GODLESS

AND GLAD OF IT

Fifty years of militant secular humanism

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Introduction

The National Secular Society's impressive annual reports and bulletins have set me comparing its difficulties and achievements (in concert with other bodies) during the eventful years of my presidency, 1963-1971, with those of today. What has changed and what has remained the same?

The "Swinging Sixties" were more than the gaudy gear of Carnaby Street or the bawdy brio of Tin Pan Alley. This was a time of great socio-political, if not intellectual, excitement throughout Britain. Finally gone was the austerity dating from the Great Depression through World War II to the dreary post-war years. Largely gone was the cap-touching of the "lower orders" to the gentry. Indeed, save in rural areas and sporting circles, largely gone was the cap. Above all, there was a new Zeitgeist challenging traditional values, religious and moral, unconnected to Marxism. It was a climate ripe for change.

There was no Human Rights Act or Joint Parliamentary Committee - and no European Parliament, Commission and Court - on Human Rights, but there were repeated attempts to introduce a Bill of Rights along American lines. To the surprise or dismay of many libertarians, the NSS opposed this initiative on the grounds that: conformist tendencies were stronger in the United States than in Britain; that Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia had Bills of Rights as a mere public-relations façade; that such bills could be exploited by the wrong people; that they could suggest to the general population that something useful had been done when in fact progress would come only with specific libertarian legislation and regulations (of which more later).

Another general principle motivating the NSS at that time concerned relations with the churches. Islam was not then a potent force despite the number of Muslims in the country, but I did receive and accept invitations to visit a well-known liberal mosque. We believed that religionists (and others) had the right to know what we stood for, and that in a climate of frankness there would always be irreconcilable differences between ideologies. That didn't preclude meetings among secularists, Christians and members of other faiths from time to time, or co-operation with them on social and moral issues where there was common ground and a common goal. But we preferred *ad hoc* interviews, discussions, open forums and debates to on-going "dialogue". The churches had greater resources of manpower, money and facilities for time-consuming committees that were guaranteed to produce an insincere or meaningless "consensus" or no agreement at all, especially where religion's privileged status in education, broadcasting, prisons, hospitals, public events and elsewhere was concerned. Nor would private dialogue give humanists a public profile for recruitment. Indeed, for sociological reasons

no initiative was likely to produce a massive influx of secular “converts" as some humanists were forecasting, and publicly proclaiming. Most people liberated from traditional religion were more likely to turn to other outlets for enjoyment or strange new “glamorous" sects. I take no pleasure in recording that these and other realistic prophecies came to pass.

In pursuit of dialogue, capital-H humanists of the time believed that freethinkers should stop not only a crude bible-bashing (which had been overdone) but any criticism of religion whatever, in the pious hope that this would make the churches more conciliatory. Of course these humanists didn't suggest that Christians should stop preaching the gospel. Inside county (state-run) schools they did seek to remove the divisive daily act of collective worship, but they were happy for religious instruction (as it was then more honestly called) to remain. On the other hand, secular humanists said worship of God flowed naturally from and consummated a belief in him, just as laboratory work illuminated and made tangible a belief in science, and the case for or against collective worship rested on whether or not the worshipped entity existed. In fact, all humanists really believed that God didn't exist or his existence couldn't be proved. Most secularists didn't object to school history and social studies that included teaching *about* religion (all major religions), or at a senior level admitted theology to philosophy classes, as bizarre ideas were facts of life that should be faced. The objection was to the teaching of religion, particularly the Christian version alone, as if its mythology were objectively true.

The secularist goal was "unremitting militancy, but careful avoidance of anything that suggests the cranky, the parochial or the vituperative" (*Towards a New Society*, the NSS Annual Report for 1964) "Straight talk may alienate some. Devious talk will in the end alienate everybody" (*The First Hundred Years*, the NSS Annual Report for 1966). We aimed to work always within the law, and the only exceptions I can recall were marching in some anti-nuclear processions and distributing leaflets offering free advice to young people on their problems, including venereal disease (now sexually transmitted infections or STIs)

Richard Branson of the Student Advisory Centre had been prosecuted for this "offence" but the NSS wasn't. Nor did prosecution result from any of the numerous booklets, pamphlets, leaflets, media releases and articles I wrote for the NSS or *The Freethinker* during the 1960s, though a zealous prosecutor might have claimed some of them infringed common or statute law directed against so-called defamatory, blasphemous, seditious or obscene libel.

Before abortion became legal in 1967 I was sent a sample do-it-yourself abortion kit devised by a publicly anonymous and, as far as I know, never-discovered freethinker in the hope I would promote it. More for medical than law-abiding reasons I declined and advised him against its distribution. On the subject of legality, individual gay and lesbian humanists **-** like

representatives of any other section of the community - have regularly defied laws against adult homosexual practices down the ages.

At this point the question arises, what should a secular society be doing? Often overlooked is the fact that three nouns derive from "secular":
(1) secularisation; (2) secularity; (3) secularism.

(1) is essentially a sociological phenomenon that no single organisation can significantly influence. People just find better things to do than going to church, take their problems to human specialists rather than to Mary, dead saints or unqualified clerics, and seek to regulate their own personal lives without clerical intervention. Of course, that they have these options derives from the struggles and sacrifices of past freethinkers.

(2) is separation of Church and State, which is a non-ideological position aimed at reducing the divisiveness of conflicts of belief. It may be supported by religionists for biblical or sectarian reasons.

(3) is secular humanism, a non-religious or irreligious belief system and life stance.

For some years before 1963 the NSS had no significant media (and hence public) profile. In his last despondent years Chapman Cohen told colleagues, "Why should I go to the papers? Let the papers come to me." Intellectually he had more to offer them than they to him, but that's not the way society works. After his retirement, two presidential incumbents did little worth reporting. To gain media attention it was necessary to issue frequent presidential statements – later ratified by the NSS executive committee - on a variety of topical political, social and moral issues. Making submissions to sundry royal commissions and public inquiries and releasing their contents to the media was another valuable way to publicise our aims and objects. So too were open forums and debates (the latter a time-honoured practice of the NSS), and the publication of conclusions reached by secularist working parties. Modern means of communication, brilliantly exploited by Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson, provide new opportunities. All our activities in my time were outstandingly promoted by the indefatigable and persuasive Bill McIlroy.

A sad but necessary internal procedure was dismantling a branch structure that had been in place for 100 years. This gave the prime responsibility for seeking and maintaining membership, and remitting a capitation fee to headquarters, to branch secretaries. It also conferred on branches, even those with a ridiculously small membership, the right to place a member on the executive committee. This system had worked well during the 19th and part of the 20th century, but had gradually collapsed. Membership by the 1960s was being lost as many branch secretaries failed to fulfil their duties, so that their branches became "rotten boroughs", while

"pocket boroughs" were being created by a handful of dissidents to stack the Executive Committee. In the reformed structure affiliated societies replaced local branches and a Distinguished Members Panel was formed to demonstrate that the society had influential support.

In the following survey of our successes and failures in the 1960s and early 1970s, the first seven issues pertain to secularity and the rest to secularism. Many of the issues are libertarian rather than "sectarian" and were greatly assisted by my position on the executive of the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty), which eased the path for successful submission of motions by us and by single-issue bodies to its AGMs. It was always emphasised that these measures were non-coercive: those who like libertarian reforms can utilise them; those who don't can ignore them.

Though our situation seemed more like trauma than triumph at the time, in retrospect one can trace significant progress in most of our objectives. Much ingenuity and hard work achieved this result, but there was a strong element of being in the right place at the right time. In addition to a climate for change, accompanied by numerous liberation movements, the churches seemed stunned by a new and effective upthrust of secular humanism and took some time to organise its "counter-reformation". So insidious and effective has this been that, despite valiant secularist efforts and a shift of public opinion towards us, relatively little new tangible progress has since been made and in some respects the situation has deteriorated.

1: Republicanism

Unlike that of earlier periods in British history, the republican movement of the 1960s was more rational than reactive. A constitutional monarchy offered few opportunities for real malpractice and the consensus was - and is - that the reigning monarch was performing exceptionally well in difficult circumstances. Hence there was little public demand for reform. The secularist platform rested on other foundations. First was objection to the hereditary principle which, whether or not it led to actual abuses, was an affront to democracy and equality of opportunity. More specifically objectionable was monarchy's entanglement with religion. This included regulation of the sovereign's (and the Lord Chancellor's) religion and his/her position as ceremonial head of the Church of England and quasi-head of the Church of Scotland. It entailed coronation by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the appointment of Anglican bishops and deans on the advice of the Prime Minister, regardless of the politician's personal beliefs and - in the case of some modernist clergy - of theirs.

No progress on this issue was made in the 1960s. Subsequently, stimulated by the antics of other members of the Royal Family, a mood for republicanism has grown but extends no further than a hope that the monarchy will be abolished on the death or abdication of Queen Elizabeth II.

2: Abolition of the House of Lords

Historically, the main popular objection to this gentlemen's club with legislative powers was its hereditary nature. From a secularist standpoint, the main objection was inclusion in the Lords of the two Anglican archbishops and 24 other bishops. These objections related more to practice than to principle. Down the years their “spiritual” and temporal lordships’ intervention in the democratic process served not only to preserve aristocratic privileges but to obstruct political, social and moral progress. A small but significant reform came with the Life Peerages Act 1958, which brought distinguished commoners into the chamber. Some were by chance also humanists, but a retrograde step was inclusion of non-Anglican religious leaders by right.

Only recently has any popular agitation for reform erupted. This entails not abolition of the House of Lords, which is seen as a potentially valuable house of review, but a restriction of membership to an all-appointed or all-elected or mixed assembly.

3: Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of England

Establishment of this minority masquerading as a national institution involved more than the privileges outlined above. Legislatively for the Church there were even disadvantages in that junior clergy were unable to be members of the House of Commons and Parliament had a theoretical control of its formularies and forms of worship. But these were outweighed by a saddlebag of benefits. Anglican clergymen functioned as registrars of marriage and official chaplains to hospitals, prisons and the Armed Forces. Many state, civic and legal ceremonials were conducted under Anglican auspices, and politicians, councillors and judges were, with rare exceptions, virtually obliged to attend, whatever their personal beliefs. Church courts, which had the same powers as ordinary secular courts - subpoena, application to the High Court for contempt of court proceedings, absolute privilege and enforcement of costs - didn't have juries or proper legal aid. Not surprisingly, they reached some scandalous verdicts. Local vicars could issue official-looking parochial rate notices, though payment was by then actually voluntary. But the chief benefit of establishment was endowment with public money and land down the centuries. The Church Commissioners probably cared little about the other privileges but feared disestablishment would entail the customary disendowment.

Though many organisations, and individual Anglicans supported the NSS demand for reform, the situation of the Church of England actually improved in the sixties. In 1963 church courts were placed outside the secular appeal machinery, and in 1966 the power of parliament to intervene in Anglican liturgical practices was greatly reduced.

Subsequently, more organisations and individuals have called for disestablishment and disendowment, but the Lord is mindful of his own and remembers his children.

4: Universal Affirmation

Like the previous objective, this agitation for reform began, but hasn't ended, with the NSS. In the past a Christian oath was required of every witness in a court of law, candidate for public office and other official situations. In the 19th century exceptions were gradually extended to Quakers and Moravians (following modifications to the oath in the 17th and 18th centuries), Jews, and all Christians who invoked Matthew 7:34-7 to say the taking of an oath was contrary to their religious beliefs. But no civil rights in this respect were accorded to those who had no such belief. Almost single-handedly Charles Bradlaugh, first NSS president, secured the passing of the Evidence Further Amendment Act 1869, Evidence Amendment Act 1870 and Oaths Act 1888, so that unbelievers had the right to affirm in all cases where an oath might be required.

Important as this reform was, in the 1960s the NSS pointed out lingering objections. It was obvious from statistics that many of those who took the oath had no genuine belief in God. As I said in *Universal Affirmation* (1967), "'I swear by Almighty God' is simply the first lie that the hardened perjurer is prepared to utter. Probably he tells it with the least misgiving as it is not subject to cross-examination." And it is not prosecutable. From a secularist standpoint, as in so many other cases where concessions have been made to atheists and agnostics, it involved opting out, not opting in. A presiding judge or other functionary was entitled to ask why affirmation was desired. The acceptable answer was either "I have no religious belief" or "the taking of an oath is contrary to my religious belief". Thus atheists were identifiable and could become victims of prejudice. From a practical standpoint, taking an oath invoked scriptures and tokens like head-covering so diverse in a multicultural society as to render proper administration difficult or impossible. The answer to all these objections was universal affirmation.

An NSS motion to the 1967 AGM of the NCCL was carried overwhelmingly**,** and support was lent by some jurists and legal bodies. Subsequently this support has increased, but nothing has been done.

5: Secular Education

The issue for which the NSS is best known, which has received much of its officers' attention over the decades, and which played an important role in my research and writing in the 1960s, is secular education. It has been complicated by a series of unsatisfactory education acts and shifting alliances since the Elementary Education Act 1876, and the freethought catch-cry of "free, secular and compulsory education" is older still. In Britain education became compulsory in 1880 and virtually free for all children between three and fifteen in 1891, but it is still far from being secular. In 1907, a Secular Education League was set up under liberal Christian, ethicist, rationalist and secularist auspices. Sequentially it lost the support of the first three on the ground that its campaign was "negative" and later that the Education Act 1944 - the core of the current system - was a *fait accompli*; it was wound up in 1964 without the NSS being informed.

The 1944 Act decreed that the school day of all county (state) schools must begin with an act of "collective worship" and that "religious instruction" must be provided as part of the school curriculum. In fact it's the only legally required subject. Thus **"**particular religious views are not only allowed to enter, but are now prevented by law from leaving" (my *Secular Education ca.* 1962).

The instruction and the worship are supposed to be "non-denominational" (the religion that nobody believes). Its precise content is established by each educational authority through an "Agreed Syllabus". Since the formulating committees are dominated by mainstream Christians, one can imagine how "non-denominational" they are, even in religious terms.

The other plank of the 1944 act was state support for religious schools, the overwhelming bulk of "voluntary" schools. They were divided into "aided", "special agreement" and "controlled" schools. Aided and special agreement schools (mainly Roman Catholic) were controlled by the sect, had purely sectarian education but received all their maintenance costs and a proportion of their building costs from the state. Maintenance included wages and salaries, which religious-order staff have to hand over to the order. The proportion of building costs began at 50 percent but over the years grew to 80. The Church had the temerity to claim it met 20 percent of the cost of its schools, but when all maintenance costs and other subsidies were taken in to account "the total contribution of the sects is ... I.5 percent" (my *Cost of Church Schools,* 1970).

Calling a spade a spade, the NSS labelled RI as "brainwashing" and the existence of religious schools as "subsidised segregation" or "apartheid" in numerous booklets, pamphlets, media releases, articles, letters, interviews and forums. Mainly we concentrated on libertarian rather than ideological considerations. We were the first to warn that, while there were subsidised Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Jewish schools, Muslims and representatives of other

sects had a case to demand subsidised schools of their own. Where would it stop? This multiplication of schools in the one area was not only socially divisive but economically wasteful. And there were many practical, professional and psychological problems for teachers and students of different or no religion (and there were some in a sectarian school). Support came for this NSS platform, explicitly from the NCCL (now Liberty), the Humanist Teachers Association and other libertarian bodies (not at that time from the BHA), and tacitly from *The Times Educational Supplement* and some other media outlets. Unfortunately, too much sectarian lucre and proselytisation depended on the status quo, and no reforms resulted.

In *The Rights of Children* (1968), the report of an NSS working party, it was stated that "we believe that children should at 14 have gained the right to leave worship and RI with or without their parents' consent". It wasn't till the Education and Inspections Act 2006 that NSS agitation, spearheaded by Keith Porteous Wood, gained its only victory on the education front. Section 55 of the act decreed that "if a sixth-form pupil requests that he may be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious worship at a community, foundation or voluntary school the pupil shall be so excused".

In other respects the situation has deteriorated. Headteachers who might have "secularised" the morning assembly have been reminded of the religious requirements of the Education Act 1944, while the Education and Inspections Act allows for discrimination against non-religious teachers in religious schools. Honestly-named religious instruction has become devious "religious education", and religious schools (and other institutions) have adopted the neutral label "faith".

This is particularly ironical in that these places are increasingly occupied by people of little or no genuine faith but merely a baptismal label, ancestral memory or naked careerism.

6: Secular Broadcasting

A great deal of NSS time was wasted in the 1960s trying to secure abolition of religious broadcasting departments, or parity for humanism with religion in overall broadcasting. The stock answer of the BBC, which wasted more time in double-talk than did commercial television, was that religion expressed itself in many ways that had no secular equivalent. In 1965 I countered this claim with a list of suggested programmes, reproduced in *Broadcasting, Brainwashing, Conditioning* (1972), paralleling all aspects of religious broadcasting except prayer, but in vain. Particularly annoying was the BBC's failing to commemorate the centenary of the NSS, coinciding with a meeting in London of the World Union of Freethinkers in 1966, on the grounds that the habit of celebrating centenaries had worn thin. That might have been true but the BBC continued to promote other centenaries and anniversaries of a less venerable age.

Our representations may have borne some fruit in the gradually increasing interviews on topical issues and occasional discussions on philosophical matters as in *Dialogue with Doubt* (1967) for Rediffusion Television and debates on ABC Television.

7: Penology

This involves elements of both secularity and secularism. In the 1960s the prison system was - and still is - predicated on the mediaeval view that the only way to treat lawbreaking and immorality without legal sanctions was a good ongoing regimen of religion. All prisons boasted Anglican chaplains and regular Anglican chapel services, while chaplains from other denominations were also admitted. There was, of course, no official right of entry for humanist counsellors.

The NSS and *The Freethinker* contended that the biological and sociological bases of religion were entirely different from those of morality and that criminal statistics endorsed the common observation that piety didn't promote virtue. For every religionist motivated to good works by faith, many others were led into fanaticism and inhumanity by the same stimulation.

The secularist approach struck a chord with the media and the general public. Out of all my verbiage during the sixties, only two comments gained a measure of general currency. One was describing the National Anthem as "calling on a figment of the imagination to save a political anachronism". The other was: "Many men leave prisons and borstals confirmed Anglicans and confirmed criminals."

The latter appeared in the NSS submission to the 1965 Royal Commission on the Penal System. But most of this submission was devoted to constructive suggestions for penal reform. These included:

- replacement of the concept of retribution with those of deterrence and reformation;
- increasing fines and probation and reducing imprisonment, especially of women and young people, so as to keep them away from a poisonous environment;
- providing genuine employment at trade-union rates to give inmates a sense of dignity and purpose and an opportunity to support their families outside or to compensate their victims;
- facilitating more visits to prison by families to keep them together while a member was in gaol;
- promoting rehabilitation on release through expanded probation services and assistance in finding further education and employment;
- restricting the role of chaplains to ministering only to those who asked for them, and relegating their other functions to trained psychologists and social workers.

The NSS had long called for the abolition of capital punishment on the grounds that it suggests violence is ultimately the only way to solve problems and it gives no opportunity to redress a wrongful verdict. The Christie-Evans case was the most notorious example of a miscarriage of justice at that time. Although such injustices were deemed rare, modern DNA analysis has since brought to light an alarmingly large number of imprisoned or executed innocents. The Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 was welcomed by secularists though it contained the anomalous exceptions of treason and piracy. Particularly gratifying was the passing of the Criminal Justice Act 1967 incorporating many NSS suggestions.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons too complex for this survey, these reforms have done nothing to reduce the crime rate.

8: Suicide

One of the most heartless, ideologically-driven tenets of Christianity down the ages was its attitude to suicide. Presumably this stemmed from the Pauline pronouncement: "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you" (I Corinthians 6:19). It echoed an ancient belief in the existence and sanctity of a supposititious soul, while ignoring a reasonable deduction that destroying the body would actually "liberate" the soul if it existed.

In canon and later criminal law the act of suicide was called a *felo de se* (felony against oneself). It was especially abhorrent in Roman Catholic theology as it was a mortal sin without an opportunity for confession and absolution, and was thus an immediate passport to Hell. Anglicanism inherited this attitude if not the theology.

As a sign of revulsion and a means of deterrence, up till 1823 the victim was buried at the village crossroads with a stake through his/her heart. Between 1823 and 1882 a suicide was buried in an unconsecrated part of the churchyard at night. Of course a successful suicide escaped punishment in this life, but attempted suicide remained a misdemeanour. Reformist agitation by humanists and liberal Christians secured passing of the Suicide Act 1961, which annulled this misdemeanour. But anyone who assisted in a successful suicide could still be charged with murder, while section 2 of the act imposed a sentence of up to 14 years gaol for "aiding, abetting or procuring" self-destruction, whether successful or not.

In 1968 the NSS convened a working party, whose report was *The Right to Die,* to redress this injustice and address other issues relating to dying. Exploring the many causes that precipitate a wish for suicide and the practical difficulties of achieving it unaided, the NSS urged decriminalisation of assisting suicide. At the same time, secularists saw this way out of life as a last resort and in their public, private and professional lives explored physical, psychological and social solutions to problems leading to self-destruction. They have continued in these endeavours**.**

9: Euthanasia

In the 20th century the "right to die" became associated with the narrower issue of euthanasia ("agreeable" or "easy" death) for people, usually elderly, with physical conditions like intractable pain or incurable illnesses. So *The Right to Die* (1968) gave it special attention. Whereas impulsive suicide by the apparently healthy may involve little or no consideration of means and consequences, supporters of planned euthanasia consider both. Patients may wish to save themselves and carers the agony of a degrading life, but be physically unable, lacking courage or unaware of effective means to end it. And there's always the fear that an unsuccessful attempt could lead to further disabilities.

The NSS has long supported an organisation, founded in 1935, which has drafted various bills whereby sufferers can seek relief from their misery. Originally these bills gave conscious, rational individuals the right to ask for euthanasia; later, to cover all contingencies, the right to specify the circumstances in which at some future time this relief could be obtained. The organisation was first called the Euthanasia Society, but various outcries developed. Religious opponents quoted the biblical injunction (in the Authorised Version) "Thou shalt not kill" or vaguely spoke of the "sanctity of life", even of “the ennobling power of pain”. Of greater influence were reminders of Hitler's concentration camps and instances of rapacious relatives chasing an early inheritance. So the name was changed to Voluntary Euthanasia Society and now Dignity in Dying.

The issue of involuntary euthanasia was, however, also recognised by the NSS working party. This included instances where a patient who hadn't requested euthanasia "died" clinically, but could be resuscitated, with severe permanent damage, by medical intervention, or passed into a vegetative state that could be prolonged indefinitely on life-support apparatus. Here the humanist call was, in the words of Arthur Hugh Clough (contrary to his satirical intention), "need’st not strive officiously to keep alive". A similar issue involved foetal monsters who would in nature be stillborn but could have "..life" - mere metabolism - officiously breathed into them.

A year after the working party, secularist Earl Raglan introduced a Voluntary Euthanasia Bill to the Lords. It was rejected.

Numerous attempts have been made subsequently to introduce similar bills to the Commons or Lords. All have failed. Globally the situation is little different. Disputes over wording and safeguards, growth of the hospice movement, constant claims of medical "miracles" and public unwillingness to face up to death have combined with religious prejudice to frustrate legislation.

10: Moral Education

Secularists have been concerned to demonstrate that their interest in education goes beyond the narrow, however important, issue of secular education. Indeed, the history of freethought illustrates a concern for education versus propaganda, knowledge versus ignorance and science versus superstition. Special attention has been given to moral education. In 1897 a Moral Instruction League was formed by the Union of Ethical Societies. The centrality of this issue for freethinkers stemmed from a need to counter religious claims – accepted by many nothingarians – that an absolute moral law exists outside nature, that it's inextricably tied to religion and that any unbelievers who can be regarded as moral owe their morality to "Christian moral capital".

This public perception received a bone-crushing, if not a fatal, blow when secular humanist psychologist Margaret Knight gave two BBC radio talks on *Morals without Religion* in 1955. Criticised for not having read that "great moral textbook" the Christian Bible, she ultimately found time to read it *in toto* and not just the bits cited from pulpits. The faithful were then confronted by a devastating pamphlet, *Christianity: The Debit Account* (1965). Dismissing the popular view that Jesus was "a great moral teacher" if not a god and that Christianity was a great force for good in its heyday, she declared: "I now incline to the view that the conversion of Europe to Christianity was one of the greatest disasters of history."

The Cost of Church Schools (1970) was careful to open with the statement that "I shall be contending, however, that their social cost is even more onerous than the bill they annually present to the ratepayers and taxpayers of this country", for they fostered divisiveness, not inclusiveness, in society. This fortified a view elaborated in my *Religion and Ethics in Schools* (1965) that "attempts then to pump yet more religion into young people, as in Borstal training, must be judged in the light of the high and mounting incidence of reconvictions".

That booklet and my *Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society* (1972) showed how Christianity was not only untrue, as was by then widely accepted, but that there was no theoretical or practical connection between religion and morality, as was widely disputed. Moreover, the claim that Jesus was "a great moral teacher" didn't stand up to a close scrutiny of the Sermon on the Mount and other homilies attributed to him. There were, of course, useful moral insights in his teachings, but accepting everything he said and linking it with an incredible theology – which adolescents were increasingly rejecting – could lead them to "throw out the moral baby with the mythological bathwater" (*Morals without Religion*).

But how should morality be taught? Some humanists urged a revival of formal syllabuses as advocated by the Moral Instruction League. Secularists contended these were artificial and arid,

and could result in the school bully or cheat walking off with first prize. The need for moral behaviour should be demonstrated in practical situations, and the school should be seen as a moral community which fostered co-operation, thoughtfulness and tolerance. Happily, formal moral syllabuses were soon abandoned as a useful way forward for educationists.

More controversially, I contended that humanism as an ideology, like other ideologies, should not be seen as the foundation for personal morality and that actual behaviour was shaped by social and legal forces, peer pressure and early parental guidance. The Jesuits were probably right in asserting, "Give me a child until he is seven, and I will show you the man." Though human actions accorded with individual assessments formulated previously from various sources, they were impulsive rather than "rational" when they occurred. Thus many lower animals understood morality if not ethics.

Secularists regarded knowledge of consequences as the essential ingredient of moral education. Nowhere was this more obvious than in sex education, which had traditionally been regarded by religionists – and some prudish freethinkers – as obscene and conducive to "impure" thoughts. My *Humanism, Christianity and Sex* (1968) showed the evils of ignorance and superstition in this area of knowledge. When sex education was gradually and fearfully introduced to schools, it often omitted "delicate" topics like venereal disease and homosexuality, while some school texts so abounded in faulty, even hilarious, material that secularist teachers Maurice Hill and Michael Lloyd–Jones wrote *Sex Education: The Erroneous Zone* (1970). Following NSS protests against the fining of Richard Branson of the Student Advisory Centre in 1970, The Indecent Advertisements Act 1889 was amended to permit officially approved advice on venereal disease.

Since the 1960s most, if not all, schools have sex education, though religious institutions preach chastity as the only way to avoid venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies. But general moral education has failed. Schools are continuing to reflect the violence and greed in society at large, and sexual abuse by teachers and bullying by students appear to be growing rather than declining.

A rising school-leaving age has introduced or magnified problems of teenage pregnancies, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and the carrying of weapons.

11: Contraception

In early, underpopulated communities, where most individuals failed to reach adulthood, it was reasonable to urge those who did to "be fruitful, and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). But by the 1960s - and a century or more earlier - the social problem, especially in cities, was overpopulation. Some sects still advocated fertility to outbreed their rivals, but most religious people were recognising the need for contraception. But only through abstinence or, grudgingly, the unreliable "rhythm method".

From Jeremy Bentham to Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, freethinkers were pioneers in promoting artificial contraception by a variety of methods. Initially the chief motivation was population control on neo-Malthusian lines. The focus then turned to family planning to protect women against ill-health occasioned by annual births and miscarriages and to ensure the physical, mental and financial health of the family. Finally, attention was drawn to the outcome of conception under the banner "All children should be wanted children".

Religionists who opposed contraception (but not other forms of medical intervention) did so on the stated grounds that it ignored or flouted divine providence and its popularity would aid promiscuity. They were quite prepared to allow hunger, disease, wars, pollution and environmental damage (all of which God seemed unable or unwilling to prevent) to flourish globally and for unwanted pregnancies to flourish individually. There was some truth in their claim about promiscuity, but secularists contended that what might be regarded as a "sin" or even a "vice" should be left to the people concerned so long as they acted responsibly to themselves and to society: namely, avoiding unwanted conception and venereal disease.

In the 1960s artificial contraception was extensively practised in non-Catholic communities but, especially for young people, with great difficulty. Contraceptives for heterosexuals and condoms for "safe sex" by both heterosexuals and homosexuals weren't freely available. Posters for the Family Planning Association were banned on public transport and the Freedom from Hunger Campaign of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation omitted discussion of birth control in return for Vatican support and the co-operation of Roman Catholic countries.

Agitation led by the NSS gradually ameliorated this deplorable situation. Edwin Brooks' National Health Service (Family Planning) Bill became law in 1967, making contraceptives available under the NHS; FPA posters were displayed openly; advice on birth control, with Vatican approval, was given by the World Health Organisation.

Since that time, contraception has been recognised as a basic human right and global necessity, even in some Catholic countries in the First World, despite continuing Vatican

fulminations. But the entrenched power of Christianity and Islam, allied with traditional taboos, is still obstructive in the Second and Third Worlds.

12: Abortion

It's often said that humanists are in favour of abortion. This statement is very misleading. Actually, humanists are in favour of avoiding it through effective contraception. Like other people, they realise it may be more distressing for doctors and nurses than other operations, and it is certainly more distressing for the women and (if told) their families. But humanists believe in the right to choose and contend that abortion is better than continuing with a pregnancy which threatens the physical, mental or financial health of the woman and leads to the birth of an unwanted child and all that that entails in personal and social costs.

Before the 1960s procuring abortion was illegal in Britain and most other countries. Wealthy women might obtain it by travelling to a place where it was legal, or paying a very high fee to an obstetrician willing to break the law. Most women had to seek a backstreet abortion in doubtfully sanitary conditions on a kitchen table by an unqualified person. Chronic illness, sterility or even death was a not uncommon outcome.

Views on abortion are striking cases of incompatible religious and non-religious worldviews, which "consensus" apologists gloss over. Orthodox Roman Catholics and some other sectarians believe in a non-material soul which enters the embryo at conception to create an independent human being. Thus they regard abortion as murder. Less logically, other sectarians say it's all right if the pregnant woman has been raped or her own life is in danger. Humanists adopt a humane, pragmatic approach which recognises the case for abortion outlined above. To remove some of the hysteria engendered by this issue, former NSS president Barbara Smoker pointed out that spontaneous abortions, often not recognised by the woman herself, are far commoner than induced ones, and dubbed God "the great Abortionist in the sky".

While always advocating legalisation of abortion, the NSS was less active in its promotion than in other reform movements because of the existence of a very effective Abortion Law Reform Association (now Abortion Rights), which was established by freethinkers and to which the society was - and is - affiliated. From 1952 to 1967 many secularist and liberal Christian parliamentarians, notably Joseph Reeves, Kenneth Robinson, Renee Short, Simon Wingfield-Digby, David Steel and Lord Silkin, introduced Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bills to the Commons or the Lords. Success finally came with the Abortion Act 1967, authorising medical termination of pregnancy on both medical and social grounds.

Almost immediately, Roman Catholics began an ongoing rearguard action. It had two prongs: Catholic doctors and nurses invoked the conscience clause in the act allowing them to refuse participation, and Catholic social workers and superintendents of institutions pressured young

women in their charge not to seek abortion. This obstruction is being facilitated by the growing tendency of the Government (not only in Britain) to outsource medical and welfare services to "faith" institutions. Conversely, even in Catholic countries, abortion is being legalised and nominal Catholics are defying their Church to avail themselves of it.

13: Marriage

Another clear divide between Christians and secularists is the institution of marriage. To one group it's a sacrament made in the sight of God "till death do us part", but modified by the "Matthean exception" (Matthew 5:32) involving adultery and the "Pauline dispensation" (I Corinthians 7:I5) involving marriage to an unbeliever. To the other group it's a non-commercial contract (with commercial consequences) that remains in force for as long as both partners desire or, with court approval, for as long as one partner chooses.

In countries like Britain with established churches, their clergy have traditionally had special privileges, such as acting as their own registrars while having the right to refuse to marry non-churchgoers or divorcees. Traditionally the Roman Catholic Church denied marriage to non-Catholics, thus obliging conversion if the marriage were to proceed. Now it may not insist on a partner's conversion, but insists on Catholic rites and an undertaking the children will be brought up as Catholics. Whilst this may be considered a personal matter, freethinkers deplore it as an infringement of human rights and - because Catholics regard infant baptism as a non-renounceable sacrament and label - a means of artificially inflating Catholic numbers in censuses.

Attitudes of freethinkers to marriage have varied. Pointing to the group marriages that existed in primitive societies before paternity was recognised, some freethinkers (like early Communists) denounced marriage as a church-invented device to perpetuate patriarchy, property inheritance, nepotism, racialism and social injustice, and advocated free love. Most recognised it as a means of fostering both personal and social stability, particularly when children were produced.

At the local level, much attention was given by secularists to registry offices, which were created by the Marriage Act 1836 for civil marriages. Not only were there too few of them, but many were cheerless, even forbidding, and some illegally displayed crosses and other religious trappings.

By constant pressure, improvements have been made. A new and usually better alternative has appeared with the recognition of humanist celebrants.

14: Divorce

From I857 to today a plethora of Matrimonial Causes Acts have been more concerned with divorce than with marriage. Until passage of the 1857 Act, divorce was possible only after securing permission from ecclesiastical courts and a separate act of parliament. Thus only aristocrats and monarchs like Henry VIII were likely to succeed. While the poor were debarred, in rural areas it didn't matter as many couples couldn't afford church fees to get married in the first place. Later laws differed only in what grounds they specified for divorce. Until the 1960s these were "matrimonial offences" such as refusal to consummate, entering into prohibited marriages (incest or with close in-laws) and adultery. Commonest was the last. It led to a thriving private-enquiry industry, whereby an agent armed with a camera climbed a ladder providentially positioned near a bedroom window and, further aided by open curtains and a bright light over a bed, photographed a man on top of a prostitute.

From 1835 various marriage-law-reform and divorce-law-reform bodies, established by freethinkers and liberal Christians, urged extending the grounds for divorce beyond matrimonial offences. Some progress was achieved with A.P. Herbert's Matrimonial Causes Act 1937, which named desertion, cruelty, insanity and presumed death. Nullity could result from refusal to consummate, mental deficiency, venereal disease or pregnancy at the time of marriage. But these still involved one-sided actions or inactions.

Bills by Eirene White (1946), Leo Abse (1962-3) and John Parker (1966) citing separation were unsuccessfully introduced to the Commons. But the Divorce Reform Act 1969 at last established the "no-fault" divorce (though deemed "fault" as well as children's needs seemed to determine child custody and division of assets), whereby matrimonial offences were replaced by "irretrievable breakdown of marriage". Divorce was granted after two years separation by common consent or five without it.

Since that time divorce has become so accepted as to be almost fashionable in some circles. Approaching half of all first marriages and more than half of second ones end in divorce. Humanists at first rejoiced over the potential disappearance of warring families, but are now more cautious. Divided households have led to financial problems, housing shortages, and custody and access disputes involving the children, who may actually prefer domestic quarrels to separation.

15: Rights of Women

Again, it's freethinkers and liberal Christians, dating from Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, who have gradually liberated women from religious oppression. The Old Testament myths of the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall underpin a patriarchal Jewish and Christian society. In 581 the Christian Council of Macon even debated whether women had souls. Happily the conclusion was affirmative. But women continued to have no sacramental or governing role in the Church.

From its inception in 1866 the NSS has called for female emancipation, and has increasingly - and exceptionally - promoted them within its own ranks. In the 1877 obscenity trial of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant for publishing Charles Knowlton's birth-control manual, *The Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), various arguments were submitted by the defendants. They didn't know that aspects of medical advice given in the book were wrong, but they cogently argued for the rights of women as well as an answer to the population question. The two secularists were convicted and sentenced to a fine and imprisonment, but successfully appealed on a technicality.

It's common knowledge that women didn't get the vote till 1918 if over 30 and 1928 if over 21. Less well known and hardly conceivable today were other injustices. In the eyes of society "fortunate" women passed from the domination of a father to the control of a husband. Unfortunate ones stayed at home as unwanted spinsters, sought jobs in domestic service or oppressive factories, or took to the streets or a brothel as prostitutes. To "compensate" husbands for assuming the financial burden of a wife, her family provided a dowry which passed permanently into his possession, whatever the fate of his wife or their marriage. (Even among the aristocracy, inheritance was through the male line.) Only after the Married Women's Property Act 1882 was this wrong righted. But women still gained no legal share of assets accumulated during marriage, and could not institute divorce proceedings till 1923 - and then for adultery alone. As married women were virtually unable to gain decent employment and were thus financially dependent on their husbands, they usually turned a blind eye to the latter's infidelities. For women were expected to be chaste, but not men.

Having no professional prospects or claims to intellectual pursuits, women of all social classes received no tertiary - and often no secondary - education. Only in very special circumstances were they able to sign contracts. They couldn't serve on juries or be magistrates, let alone judges, so justice naturally favoured men.

In the early 20th century the situation for women hadn't improved. Individual secularists like the Pankhursts were prominent leaders of the Suffragettes, but the NSS was wary of the movement

as a whole because of its tactics. For similar reasons it wasn't involved in the sixties' Women's Lib as an organised (or disorganised) movement.

With other humanist bodies it was however active in promoting the feminist cause. Here it was assisted by circumstances.

With so many men away fighting during World War II, women entered the workforce and even the Armed Forces as never before, and largely maintained these new roles after the war; but their rewards weren't usually commensurate with men's. Relief came with the Equal Pay Act 1970, decreeing equal pay for equal work. This largely depended on job descriptions, and many positions were reclassified for men. Another advance for women was the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970, officially recognising a wife's role as homemaker and her claim on family assets after a marital breakdown. It also recognised ante- and postnuptial agreements (which proved difficult to enforce) and abolished the demand in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1965 for the restitution of conjugal rights.

Since that time, with continuing NSS support, women have entered all the professions and trades once the preserve of men. These include engineering and construction, the Protestant clergy, police, ambulance, firefighting and other frontline services, albeit as a minority; and men complain the heaviest and most dangerous tasks are left to them. Women are now prominent in small business and are gaining promotion in the corporate world, though often limited by a "glass ceiling". The conflicting claims of childrearing and professional continuity are still not resolved.

A new, or newly recognised, problem in Britain is the status of women in Muslim society. Increasing migration and male militancy have brought their plight to the fore, though it's minor here by comparison with Muslim countries despite instances of “honour” killing of alleged adulteresses.

Ignoring political correctness, the humanist movement hasn't been slow to demonstrate it isn't fixated on Christianity and to condemn the follies, fallacies and potentially violent fanaticism in traditional Islam. By this creed women are severely handicapped in such matters as education, employment, marriage, divorce, litigation, inheritance and even appearing in public alone, with or without the burkha. Hopefully reformist Muslims will gradually improve this situation.

16: Rights of Children

Traditionally children were - and often still are - regarded as the chattels of their parents, especially where their religion and education are concerned. However regarded, they were expected to be "seen but not heard". This attitude used to prevail among freethinkers, but the humanist movement has long been at the forefront of child emancipation, promoting protective and self-assertive rights. The transition from infancy to adolescence, from physical restraint to relying on advice and financial sanctions, is a challenge to both parents and children. A formidable challenge also confronts the state in deciding the age at which young people should be deemed to have criminal responsibility, and allowed to serve in the Armed Forces, vote, leave school, work, sign contracts, gain a driver's licence, buy cigarettes, drink in hotels, give consent to heterosexual and homosexual sex, and marry with and without parental agreement. The ages at which most of these activities were permitted rose in the latter 19th century and fell in the latter 20th.

In the 1960s the NSS decried the physical and mental abuse inflicted on children, often without discovery and punishment, by some parents and institutions, especially church-run ones. But we had no idea how extensive this was, how often it involved rape of both girls and boys, and how complicit the Roman Catholic hierarchy was in covering this up and simply moving criminal clerics from one parish to another.

In its submission to the Latey Commission on the Age of Majority in 1966, the NSS called for its reduction from 21 to 18. As a contribution to Human Rights Year (1968) the society submitted my paper, *Religion and Human Rights,* to the UN Working Group on Legislation and Conventions. It was commended for study by the UK Committee. Also in 1968 the NSS convened a comprehensive working party on children as part of Human Rights Year. This recommended more education for parents in recognising the emotional and mental growth of their children, and more rigorous state control of potentially dangerous toys, paint and flammable clothing. It protested against imposed religion in schools as not only an affront to children's intelligence but as a libertarian issue for them and their parents. While worship and RI existed, it should be opted into, not out of. With respect to opting out, "We believe that children should at 14 have gained the right to leave worship and RI with or without their parents' consent." On the issue of illegal drugs, it questioned punishment for taking "youth" drugs like pot while adult ones like tobacco and alcohol escaped.

Following my article on adoption in *The Humanist* (May 1962) an Agnostics Adoption Bureau was set up in 1963 with representatives from the BHA and NSS. In February 1965 it was recognised as an adoption society by London County Council and as a charity by the Charity

Commissioners. This was not a desired "sectarian" solution since, "though it is certainly more accurate to describe a baby as 'agnostic' or 'atheist' than 'religious', the society regards the ideological labelling of babies at all as faintly ludicrous". What necessitated this initiative was the virtual impossibility for agnostics or atheists to adopt children. This was one of the many anomalies and social tragedies in the prevailing adoption system.

Under the Adoption Act 1950 the natural parent(s) had to sign a consent form stating "I understand that, the effect of an adoption order will be to deprive me permanently of my rights as a parent/guardian", yet adding "on condition that the religious persuasion in which the infant is to be brought up is ...". Since the natural parent was often an unmarried mother in a religious institution, pressure could be brought on her to express remorse and gratitude by naming that denomination, whatever her personal views. The humbug of this situation was tacitly acknowledged in the Adoption Act 1958, which modified the condition to "religious persuasion in which the infant is proposed to be brought up". (One is reminded of the hypocritical situation with "godparents".) Further, many adoption societies were denominational while others that called themselves "non-denominational" refused agnostics and atheists as adopters. The result was that some denominations had a surplus of babies over adopters and others the reverse, while honest freethinkers were everywhere rejected.

Earlier in the 20th century some of them, especially if they had communist sympathies, might have regarded the nuclear family as acquisitive and nepotistic, even racialist, concerned only with property inheritance, and have preferred secular institutions as adopters; but the view, which is now confirmed by neurophysiologists, grew that children were stunted both intellectually and emotionally if they lacked constant recognisable carers.

Related to property inheritance was "legitimacy". Secularists believed that the labelling of an infant born out of wedlock as "illegitimate" was far worse than "faintly ludicrous". Not only did it brand him/her with an indelible social stigma, but it had important consequences for maintenance and inheritance.

By the Legitimacy Act 1926 children were legitimised if their parents subsequently married, but only if they were free to marry when the baby was born. This condition was removed in 1959, but the legal and financial disabilities remained.

Changes were on the way to meet some of these secularist demands. The Family Law Reform Act 1969 reduced this age of majority from 21 to 18 and the rights of "illegitimate" children were recognised. Then the Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970 gave both parents the responsibility to provide for their children.

Since that time little has changed. Indeed, sexual abuse appears to have increased. On the other hand, liberty for some teenagers has become licence. Some tacit secularisation has advanced in the community, and the LAS was able to become the Independent Adoption Society. A notable advance through NSS pressure was the belated right given in the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to sixth-formers to withdraw from religious worship.

17: Rights of Older People

Historically, old age wasn't a great social problem. Indeed it was a boon. Through disease and malnutrition most people didn't reach it, and those who did were valued for their wealth of knowledge and experience. When they ceased to be self-supporting they were usually cared for by their families. It was the advent of antibiotics and other drugs and of intensive care in hospitals, allied with improved hygiene and nutrition, that radically changed this situation. Further, the declining importance (at least among Anglo-Saxons) of the extended family left the rapidly growing numbers of old people vulnerable to neglect. The closure of geriatric wards in hospitals left many reliant on nursing homes of unequal standards of facilities and care.

Freethinkers like Thomas Paine were among the first to recognise the potential problems of old age. Some were medical, and their elimination depended on contemporary medical knowledge. But people then survived infections and other acute problems to fall victim to lingering degenerative conditions. A major concern was financial insecurity when wage-earning became impossible. Here the community could and indeed did provide support with national insurance and old-age pensions as recommended by Paine; but it was limited by economic and demographic factors. By the 1960s other psychological problems were increasingly recognised. Neither the supposed comforts of religion nor the liberating enlightenment of humanism answered all the issues of death: old people's fear of dying slowly and agonisingly, if not the fear of death itself; the pain of bereavement in those who remained. My *Problem of Death* (1963) described it as "the supreme tragedy", yet "no more to be feared than sleep". "Should life become intolerable, suicide or euthanasia should be at hand. Sad as this solution is, it is even sadder to see life groaning on for the superstitious fear of ending it."

In 1964 secularist Kit Mouat started the Humanist Letter Network (International) as a means of combating loneliness. In her *Problem of Loneliness* (1965) old age was named as one of the circumstances likely to occasion it. In 1968 the NSS convened a working party and published its report as *The Right to Die* (see Euthanasia). Not all old people need to, or do, think about death other than prudentially to make a will and confer a power of attorney. They need to, and do, think about life, whose span is steadily increasing. So in 1971 the NSS convened another working party, whose report was *The Rights of Old People.* It sought to restore the respect for elders that had existed in primitive societies and Eastern religions. Under six headings - the right to independence, the right to respect from fellow citizens, the right to social and financial security, the right to adequate care and attention, the right to ample employment opportunities and the right to creative fulfilment - it made 44 recommendations. Among these were recognition that "old people should be as self-supporting as practicable rather than institutionalised"; provision of better domiciliary and external services and facilities; town

planning to provide for extended as well as nuclear families; institutions to allow more freedom, privacy and secularisation; legalisation of voluntary euthanasia**;** more national and local financial provisions and subsidies; abolition of compulsory retirement ages; nationalisation of Anglican property to provide facilities for all, and school involvement in helping old people.

It would take a major research project to determine the progress made nationally, or even in one local-authority area, in advancing all these rights of old people. Lip service has been paid to almost all of the NSS's 44 recommendations, but their implementation has been at best patchy.

18: Rights of Homosexuals

Though representatives of some indigenous peoples and some pious or Marxist countries have claimed that homosexuality doesn't exist in their communities, it's been found in all human cultures and among many animal species. In some cultures it's even been practised openly in connection with certain religious rites; but generally it's been considered "unnatural", that is, against postulated "natural law", however this may be derived. Clearly it was frowned upon as a routine way of life in underpopulated communities.

Despite denials by modernist Jews, Christians and Muslims, there are clear prohibitions and dire penalties against homosexual activities in both Old and New Testaments. In countries under their sway there have been - and in many Muslim countries still are - sanctions as stringent as capital punishment. In these patriarchal societies, so long as women performed their marital and domestic duties their extracurricular activities (if ever they got the chance) were ignored if practised among themselves. Thus there's no direct reference to lesbianism in the bible, or in canon and criminal law. Until recent centuries monasteries and convents flourished outside the law of the land and homosexual practices may have been rife in both. Freethinkers have observed that a "chaste" life of sexual abstinence, in theory or in practice, is more "unnatural" than homosexuality and apparently unknown in the rest of the animal kingdom.

Until the Reformation, homosexual behaviour in Britain was dealt with in ecclesiastical courts, often more leniently than adultery. In secular courts "the detestable and abominable vice of buggery committed with mankind or beast" became a crime punishable by death in 1533 and life imprisonment in 1861. Other offences of "gross indecency" by male homosexuals were added to the statute book by the "Labouchere amendment" to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. In 1921 there was a proposal to outlaw lesbianism, but the measure was defeated in the House of Lords.

Prosecutions of homosexuals were however relatively rare. Most activity was safely "in the closet" and offenders who were discovered were usually given the opportunity to decamp overseas.

So freethinkers, unwilling to stir up a hornet's nest or fearful of being branded as "criminals" themselves, made no attempt to reform the law.

In 1878 the Leeds Secular Hall was let for a fancy-dress ball. The police got wind that debauchery was likely to occur and advised the secularist manager, who wanted to cancel the booking. But they wished to catch the villains red-handed, and the ball went ahead. According to police evidence, transvestism, scanty dressing and "indecent familiarities" occurred. In 1894 a pamphlet appeared alleging that a class was conducted in 1879 "at the Hall of Science" (the

NSS headquarters in London), "for teaching boys unnatural vices". The secularists sued for libel and the defendants said they meant the "Leeds orgies". In *The Hall of Science Libel Case* (1895) NSS president G. W. Foote rightly expressed outrage at this smear, but piously described the Leeds offenders as largely "young men belonging to well-known Christian families" who were "obscene wretches". He obviously approved of imprisonment for "unnatural crimes".

Oscar Wilde's situation, largely self-created, gained some sympathy. But public concern at the persecution of gays didn't really surface till the notorious Montagu cases, implicating a well-known peer, in 1953-4. Robert (later Lord) Boothby sought to introduce a bill "to humanise the law relating to this vital problem". In *The Freethinker* (14 May 1954) a clergyman asked "whether a more enlightened approach to the whole subject is not long overdue". Unusually, an editorial note observed that the paper and the NSS did "not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed". Two months later (16 July) a reader deplored this caution and a new editorial note said: "*The Freethinker* and NSS endorse your attitude and, in general, that of the Rev. J R Brown."

In 1957 the Wolfenden Report recommended that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private be no longer a criminal offence", but no action was taken. The Homosexual Law Reform Society was formed next year with humanist and liberal Christian support. In 1960, 1962 and 1965 Kenneth Robinson, Leo Abse and Lord Arran unsuccessfully tried to amend the law. The 1964 NSS Annual Report named it among religion-based "injustices and abuses" and its 1967 report said NSS pleas for "homosexual toleration" would strengthen. With the support also of the NCCL (Liberty), in 1966 Abse tried again and the Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting adults in private.

Hailed at the time as a great triumph, the statute was soon acknowledged as unsatisfactory in many particulars. Adults were then aged 21 and over, whereas the female age of consent was 16. "In private" was very restrictively defined, and there was nothing to prevent discrimination against homosexuals in housing, employment and social services. Whilst it was less of a **"**blackmailer's charter" than the old law, since criminal prosecutions were more circumscribed, blackmail was still possible. Local authorities and the police seemed to become more zealous in enforcing the law and in entrapment, and many "cottages" (public toilets) were demolished or closed at night to the inconvenience of everyone. The publicity attending the new legislation also drew the attention of "bovver boys" to the issue and "poofter bashing" became more common. The media, and even some gay publications and activists, deemed it now acceptable to invade privacy by "outing" public figures, with grave professional and sometimes family consequences.

Anti-discrimination laws affecting housing and employment brought some relief, the age of gay consent was reduced to 16 and police attitudes gradually improved. Beneath the hammers of Gay Liberation and Gay Pride, "the love that dare not speak its name" became positively garrulous and turned to new issues. Once seeing themselves as part of the radical-celibate "free love" movement, gays increasingly turned to partnerships and, with secularist support, at first sought civil unions and then marriages on equal terms with heterosexual ones. These would entail a number of legal and financial consequences, embracing life insurance, superannuation, pensions, home ownership, inheritance, social services and, most controversially, adoption.

Throughout the 20th century intense debate was waged over the nature and causes of homosexuality - and it's ongoing in the pages of *The Freethinker* and elsewhere. Devout religionists continue to regard it as a sin (to which they not infrequently succumb themselves) to be punished by God and reversed by prayer, and tend to equate it with paedophilia (much less validly than with heterosexuality). Lawyers have regarded it as a crime to be punished judicially or a vice to be ignored as private immorality. Until the 1980s psychiatrists saw it as a disease, at least when it was prolonged from adolescence into adulthood, to be treated by electroconvulsive and other forms of aversion "therapy". Only then was it removed from diagnostic and statistics manuals that "linked sexual orientation with psychopathology".

Both nature and nurture have been invoked as its cause. Some proponents of nature regard it as hereditary (presumably not sex-linked), others as congenital. One scientist has even claimed to have discovered a "gay gene". Proponents of nurture have named everything from mother-fixation to education in single-sex boarding schools to sexual abuse as children to close confinement in single-sex environments like submarines or monasteries or prisons to alcoholism and other drug abuse to employment in certain professions such as hairdressing or acting to... - the list is endless. It's probably best to regard it as one end of a bisexual continuum influenced by hormonal balances, early childhood experiences and early adult lifestyle choices which become habituating. The phenomenon isn't to be castigated as "queer", except by those practitioners who've adopted the term, or congratulated as "creative".

Secularists are interested in it, as in other areas of scientific speculation, whether they practise it or not. Above all, as libertarians they insist on the right of individuals to "do their own thing" so long as it doesn't impinge on the rights of others or imperil society. In an overpopulated world it can even be seen as socially beneficial.

19: Rights of Racial Minorities

In primitive societies this wasn't an issue as the population was homogeneous and migration was minimal. In the past 200 years various refugee, environmental, postcolonial and commercial factors have combined to stimulate migration and make populations increasingly heterogeneous. Up to about ten per cent of immigrants in any one area can usually be accepted without problems, whether or not integration occurs, during times of economic prosperity. Otherwise, there's likely to be friction or violence. This may result from "racism" - feelings of ethnic superiority and prejudices against close association and especially miscegenation - but usually stems from social and religious misunderstandings and fears the newcomers are "stealing" jobs or houses and pushing up prices.

Humanists have tried to foster a spirit of compassion and co-operation while recognising and addressing genuine grievances. Chief of these is forced migration, whether taking into slavery or "ethnic cleansing" of minorities. Many freethinkers and some liberal religionists were prominent in campaigns to end the West Indian slave trade (1807) and slavery in England (1772), the United States (1865), officially in other parts of the world (1834 to 1962) and wherever it still exists unofficially. This struggle was linked with that for colonial emancipation. After World War II increasing numbers of people from the former colonies and protectorates that gained independence - notably in the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and East and West Africa - migrated to the "Mother Country" to escape persecution as minorities or to seek a better life. Stimulated by white-supremacist groups, confrontations developed between newcomers and native Britons in certain immigrant areas in the 1960s.

With admirable motives the Race Relations Act 1965 outlawed "incitement to race hatred". Unfortunately, it was so loosely drafted that criticisms by Christians of Judaism, which had entered Britain with migrations of Jewish refugees from Czarist Russia and Baal Germany in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, and of Hinduism and Islam with later immigrants from Asia could be declared illegal. Secularist criticism of these religions and of Christianity, the faith of most West Indians and many Africans, came under the same cloud. So did scientific research in social anthropology. As the Old Testament amply demonstrates, the problem is that religion is tribal in origin and its practitioners have cone to regard any criticism of it as a personal or ethnic attack. The NSS was one of the few (if not the only) organisations at that time to point this out.

Throughout the 1960s we continued to advocate the reception of political refugees and the amelioration of social conditions experienced by racial minorities. So we welcomed the Race Relations Act 1968, which outlawed discrimination in housing, employment, hire purchase and insurance, and the Caravan Sites Act 1969, which obliged local authorities to find camping sites

for Gypsies; and we deplored the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968, which denied the right of persecuted Kenyan Asians to enter Britain. On a less significant, but equally contentious, issue we supported the right of Sikhs to wear turbans in non-dangerous work environments, Muslim women to wear *hijab*s (headscarves) and Christian schoolgirls to wear crucifixes.

Since that time many changes have taken place. Where there's mutual goodwill, immigrants of all racial backgrounds have largely adjusted to British life and institutions and become prominent in the medical and other professions. Unfortunately, a clamorous minority of Muslims, undisciplined by the majority, has sought to import undemocratic *Sharia* law in defiance of the law of the land. These fundamentalists are insisting on the right - indeed the duty - of Muslim women to wear *burkhas* (antisocial concealment of everything but the eyes). They're promoting female circumcision (genital mutilation), "honour" killing of women offending against *Sharia* law, and suicide bombing of "infidels". Some Sikh schoolboys were to carry *kirpans* (small ritual daggers). Enslaved to political correctness, many British "liberals" are refusing to criticise the imams, muftis and mullahs condoning or promoting these activities, lest they be accused of Islamophobia or racism. In the best freethought tradition, secularists have refused to be bound by political correctness or postmodernism, and *The Freethinker* hasn't hesitated to censure the errors and lampoon the absurdities of any and every religion that presumes to capture human minds.

20: Rights of Animals

One of secularists' reservations about "humanism" as a label was that it could suggest speciesism. Long before it became fashionable they promoted biodiversity and asserted that *Homo sapiens* was just one of thousands of species in the animal kingdom. Historically, they've been the major supporter of the theory of evolution, now grudgingly accepted by most religionists, and have acknowledged all its implications and debates about its details. For decades they've advocated environmental protection and habitat conservation in the interests of mankind and other species, especially endangered ones. They've also acknowledged, without publicising or solving, the dilemma that evolution is an ongoing process and species in advance of *Homo sapiens* could emerge. The issues then are how we'd recognise them and how we should respond to this threat to our global dominance, if not our survival [*best to delete this, since evolution happens so slowly that the arrival of a new species is not the kind of thing we'd notice or should be worried about*]. Following the lead of Sir Julian Huxley and other scientists, secularists have instead turned to the demonstrable fact of psychosocial, as a replacement for biological, evolution within our own species.

Secularists aren't Jains and don't regard all forms of life as sacred. They support the extermination of insect pests like flies and mosquitoes, and where necessary the control of dangerous animals like sharks and crocodiles. But attitudes to other species are ambivalent and critics might say hypocritical.

Rightly or wrongly, most humanists haven't become vegetarians, called for the cessation of all experiments on animals or demanded the closure of all zoos and circuses. But they've advocated other aspects of animal liberation. These include banning their inhumane slaughter to produce kosher or halal meat; reforming factory farming; avoiding their use, wherever possible, in medical and, above all, cosmetics research; banning all cruel sports.

Historically, freethinkers were prominent in agitation that led to outlawing bull and bear baiting. From its inception in 1924 secularists supported the League Against Cruel Sports. In the 1960s the NSS separately protested against the widespread illegal or legal sports of cock-fighting, hare coursing, fox and stag hunting. In retrospect, it's surprising the society had less to say about shooting game birds, and virtually nothing about recreational fishing.

Since that time, pressure from secularists and others has made some progress in advancing the cause of animals. Illegal cockfighting has been driven to remoter locations and probably rarer occurrences, and mechanical hares have replaced real ones in greyhound racing. A notable success was the outlawing of hunting with hounds in 2006. But political correctness and bowing

to "religious sensibilities" have stifled reform of the ritual Jewish and Muslim slaughter of animals, though some modification has allegedly occurred.

21: Censorship

Most secularists believe adults should have the fullest access to opinions, however wrongheaded, and information, however disturbing. The only exceptions are revelations of military secrets and maliciously untrue defamatory libel. Like other people of goodwill, all secularists strongly support laws against the production of gruesome or paedophiliac material involving or directed at children.

The main tool of censorship is libel under the common law and later under statute law. There are four recognised kinds:

(a) defamatory

Britain has some of the strictest laws in the world; "laws which, moreover, seem designed not so much to save innocent citizens from traducement as unconvicted scoundrels from exposure" (*Broadcasting, Brainwashing, Conditioning*, 1972). Indeed, under the (obsolescent) common law offence of criminal libel the yardstick was "the greater the truth the greater the libel", on the basis that exposed rascals were more likely to cause a breach of the peace than were traduced honest citizens. Civil libel has remained and flourished, almost always brought by a living person against the alleged libeller, who may be the author, publisher, printer or seller, or all four. Unless hostility to the author is the main motivation, the plaintiff chooses to name the persons or organisations with the most money. An entire print run can be pulped, or expensively unbound and rebound, if one paragraph is claimed to be defamatory. As the outcome of defamation actions is usually uncertain and the publisher may decline to withdraw the book, a plaintiff may issue as injunction (known as a "stop writ") to prevent distribution pending a court case which may not in fact be brought; but this writ involves some costs and, in many cases, loss of topicality for the publisher. If the case is brought and won by the plaintiff, the defendant faces massive costs incurred by both parties and damages out of all proportion to any harm caused to the plaintiff, or alleged to be caused.

Unflattering spoken material may also be proceeded against as slander. It's less common or costly to defend than libel, and usually actual damage has to be shown. Unfortunately, attempts to equate the two seem more likely to remove damage from slander than to introduce it to libel. Though broadcasts are spoken, because of their wide circulation defamation here is deemed to be libel.

Since the 1960s "truth" and "public interest" have been established as defences, but they're not absolute and the latter definition is vague and sometimes hard to establish. Secularists and other libertarians continue to talk most about the ensuing censorship issues, which almost always involve public prosecutions, but what authors and publishers most dread is defamation.

(b) seditious

For centuries "high treason" was a common-law offence against the state, while "petty treason" - later called "murder" - was against an individual, usually a patron. In the 18th century, statute law was marshalled to fortify the common law. From 1795 to 1869 a mesh of stamp duties, three "taxes on knowledge" (1815), "Six Acts" (1819) and three overlapping "Security Laws" (1819-30) was in force. Their repeal, with the exception of the Criminal Libel Act 1819, came after successful flouting by Charles Bradlaugh and earlier freethinkers. Libertarian joy was short-lived, however, for in 1889 the first Official Secrets Act was passed. It was used to prosecute traitorous - or indiscreet - government employees and the recipients of their leaks following publication of anything the government arbitrarily declared to be an "official secret". Often it wasn't a genuine military secret but a "classified" document exposing official mismanagement or some illegal planning the government was trying to cover up. In the Cold War spy hysteria of the 1960s, successors to this act were major curbs on freedom.

Despite protests by Liberty, the NSS and other bodies, this legislation remains in force though its overt use has declined. Its covert use is as insidious as ever.

(c) obscene

Like "profanity" in the ancient world, "obscenity" originally suggested desecration of a temple or a religious rite. Gradually the term was extended to the arts. In Britain there was an old common-law offence of "conspiring to corrupt public morals", and while the charge could still be brought in the 1960s - and was, among others, against the publisher of a *Ladies Directory* in 1961 - it had been largely supplanted by prosecutions under Libel Acts (1843 and 1845) and then Obscene Publications Acts (1857 and 1939). Following a court judgement in R vs. Hicklin (1868) the offence came to mean the issue of material (art or literature) or staging of drama (theatre, radio or TV) with a tendency to "deprave and corrupt" vulnerable people exposed, or likely to be exposed, to it. Such people could be women, children or (lower) social classes. Police, the judiciary and pious complainants were, of course, immune to such taint.

The Freethinker and the NSS noted that the big prosecutions tended to name serious works, especially those giving information about sex, contraception and venereal diseases, rather than commercial pornography (literally, writing about harlots); but most secularists contended that even worthless material not involving children should be available to those who wanted it. Naturally, they preferred to defend works of literary, artistic or scientific interest or merit, and these became defences under the 1959 Act. The opportunity to participate actively in the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* case was missed, but the Society was involved both publicly and privately in defending other prosecuted works during the 1960s. These included *Fanny Hill* (1964), *Last Exit*

to Brooklyn (1966) and *Early Morning* (1968). In 1970 there were *Oh! Calcutta*, *The School Kids OZ* and *Council of Love.*

In the early and mid-sixties, before plays even hit the boards, their scripts had to be vetted by the Lord Chamberlain. Hoping (mistakenly) to escape this pre-censorship, producers formed little theatre clubs with necessarily small audiences. More corrosively, they exercised self-censorship for the mainstream theatre. Secularists and a few liberal Christians started or supported reform bodies to oppose Christian fundamentalist ones, which were pushing "purity" in literature, stage drama, radio and television, or proactively to promote liberalism in the liberal arts. Chief among these agencies for reform were TRACK, the Cosmo Croup, Defence of Literature and the Arts Society, Freedom of Vision and Free Art. It must be conceded that some older secularists, perhaps still bearing the baggage of Puritanism or prudery from their religious or Marxist past, opposed these initiatives.

The Obscene Publications Act 1964, which made possession as well as publication of "obscene" material an offence, was a retrograde step involving gross invasions of privacy; but, under pressure, parliament did pass some reforming measures. By the Theatres Act 1968 the Lord Chamberlain lost his pre-censorship role and the Attorney General could refuse permission for private prosecution. Under the common law, however, these remained alive.

Little has changed subsequently, save that the bar has been raised in response to community standards. Four-letter words are now not only common but in some works *de rigueur.*

(d) blasphemous

Historically this libel has often been linked with sedition or obscenity in prosecutions. Though it purports to be an offence against Almighty God, he is generally deemed able to punish offenders with thunderbolts from heaven. So the test of blasphemy has become the effect of impiety on human surrogates, with the implication that a breach of the peace may occur.

To protect both divine and human sensibilities, a number of blasphemy acts were passed down the ages; Sacrament Act 1547, Acts of Uniformity 1548 and 1558-9, Blasphemy Act 1697, Profane Oaths Act 1745 and Criminal Libel Act 1819. The 1697 statute was particularly outrageous in that it was directed against a simple expression of opinion by anyone brought up as a Christian who “by writing, printing, teaching, or advised speaking, denies the Christian religion to be true, or the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be of Divine authority". This is analogous to the specially harsh view of apostasy within Islam. The other blasphemy acts and the common law presupposed some element of ribaldry.

By the 1960s the 1697 Act was obsolescent, but it remained a source of affront to freethinkers and embarrassment to officialdom, since any theologian of repute and some well-known clerics

were as guilty as hell. Thus it took relatively little secularist action to secure its repeal and that of the Profane Oaths Act by the Criminal Law Act 1967. But the other blasphemy acts and the common law remained in force.

Subsequently, civil libertarians have joined secularists like Nicolas Walter in agitating against the whole notion of blasphemy, especially as it related to Christianity only. Not surprisingly, in recent years Muslims have echoed this point and, motivated by Sharia law, militants are now proving more zealous than Christians in calling for the prosecution of heterodox or satirical material.

Offence

"It is true that there is sometimes as much dispute over what is seditious, blasphemous or heretical as over what is obscene or indecent, and the central issue of whether or not the dissemination of ideas should be regulated is in one sense independent of the nature or scope of the ideas. Yet once definitions are out of the way, direct political and religious censorship is largely the suppression of what is 'against the government' or 'against true religion.'" (my *Questions of Censorship*, 1973).

A disturbing new "offence" is “offence". It too is being invoked especially by Muslims. Because most of them are non-Caucasian, they took heart from well-intentioned clauses against "incitement to race hatred" in the Race Relations Acts 1965 and 1968, the Theatres Act 1968 and numerous United Nations, European and British protocols, charters, conventions and commissions on human rights.

However unsatisfactory dictionary and legal definitions of defamation, official secrets, obscenity, indecency and blasphemy may be, at least they *have* definitions. "Causing hatred of" or "giving offence to” people generically on account of their religious views raises a very different issue. It's entirely subjective. Anyone can claim to be hated or offended by anyone or anything, and who can dispute it? The problem arises when devout people equate themselves or their race with their beliefs. Unfortunately, they're often supported in their complaints by a motley of agnostics, postmodernists and nothingarians, all succumbing to political correctness. Appealing to "community standards" in the wider population is the only defence open to defendants.

22: Sunday Freedom

To distinguish themselves from practising Jews and to commemorate the resurrection of Christ, the early Christians opted for Sunday instead of Saturday as their holy day, though many continued to call it the Sabbath. That made it a holy day in the Jewish tradition, with severe penalties for anyone exceeding essential activity. Entertainment, sport, commerce, trade and industry were specifically banned (with exceptions to enable the faithful to attend church). In the early 1960s the potential organisers of such activities were strangely silent until the NSS, notably through William McIlroy's battles with the Lord's Day Observance Society, galvanised them into supportive action. Secularists Lord Willis, John Parker and William Ramling wrote pamphlets like Willis's *Let's Make Sundays Brighter* (1966) and introduced Sunday Entertainments Bills 1966, 1969 and 1970 to Parliament. All this activity bore fruit with the passage of the Sunday Theatre Act and Sunday Cinema Act, both 1972.

Subsequently, Sunday freedom has gradually been extended by legislation and regulations to organised sport, hotels, manufacturing and retailing. So extensive and popular has this liberation of Sunday become that (by contrast with some other secular-humanist successes) it's inconceivable that the clock could ever be put back by religious fundamentalists.

Conclusion

The flood of political and legal reforms inspired by libertarian secularism in the 1960s and early 1970s was unsustainable. Indeed it was likely that a clerical "counter-reformation" would emerge. And it did. Secularists have responded with a counter-counter-reformation led by Terry Sanderson as NSS president and Keith Porteous Wood as long-serving executive director. Terry observes: "Amid all this flurry of religio-political hyperactivity, the words 'secularism' and 'atheism' have become conflated, as religious propagandists try hard to make both into words of insult here in Britain as they have in the USA" (NSS Annual Report for 2007). Regrettably true. Yet the demonisation of these words is testimony to their currency and increasing support in the community at large.

Once taboo save in dedicated freethought circles, "atheism" has in recent years burst into public consciousness. Not only has Barry Duke, editor of the stimulating *Freethinker*, introduced a subtitle of "the voice of atheism since 1881", but books on this theme by, among others, NSS honorary associates Richard Dawkins, A. C. Grayling and Christopher Hitchens have become bestsellers, and impressive modern reference books like Bill Cooke's *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism* (2006) and *The New Encyclopaedia of Unbelief* (2007), edited by Tom Flynn, set out the whole history and scope of secular humanism.

"Secular" is now seen as probably the principal plank of the broad freethought movement and the NSS has become a prominent and respected affiliate of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which has conferred on Keith its 2007 award for Distinguished Service to Humanism. Emphasising the forward-looking direction of the NSS, Terry operates its popular website www.secularism.org.uk

Secularists don't claim to have answers to every scientific, economic, environmental, social or moral problem in the world. But if we don't always know the right answers, we have a pretty clear understanding of the wrong ones.

Much has been achieved over the past 50 years. In a world burdened by recrudescent fundamentalist Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism much more remains to be done. As in *100 years of Freethought* (1967) I conclude this survey with a message of dedication: it is "THE END WITHOUT ENDING".