhaps prefer that to endless sycophantic favour-asking prayers, hymn singing and moronic excuses, volunteered on his behalf, for the way his imperfect creation has turned out. It is interesting that God is credited with absolute goodness, power, knowledge and what not, but never with absolute candour about his own errors and omissions. Too many people are in the image of just such as invincibly smug god as we are often asked to believe in.

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

Cross Words

A dispute has arisen over the display of a cross at West Norwood Crematorium, owned by the London Borough of Lambeth.

When Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, recently attended the crematorium to conduct a non-religious committal ceremony, she was informed by the chapel attendant that he had been instructed not to allow the small cross behind the catafalque to be removed. There had been no problem about this in the past, but in future the only concession that would be made to non-Christian officiators and mourners is that the light under the cross would be switched off.

In a letter to the officer in charge of cemeteries and

crematoria, Barbara Smoker protested that the cross is inappropriate and often distasteful to non-Christians and non-believers. She added that it is "especially offensive to bereaved families of Jewish backgrounds, since for centuries the cross symbolised the hatred and persecution of Jews as 'Christ's murderers'..."

"At a time when public authorities are generally becoming more sensitive to multi-creed requirements in education, the arts, and so on, it is amazing that your borough should remain so insensitive in the matter of provision of non-Christian funerals."

In his reply, Mr D. M. Auger said they have endeavoured to cater for the wishes of different groups "and will carry on doing so.

"In future if we receive any requests for the cross not be on show we will arrange to have it covered by a curtain. We would ask that advance notice is given for these requests."

Noting this minor concession, Miss Smoker replied that she cannot understand why a small, easily removed cross "still has to lurk there behind a curtain rather than be taken down.

"I assume that Christians are not required to give prior notice for the cross to be on show — though this would be the more logical way around, since they are requesting something special to be provided for their own sectarian ritual, whereas we merely ask not to have to put up with alien religious symbols."

Fewer Priests and Nuns

The Roman Catholic Church is facing a serious shortage of priests in England and Wales. According to *The Westminster Record*, the number of priests in the diocese has fallen by a sixth over the past seven years.

In some parishes, full-time priests are being replaced by married deacons. The role of nuns is also declining, particularly in the sphere of education. *The Westminster Record* comments: "The idea of the consecrated life has diminished in its appeal. The traditional life of the nun or sister seems to have changed immeasurably."

The Catholic Media Office agrees that the decline in vocations is leading to increased participation by the laity. Religious education in schools — once the preserve of priests and nuns — is now often undertaken by teachers.

Even in hospitals, distribution of communion is being entrusted to "ministers of the eucharist", some of them women.

A huge statue of Jesus being lowered from a helicopter on to a church steeple in Varese, Italy, crashed through the roof of the building and was destroyed.

BOOKS

UNDER GOD: RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS, by Garry Wills. Simon and Schuster, £9.99

As Ronald Reagan's presidency was mercifully drawing to its close, Gore Vidal said: "I think there should be a Constitutional amendment making it impossible for anyone to be president who believes in an after-life." If Garry Wills is right, that would rule out 70 per cent of the American nation and put an end to the presidency. Which judging by its recent incumbents, might not be a bad thing.

In his elegantly produced and moderately priced *Under God*, Wills, former professor of American culture and public policy at Northwestern University, has a salutary lesson for those who believe that religion will simply wither away in the face of scientific secularism. There has, it is true, been a decline in religion among Episcopalians and Presbyterians over the past decade; but they make up only five per cent of the US population, while evangelical churches (like Baptists, 20 per cent) have been growing. Wills cites no figures for his own Roman Catholic Church, but I attach no significance to this; he criticises it strongly enough elsewhere, especially for its attitude to sex.

The religious vote that has been increasing is the evangelical vote, which "helps to explain the tendency of recent presidents to proclaim themselves born again — Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush". There has been one non-religious candidate for the White House, Michael Dukakis the first ever, Wills says, and he was the victim of a vicious Republican campaign "much of which relied on religion". Two other candidates in 1988, Jesse Jackson (Democrat) and Pat Robertson (Republican), were ordained priests. A third one, Gary Hart, had had a strict religious training, though he was reticent about this as about a number of other things — his age, for instance.

Dukakis and his aides "did not realise what other people will stoop to when it comes to using God for political advantage". Another mark against Dukakis was his membership of the American Civil Liberties Union, hated by the evangelical Right as the main obstacle to their vision of a Christian America. Does it not defend gay rights? And does it not support the teaching of evolution in schools? Reagan knew better! Evolution, he declared with typical eloquence, was "a scientific theory only and it has in recent years been challenged in the world of science and it is not yet believed in the scientific community to be as infallible as it was once believed. But if it is going to be taught in the schools, then I think that also the biblical theory of

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creation, which is not a theory but the biblical story of creation, should also be taught."

The American Civil Liberties Union, founded in 1920, was only a small organisation when it supported John Scopes at the notorious Dayton "monkey trial" in 1925, which Wills describes as "a nontrial over a nonlaw, with a nondefendant backed by nonsupporters, which was followed by a nondefeat". Although we can laugh at the way Clarence Darrow derided William Jennings Bryan's efforts to defend Bible stories, there is irony in the fact that the former's anti-semitic, anti-feminist and racist publicist, H. L. Mencken, gloried in the victory over one who for 30 years was "the most important figure in the reform politics of America". William Jennings Bryan, who died from diabetes one week after the trial, advocated woman's suffrage, opposed war, capital punishment and big business, and mounted the "most leftist" campaign by "a major party's candidate in our entire history". It is sad, as Wills says, that Bryan should now be "best known as the puddled biblicist of Dayton".

There were further ironies, notably "a very efficient purge of Darwin from high school texts". Darwinism "had silently crept into the texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the late 1920s and early 1930s it just as quietly crept out, and those in the scientific community did not notice it. . . . It was not Scopes that put evolution in the schools but Sputnik", a fear that the Russians were teaching science better than the Americans.

Not that this made much impression on Ronald Reagan. Gore Vidal was right to be concerned about the then president's belief in Armageddon: he doesn't doubt it will come, but he doesn't know whether it will be in a thousand years or the day after tomorrow. George Bush, has no doubt that "Jesus Christ is my *personal saviour*" and regularly invokes God, though this time thankfully to no avail.

The United States does indeed present a most amazing contradiction. In the most technically advanced nation in the world, nine out of ten people say they have never doubted the existence of God (never?); eight out of ten believe in the Day of Judgment; eight out of ten believe God still works miracles; and seven out of ten believe in life after death. The difference between the second and fourth statistics enforces my scepticism about the size of the ratios. In a typical week, however, 40 per cent of Americans attend church, compared with 14 per cent in Britain and 12 per cent in France.

It is "secular innocence" to think of "revivals", Wills says; nothing has been "more stable in our history, nothing less budgetable, than religious belief and

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practice". And he traces that history from the militia (millenarian) Founders. That "militant vision" may have been "deflected, during and after the American Revolution, into more secular versions of American mission and manifest destiny", but it persisted in movements like the Disciples of Christ, the community in which James Garfield, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan were brought up.

Thanks largely, however, to Jefferson and Madison, the United States has no established church and Will sees this as its greatest asset. "No other government in history had launched itself without the help of officially recognised gods and their state-connected ministers". Separation was, he thinks, good for both Church and State, but "it is our task in a society of increasingly complex articulation, to complete the effort of Madison in removing religion from state ceremony and proclamation".

His book makes a valuable contribution to that end.

COLIN McCALL

NO MORE SEX WAR, by Neil Lyndon. Sinclair-Stevenson
£14.99

In challenging head-on what he terms "the crock of cant which is modern feminism", Neil Lyndon is a brave not to say a rash man. His book is bound to attract shrill tirades of abuse. Yet he makes a substantial case against the rhetoric of fashionable feminism, as it has evolved over the past twenty years. It constitutes, he says, nothing less than a betrayal of the radical enthusiasm of his (the Sixties) generation. For instead of achieving the solid social and political advances which seemed within their grasp, their campaigning energies were massively diverted into a spurious gender war by the "mess of pseudo-Marxist crudities" spawned by Kate Millett, Rosalind Miles, Germaine Greer and the rest of the sisterhood whose solid achievements (if any) on behalf of women were minuscule compared to the social changes wrought by modern medical technology — the Pill and safe abortion.

There certainly is a near-fascist strain of intolerance in some feminist utterances about men. According to Germaine Greer (*Guardian*, 23 September 1992), "all men hate all women some of the time; some men hate all women all of the time; some men hate some women all of the time. Unfortunately (my italics), women cannot bring themselves to hate men, possibly because they carry them in their wombs from time to time." Hatred (she then sagely proceeds to observe) is born of guilt and fear! A couple of years ago I spent a strenuous

evening, when supposedly on holiday, combating the solemn announcement by two female senior social workers — whose professional field was child abuse — that "all men are rapists". What bilge! (Imagine, as Lyndon suggests, the howls of outrage if any man dared to make similarly vile assertions about all women.) And what hope of elementary justice can a wretched father hope for when women nurturing such obsessions are officially investigating alleged misdoings in his household?

Lyndon cites many more such man-hating statements, and wrathfully castigates them as a betrayal of the true interests of women, as well as those of men. Fortunately, most young men and women continue to pursue their desires for sex and love in firm relationships with each other, and ignore the feminist version of "sexual politics" which denies the longing for love in and between men and women and fuels antagonism between the sexes by caricaturing heterosexuality as an inherently violent form of male control over women. Far from our society being a "patriarchy", Lyndon points out that men are substantially disadvantaged in a good many legal and social respects (e.g. paternity rights). The true remedy, he says, is not for angry men to launch a counter-attack or to reassert outworn claims of sexual superiority. He pleads for an end to the sex war: "We sorely need abundantly more tolerance, sympathy and kindness between men and women; more affection, generosity, love." Amen to that.

ANTONY GREY

ANARCHISM AND ANARCHISTS, by George Woodcock. Quarry Press (Canada), European distributor: Freedom Press, 84b Whitechapel High Street, Angel Alley, London E1 7QX, £9.95

George Woodcock was an anarchist propagandist in Britain until returning to his native Canada in 1949. There he is seen as a Grand Old Man of Canadian literature, and to celebrate his 80th birthday Douglas Fetherling has edited a gathering of his essays. This is highly appropriate since, among his many books of travel and biography, by far the most widely-read, reprinted and translated has been his 30-year-old *Anarchism: A history of libertarian ideas and movements*, still around as a Penguin. When it appeared this was the first such history for 40 years, and like his biographies of Godwin, Proudhon and Kropotkin, pioneered the reappraisal of the classic anarchist thinkers.

The first half of the book consists of variations on anarchist themes, the second of reappraisals of fellow-propagandists including, beyond the obvious names, a discussion of the modern American contribution of

Noam Chomsky and Paul Goodman.

Purely from a propagandist point of view, in a transatlantic context, it is fortunate to have around a much-respected figure who declares for a minority point of view, aloof from the revivalistic, born-again, church-going culture all around, and stands for a gentle, sceptical, cosmopolitan approach, critical of capitalism, nationalism, managerialism and the whole inheritance of the Marxist left. His 20-year-old paper on "Anarchism and Ecology" is a reminder that current concerns have a history too.

His editor stresses that "the Bible was promulgated in order to supplant the ancient mother-goddess religions, which were based on the idea of an all-powerful matriarchal figure at the centre of Nature, with the Christian concept of a patriarchal God who urges reliance on human institutions rather than on objects and forces found in the natural order: an essential theme of Judaism and Islam as well. Anarchism is a tiny voice of corrective protest. . ."

Woodcock's voice of corrective protest is enough to keep us all talking for a month. The changes of attitude that he recommends would appeal to most of us, anarchists or not.

COLIN WARD

ALL HEAVEN IN A RAGE, by E.S. Turner, Centaur Press, Fontwell, West Sussex, EN18 0TA, £10.99.

All Heaven In A Rage is a catalogue of unremitting horror and abomination. First published in 1964, it is now reprinted in paperback format by the estimable Centaur Press, and is essential, if painful, reading. It is also a valuable reminder that whilst religions like to boast that they have made a civilising and compassionate contribution to society's affairs, when it comes to the rest of their god's Creation, although it may well put all heaven in a rage, their earthly representatives are only too willing to demonstrate their sense of biblical "stewardship" by indifference to diabolical atrocities and abuses. A Catholic prelate, writing in the 19th century, said: "The whole modern movement in favour of animals is a scheme for the devil for the seduction of souls and a pestilent heresy." Looking at it from his warped point of view, I can see what he means, since I am convinced that the cause of animals is eventually going to be the final nail in the coffin of religious superstition.

In the equally valuable book, *The Dreaded Comparison*, Marjorie Spiegel showed how, in mankind's only comparatively recent past, people with black skins were regarded in much the same way as most people now regard animals, and how slow orthodox religionists then were to concede that people of colour

also had the same "Father" in Heaven. Go back in history, theologians raged together over the issue as to whether or not women had souls.

I once joined a band of largely religionist animalists who had had the kindly notion of requesting their co-religionists to pray for animals on St Francis's Day. Not being in the least fussy with whom I'll march in a worthy cause, my being the only atheist meant I was able to come up with what seemed a very apt prayer for the occasion, written by no less a personage than St Basil. This was included in the explanatory leaflet they produced, which was distributed to the faithful as they entered the house of their god. Although the brutality and casual cruelty of Christians has long since ceased to surprise me, I was nevertheless, amazed at the general reaction, and the almost spiteful glee with which some of these people tore the leaflets up. One pious woman even threw the bits over me like Divine Confetti.

What this outrageous demonstration of self-righteous spleen indicated to me was that to espouse a common kinship with the rest of the world's living creatures is something that touches the rawest of nerves in the religionist. The theological can of worms that Darwin and Lamarck opened some time ago just won't go away from consciousness; it constantly gnaws at the vainglorious image of mankind that religion so foolishly fostered during the centuries in which it had philosophical dominance. From their point of view I can well understand how the very existence of other living creatures is a constant irritant as science daily shows what mere common sense revealed long ago — that these beings share more similarities than differences with us. Concede that another species has kinship with us, and in an instant the heretical vision of Jesus having a daily crap is but a hair's breadth away. Concede that the chimpanzee is our distant cousin, and the realisation dawns that only mankind partook of the Fall, which leads inexorably to the notion that animals alone must still be living in the State of Grace in which their god "created" them. . .

Of course nearly all religionists hate and loathe the god they pretended to adore, and waste so much of their lives alternatively praising and then calling out, and animals have always served as a handy scapegoat for this ambivalence. Their Armageddon is really the ultimate fisticuffs with Him, not His ex-favourite, a point easily demonstrated by the fact that not one religion in the world prays for the ultimate repentance and salvation of Lucifer (although I suspect that the Masons probably do something along these lines at some degree or other). So what more enjoyable revenge and sanctioned blasphemy could they therefore conceive; take this miraculously wrought eye and pluck it out; take this animal anus and pierce it with a

hot rod; cut open this living creature and play god in the quest for knowledge; or, eat this in remembrance of me. . .

Although one could never convince a religionist that atheists have no fear of dying *per se*, one fear that does haunt me is the prospect of contact with intelligent life-forms elsewhere in the universe. For if they stood in relation to us as we now do to animals, we could well experience the unabating nightmare that we, as the so-called Lords of Creation, have waged against animals through all history. Just as religion has consistently gulled and exploited human beings, so too it has despoiled and exploited all else on earth, posing all the while as the bastions of ultimate moral Authority!

In terms of rational humanity, therefore, we atheists must lead the way in coming to terms with other life forms and treat them with respect and kindness. Not for any imagined "reward" in the Sweet Bye-and-Bye, but simply because they are there. The welcome reappearance of this valuable book will lend conviction to this urgent duty.

DAVID GODIN

Although there are now around three million vegetarians in Britain, a vast number of birds and animals will be slaughtered in preparation for Christmas. Those not wishing to join in the carnivorous orgy, or looking for an attractive but inexpensive present, could do no better than buy a copy of *Famous Vegetarians and Their Favourite Recipes*. Compiled by Rynn Berry, contributions range from Brigid Brophy to Malcolm Muggeridge, and include Percy Bysshe Shelley, Annie Besant, Bernard Shaw and Paul McCartney. *Famous Vegetarians and Their Favourite Recipes* is obtainable from the Centaur Press Ltd, Fontwell, Arundel, West Sussex BN18 0TA, price £8.95.

NSS Annual General Meeting

Jim Herrick chaired the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society which was held in London on 10 October.

A message of congratulation and support was sent to Dr Nigel Cox, of the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, for his courage and compassion in relieving a patient from pain and suffering, helping her to an easeful death. The meeting urged the Government to give parliamentary time to a Voluntary Euthanasia Bill. (The annual general meeting of the British Humanist

Association also sent a message of support to Dr Cox.)

The meeting passed a resolution welcoming the recent decision of a Scottish court "annulling the marriage of an under-age and unwilling Muslim girl (whose marriage had taken place during an overseas visit with her guardian), thus confirming the principle that modern secular legislation prevails over sectarian laws based on alleged revelation and outmoded social institutions".

Another resolution called upon the Secretary of State for the Environment "to exclude prayers from Council meetings when drafting uniform Standing Orders for the new local authorities. Such services are only practised by some Councils, which is anomalous. They are conducted by the Mayor's chaplain and cause offence to Councillors who are of different faiths to the Mayor and those who have no faith but have to participate (or pretend to) when attending what are supposed to be secular, political meetings."

A resolution was passed which urged the Government "to accept 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, and then offered for sale to the general public, should be clearly labelled as having been killed without pre-slaughter stunning, so that those who feel strongly about cruelty to animals may avoid it".

The passing of legislation in Pakistan, providing for a mandatory death penalty for blasphemy against the prophet of Islam, was deplored.

"Given the background of death threats against Salman Rushdie, it is extremely unlikely that anyone in Pakistan, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, would take the risk of expressing any opinion which could be construed as being derogatory to the Prophet. The purpose of the legislation would therefore seem to be to seek political support by appeasing fundamentalist groups. The effect would be that any objective analysis of the Prophet's spiritual and political role would be impossible and the concept of blasphemy against the Prophet could be steadily extended to muzzle any attempt to reform Muslim institutions or re-interpret Islam in the light of modern knowledge."

A resolution expressed "dismay that one group of Muslim fundamentalists in Egypt is threatening to destroy Pharaonic temples and statues as remnants of paganism.

"These Egyptian antiquities are the treasured possessions of Egypt and the Arab world, as well as the whole of humanity, and have stood for over 1200 years after the advent of Islam in Egypt. It is intolerable that their destruction should now be threatened by theological zealots and religious vandals. The meeting hopes that world opinion and moderate Muslims

themselves will support all efforts of Egyptian Government to protect their ancient monuments.”

This year's annual general meeting marked the retirement of G. N. Deodhekar, honorary treasurer of the Society for the past 24 years. Since 1968 he had made an incalculable contribution to the Society and associated companies. A teacher by profession, he also had a legal training which was a considerable advantage when dealing with banks, solicitors, auditors, Inland Revenue, etc.

G.N. Deodhekar — known to everyone as Dev — joined Marble Arch branch of the NSS in the early Sixties. He was elected to the Society's executive committee in 1965, succeeding Bill Griffiths as treasurer three years later. His other responsibilities included membership and later chairmanship of Secular Society Limited and G.W. Foote & Company (publishers of *The Freethinker*).

On his retirement from teaching, Dev undertook an increasing amount of administrative work behind the scenes. In this he was ably assisted by Richard Condon, another stalwart from Marble Arch days.

Much liked and widely respected for his considerable integrity and commitment to the freethought cause, Dev will continue to play an active role in the NSS and the wider movement. He is also a prominent member of South Place Ethical Society.

David Williams, who was elected treasurer of the Society, has a distinguished record of voluntary work in the movement.

Barbara Smoker was re-elected president.

Sunday Shopping Poll

Another MORI poll, published at the end of October, has highlighted the enormous growth in Sunday shopping. But the Shopping Hours Reform Council warns that many of the most popular shops used by consumers on a Sunday, such as DIY stores and food supermarkets, would be forced to close under proposals put forward by some of the pressure groups opposed to Sunday trading.

Baroness Jay, chairman of the SHRC, commented on the MORI findings: “No one can ignore the message from consumers who make at least 70 million visits to shops on a Sunday once every four weeks. There is no way that anyone can pretend there isn't real consumer demand for Sunday trading, particularly in DIY and food supermarkets.

“Campaigners who claim that consumers do not want to visit these types of shops on Sunday are out of touch with the reality of life in the 1990s. Complex and discriminatory proposals which ignore consumers' demands are doomed to failure before the ink is dry on the paper.”

The Shopping Hours Reform Council wants legislation that would allow small shops to open all day on Sunday and permit the large retail outlets to open for a limited number of hours. All shopworkers would be covered by statutory protection measures, including premium rates of pay and voluntary Sunday work only.

Columbus: Man of the Double-Cross

BILL ABBEY

The Pope's endorsement of celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus arriving in the Americas has not met with unqualified approval, even in Catholic quarters. For it is widely recognised that the event being celebrated led to the enslavement and destruction of a people by Christian invaders.

Nine countries and twenty towns claim to be the birthplace of Christopher Columbus. He was born probably in 1451, probably in Genoa. He died at Valladolid, Spain, in 1505. Three places claim to possess his bones: Valladolid and Seville in Spain, and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.

Columbus acquired a wide experience of seamanship and navigation in ships of several nationalities. He travelled extensively, visiting England, Ireland and possibly Iceland. On the west coast of Africa he encountered Portuguese slave trading and gold mining. He became obsessed by gold and slave trading was highly profitable.

Educated people had known for centuries that the Earth was a sphere. Philosophers from Aristotle (384-322 BC) to Toscanelli (1397-1482) showed that a westward journey was possible. Toscanelli sent an explanatory map to Columbus. There were two main incentives for discovering a new route to the Orient — trade and religion. European trade was conducted mainly via the Mediterranean Sea to Constantinople, where cargoes were bought, sold, exchanged and sent onwards. Constantinople was gateway to the East; it was also gateway to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. So when Constantinople was controlled by Islamic Turks, trade and passage for pilgrims was difficult because of piracy, harassment and extortion.

News that a fishing fleet had reached “new found land” (Labrador) was contained in a letter to Columbus from John Day, an English spy he had met while in London. In 1485 Columbus moved to a monastery at La Radiba, near Seville, where he met influential churchmen, wealthy aristocrats and merchants. He

interested them in a proposal that he should endeavour to seek a new route to the Orient by sailing west and the Pinzon brothers, Martin, Vincent and Francisco, offered three ships and crews, together with their own services as experienced captains. Queen Isabella rejected this private arrangement, saying that the Crown alone could organise such a venture. It also had to be sanctioned by the Pope, as it purported to be a mission for God. But the Royal Treasurer persuaded that there was much to be gained.

On 5 August, 1492, Columbus set sail and the three ships arrived at a chain of islands which he called the Bahamas. They stretched southwards for seven hundred miles. Columbus sailed from island to island, taking what gold he could find and giving the natives worthless trinkets in exchange. He planted a Christian cross and the flag of Spain wherever he went. It is thought that the first landing was made on an island which Columbus named San Salvador (Holy Saviour).

Other European countries — England, Holland, Denmark, France and Germany — ignored the papal allocation of the islands to Spain and Portugal. They sent their own colonists and some islands changed ownership a dozen times. Columbus abandoned islands which produced no gold and captured the natives for slavery.

Colonisation of the mainland began with the Conquistadores — the Conquerors. Cortes overthrew the Aztecs of Mexico in 1519, Alvarde the Maya of Yucatan in 1524, Pizarro the Inca of Peru in 1531. They continued the Columbus tradition of trickery, extortion, cruelty and the near extermination of ancient civilisations.

Attempts have been made to canonise Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus. They have so far been unsuccessful. There has been international condemnation of celebrations commemorating the enslavement of millions and what a Vatican spokesman described as "the beginning of evangelisation in the Americas". In some states, Columbus Day, 12 October, is a public holiday. But the native people of America prefer to commemorate 11 October, the last day of Indian freedom before Columbus and the Christian conquerors arrived.

OBITUARY

C. H. Cleaver

Harry Cleaver, a freethought stalwart, has died at the age of 91. In his younger days he was secretary of West London branch of the National Secular Society and served on the Society's Executive Committee.

Cremation took place without ceremony at Mortlake Crematorium, London.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Winter Solstice Party. Saturday, 28 November, 4 pm — 9 pm. Buffet, drinks, musical programme. Tickets £6. Details obtainable from Joan Wimble, Group Secretary, telephone Brighton (0273) 733215.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, 6 December, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Ted McFadyen. The British Press — Should we Accept it?

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 16 November 7.30 pm. Public meeting. Subject: The Bible — an Anthology. How Was it Compiled?

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, 1 December, 8 pm. Seasonal Readings and Music.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 8 December, 7.30 pm. A Hunter: China Now.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 26 November, 8 pm. Denis Cobell: Shelley the Atheist.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 19 November, 7.30 pm. Ruth Blewitt. The Burston School Strike.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 December, 7.45 pm. Jane Stevens: Sex Education in Schools.

Worthing Humanist Group. Heene Community Centre, Heene Road, Worthing. Public meetings, 5.30 pm, last Sunday of the month (not December). Information from Mike Sargent, Group Secretary, telephone Worthing (0903) 239823.

Lord Rodney

The 9th Lord Rodney, who died last month, was an active member of the House of Lords. One of his duties was secretaryship of an all-party Select Committee on religious sects.

In the 1960s Lord Rodney became a formidable opponent of the network of religious sects which surfaced. He had a personal interest in the problem as his daughter became involved with one of the groups. She was eventually persuaded to leave. Lord Rodney said: "We talked constantly to our daughter for three days until she began to think for herself again." He believed that the menace of religious cults was as serious as drug abuse.

Hindus Kick up a Dust

A French company which won the contract for collecting Leicester's rubbish has changed its name in order to placate the city's Hindus.

Initials of the company, Société Industrielle de Transports Automobile, SITA, appeared on its dust-carts and refuse bins. But Sita happens to be the name of some Indian goddess, and local Hindus kicked up a dust over what they perceived to be an insult to the lady by putting her name on a humble vehicle.

Mrs Nirmala Bhojani, who arranges Hindu assemblies at a local school, said that Sita was the wife of Lord Rama. "I am sure the other religions would not like if any of their saints' names were put on a dust-cart," she added.

Paul Winstone, the city Council's race relations information officer, admitted that he had received very few verbal complaints. He felt that the controversy was "very much a problem of communication and terminology".

But the company has climbed down in face of the Hindus' protests and threats to make the vehicles "inoperable". David Palmer-Jones, its development manager, said: "The last thing we want to do is upset anyone." So the inscription on the dust-carts has been changed to SITA (GB) LTD.

Back in 1990, Leicester had an outbreak of religious dottiness of a different kind. On that occasion hundreds of Muslims arrived at Mrs Fassam's abode in order to venerate an aubergine. On being sliced, the seeds appeared to be patterned in an Arabic inscription, "Yah-Allah", which means "Allah is everywhere".

"Insult" Actors Jailed

Ten members of an Indian theatrical company have each been sentenced to six years' imprisonment in the United Arab Emirates. They were charged with insulting Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad by staging Vasudevan Pillai's play, *Ants That Feed on Corpses*. The author was also given a six-year jail term *in absentia*.

The central figure in *Ants That Feed on Corpses*, which the Surya Group performed at the premises of the Indian Association in Sarjah, is a dead body. It is described by Christians as that of Jesus, by Muslims as the Prophet Muhammad and by Communists as Karl Marx. On the day following the performance, a group of Muslims entered the premises and physically attacked the actors. No action was taken against the Prophet's thugs, but three days later their victims were arrested and charged with blasphemy.

An Islamic cleric said the death sentence could be passed if the court ruled that the accused "were found to have insulted the Prophet on purpose".

Irish Abortion Battle

There is intense debate and campaigning in the run-up to next month's abortion referendum in the Republic of Ireland. The Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that a 14-year-old rape victim could not be prevented from travelling to Britain for an abortion. "Pro-lifers" argued that despite the girl's considerable distress, she should have been forced to continue with the pregnancy. They saw the Supreme Court ruling as a threat to the Republic's constitutional ban on abortion and mobilised to oppose reform.

Leading the campaign against reform is a 21-year-old accountancy student, Niamh Mhathuna. She is leader of the fanatical Youth Defence League whose crude propaganda has offended even conservative opinion.

It is admitted that the anti-abortion campaign is being funded from abroad, particularly the USA.

Roman Catholic bishops and priests are playing an increasingly influential role in the campaign as they did in the referendum on divorce. But undoubtedly the shock troops of the anti-abortion forces are Miss Mhathuna and her Youth Defence League.

An "Ordinary" Pogrom

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

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

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

When a wife of a Buddhist refused to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses, he set fire to their chapel on the second floor of a building in Seoul, South Korea. Fourteen people were killed and 27 injured.

Six pieces written by Joan Wimble, secretary of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, have been published in the Brighton *Evening Argus* "Thought for the Day" spot.