

FREETHINKER

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TRIBUTE TO AN AGNOSTIC

FOR ALL ITS PREACHING about the nobility of motherhood, children, and its own special "virgin" birth, Christianity has not been generous to children born in what it labels "sin" or to their mothers. **The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child** was founded in 1918 by the agnostic Lettice Fisher. Appalled by the death rate of illegitimate children compared to that of children born in wedlock, Mrs H. A. L. Fisher (as she was more often called) decided to do something about it. Until then, the illegitimate child had had no one to speak for him.

On Tuesday, 4th October, 1966, the society had its AGM, with two admirable speakers, the Minister of Health and Miss Katharine Whitehorn. Mr Kenneth Robinson made it clear that his is no barren official interest, but a humane approach to the problem of illegitimacy and unmarried parents, which must have been warmly welcomed by all those who are directly concerned with the tragedies and sheer hard work involved. He stressed the particular difficulties both of the under twenties and of older women, whether they be unmarried mothers or the mothers of babies conceived in extra-marital relations. He pointed out that although the NHS services are available to *all*, far too few such mothers-to-be take advantage of them, and the infant mortality rate of 28.5 per 1,000 illegitimate births as compared to 17.5 legitimate is sad proof of this. One child in every seven is conceived outside marriage, and one in fourteen is born illegitimate. These are the skeleton facts beneath the body of anxiety, fear, irresponsibility and practical problems in which we are all involved.

The word "bastard" is not just a term of abuse, it is still the label of the deprived-through-no-fault-of-their-own. Under feudal law a bastard was denied legal rights, although the state of bastardy did not prevent those who inherited well from becoming Top People—as William the Conqueror proved. Although there was pressure in the 13th century for a child born to parents who married later to be legitimised, this did not actually become law in this country until 1926, and the law was further amended in

1959. Amongst all the hardships suffered by the illegitimate today, it is revealing to note that they even need special dispensation to be accepted as students for the Roman Catholic priesthood and they may not become major superiors in religious orders. Even if legitimised, they can never become RC abbots, bishops or cardinals. And so the churches continue to judge, condemn, and visit the "sins" of the fathers upon children.

At the NCUMC meeting there was no mention of "sin"; the whole attitude was rather one of kindly and practical realism.

After the Minister's call for a more enlightened social climate, with more help, not only for the mother and her child, but also for the grandparents (who so often bring up the baby) and the father, he emphasised the need for better Mother and Baby Homes. The Agnostics Adoption Bureau (now Society) received evidence of just how grim these religious institutions can be, with nuns inflicting physical exhaustion on the girls as punishment, right up to the birth, and then doing all they could to prevent the girls from keeping their babies. Accommodation is a vital problem. Authoritarian institutions may well be superseded by the sort of foster-homes sought after by our own society from its beginning three years ago, when Humanists were offering to take mothers-to-be into their family. And flatlets on the Scandinavian pattern are now being organised for those mothers who want to keep their babies.

Mr Robinson stressed that the facts of pre-marital sexual experience must be accepted, but that all children need two parents. Planned parenthood is an essential, as it promotes happiness, while ignorance about it can lead to all kinds of misery, including delinquency and crime.

Miss Whitehorn spoke with the same gusto and kindly good sense with which her Sunday *Observer* columns abound, and she brought humour into a subject which is all too often deprived of it. She quoted a journalist friend who, for all her more obvious problems during her own unmarried pregnancy, resented the pervading solemnity as much as the fact that income tax forms make no provision for a situation which she had to explain every time she filled one in. Whereas 100 years ago the headlines were about the Unmarried Child and her Mother, Miss Whitehorn said, today we recognise that we are all of the same species; unmarried pregnancy is no respecter of class and can, as it were, happen "to a Bishop". The root of the trouble, in her view, is the lack of contraceptive advice for the single woman (a subject the Minister said he would avoid), and also the fact that women so often actually *want* to have babies and will, whether they are married or not, reject the idea of contraception.

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Perhaps the most enlightened suggestion of the afternoon was her suggestion that quite young children can, and should, be taught the facts of birth-control so that they are absorbed with the facts of birth and parenthood, long before the child is actually physically concerned. She suggested, too, that in reply to those who groan about the illegitimacy rate "in spite of all the contraceptives about", one can point out that we have only had effective contraception for some 50 years, and that 2,000 years of preaching chastity has not been exactly successful. Since Freud, said Miss Whitehorn, there have been no very neat answers about human morals. **We are never going to get enough forethought in sex totally to prevent conception**

amongst those who don't want pregnancies. Contraceptives must be fielded at cover point, she said, by a greater acceptance of medically controlled abortion.

During tea I approached a group of scowling Salvation Army women. I praised the meeting, and asked if they approved of abortion law reform. "No", they said scowling still more, "we do *not*". For them I suppose the meeting had been evidence of a deplorable and irresponsible condonation of "sin", while for me it was a triumph of all that secularism has achieved against the forces of superstition and bigotry. Whether the Christians like it or not, facts *are* being faced nowadays, and compassion is growing as the Christian faith declines.

AN IMPRESSION OF THE EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

Kenneth J. Ead

FOR THE Exclusive Brethren, or the Plymouth Brethren as they were more commonly called before the war, there is no death! For the "Saints", who are washed in the blood of the Lamb and have accepted the death of Jesus as the one death to defeat death for all time, Eternity has already begun.

The whole of the dogma surrounding this sect is built on the assumption that these selected—these chosen few—are not only washed whiter than white, but are also dirt-repellent and the ultimate in purity. Even the thoughts of the old Brothers are virginal, and young maidens model themselves on King Solomon's Bride in the "Song of Songs". The enjoyment of Heaven, though necessarily watered down by their worldly environment, is an ever-present fact with them, and though the sinful flesh, which in this life drags down the purified spirit and limits its scope, is something which has to be constantly fought; it cannot tarnish the sanctified spirit. That spirit which, "cleansed" and born again, just longs to be released from the earthly body which imprisons it and precludes its full enjoyment of the everlasting life which has already begun.

From this dogma stems their complete rejection of the need to play a part in local or national government. They do not vote, and though they obey the law of the land, rendering unto Caesar, etc., it is immaterial who governs, or how, just so long as they can worship undisturbed. They are just passing through this world and have no part in it. As much as they concern themselves with this world, so is their conception of the next frustrated. Dependent upon their appreciation of Christ, his finished work and his Glory, which they gain during their sojourn in this "Wilderness", so proportionately will their enjoyment of heaven be conditioned throughout Eternity.

I remember thinking as a boy that they had much in common with the Pharisees of Christ's time. Though not all rich, there used to be a general air of comfort about the Brethren, and though (a necessity for all religions) there were the poor, we were in the minority and the recipients of many good works which no doubt laid up treasure in heaven at a pretty good rate of interest for the donors. Suffice it to say, however, that a more smug, conceited, self-centred lot could hardly ever have existed. This is fair enough with grown-ups, seeking refuge from the world, but the effect of their indoctrination on their offspring is to make children unable and unsuitable to compete in the outside world. It also often leads to the break up homes and to the rejection of children by

their parents, husbands by their wives, brothers by sisters and so on.

Saintly suffering

As with Catholics and Communists, each newborn child is another worshipper and an added strength to keep the system going. Sex is not for enjoyment, but a means to an end. Tobacco, beer, cinemas and all other worldly pleasures are barred, and everything which might arouse fleshly lusts or titillate the senses. Though it is necessary to keep the body fit so that it can carry the new-born man through this Vale of Tears, it is also "Saintly" to suffer pain and physical affliction so that the Spirit may be enriched thereby.

It is not sufficient to hold a religious conviction; it has to be the ruling factor in the lives of every member of the family. Unlike other beliefs which are held for convenience and as an insurance policy just in case a God turns up somewhere, the belief of the Exclusive Brethren is a fiery passion, burning fiercely in the bosoms of its exponents with a "Be saved or be damned" attitude unrivalled elsewhere.

It always appeared to me that there were an enormous lot of people who would never fit in anywhere else, but this of course would be understandable. They were "Saints". If there was a preponderance of ear-trumpets, walking sticks, and bald heads, and a general air of antiquity pervading the assembly, it fascinated me to think that, not only had Eternity begun for them but they had every appearance of having already "lived for ever".

The very real battle to escape the enslavement of mind brought about by this fearful religion covered years of my life when I should have been progressing in the material world and not fighting the myths of Supernaturalism.

PUBLIC DEBATE

THE SUNDAY OBSERVANCE LAWS

SPEAKERS

LORD WILLIS

HAROLD LEGERTON

General Secretary, Lord's Day Observance Society

CAXTON HALL, CAXTON STREET, LONDON, SW1

Nearest Underground: St James' Park

FRIDAY, 4th NOVEMBER, 7.30 p.m.

Organised by the National Secular Society

WOMEN ALONE

Anon.

JOHN DONNE stated a universal truth when he said, "No man is an island unto himself". We are all involved with one another. From our earliest infancy until we die, after the primal needs of food and warmth have been satisfied, our needs are social. For our happiness we need the security, warmth and response of human beings who love and need us and whom we in turn can love.

But thousands of women of all ages, in every large city of the world, are desperately fighting a secret daily battle to maintain an external image of cheerfulness and normality in circumstances which are unnatural and inhuman because they are completely contrary to this basic need. They exist in a half-world of frustration and emptiness, dragging on from day to day in a meaningless routine, in futile make-believe, with little incentive to carry on, and with fast-fading hopes of ever achieving even a modicum of the happiness and fulfilment they long for and dream of in every waking moment of their lives. I know because I am one of them.

The wall of silence

We surround ourselves by a wall of silence, not knowing how to find male companionship; afraid of the hurt and indignity of possible rejection. Anxious not to appear peculiar, we pass the days, weeks and years on a sham, superficial non-communicating level. The crying need for mature, honest, adult self-expression and understanding is repressed as much as possible, in order to conform to the conventional norm—the casual, very civilised, non-emotional Conventional Woman.

Although the Victorian idea that women don't enjoy sex, they simply endure it, has been blown away years ago, and people are beginning to face the fact that women have sexual needs, in our taboo-ridden society a lot of nonsense is still spoken about this subject. It is a fallacy to think that as soon as a woman is divorced, separated or widowed, her sexual desire automatically disappears. On the contrary, with her need for the tenderness, the attention and the sense of security that only a loving partner can provide, her sexual desire often increases, since her emotional needs are so bound up with her physical ones.

Recently BBC2 had a programme called "Women Alone" in which lonely women were interviewed. The stark fact that came out of this was that the lack of sex life is the most painful deprivation that these women have to endure. Some said they just sat around in pubs till "they picked up a man". Others said they just did without. The more sensitive, inhibited woman shrinks with horror from the idea of "picking up" a man. With no outlet for relief the price they pay is tension, nervousness, insomnia, and misery.

People try to cope with frustration in various ways. Some get vicarious thrills from magazine stories and cinema shows; some find partial sublimation in making a circle of women friends. But to move exclusively in a woman's world becomes boring and unsatisfying. Sooner or later there is the cry of "the need of a world of men for me". Some, of course, form homosexual relationships. Others join clubs in the hope of meeting congenial men. Whether one meets them there is, of course, largely a matter of "the luck of the draw". There are many lonely men in our cities and sometimes two people meet "and it just clicks". There are, however, individualists who fight shy of group activities of any sort and do not join clubs. Others spend their time in a rush of little chores to fill

their days. The more constructive forget their personal troubles in works of charity or progressive causes. Few women find their jobs so absorbing or interesting that they find sublimation there with, perhaps, the exception of some professional women.

There is of course the Humanist Letter Network (International) which serves the useful purpose of putting like-minded people into contact with one another by post. Here is a practical way of tackling the problem. *Vivre the Network!* But, whichever path women take in the attempt to fill their lives, there is still a hiatus if it is a maleless life, and it seems that with all our advances in social science, we have not yet found the answer to this problem of women alone. The fact is that there is no complete sublimation.

Dr Alex Comfort has written:

"An increasing number of people who no longer accept the religious dogma on which the advocacy of abstinence was based, have attempted to live in conformity with the custom of their society by the sublimation of their sexual desires. It seems clear that while some transference of sexual energy to other fields may occur, a complete repudiation of sexual activity is almost as unlikely in practice as a complete repudiation of food and that the products of such repudiation are more likely to be pathological than constructive. . . . The evidence in most animals, even those which exhibit only infrequent sexual activity, is that the effects of chronic enforced abstinence are harmful and tend to result in manifestations closely similar to human anxiety."

Virtue or just apathy?

Kinsey has said:

"A great many people have tried to establish their sexual lives on the assumption that sublimation is possible and the outcome desirable. Fundamentally apathetic persons are the ones who are often most moral (conforming to the mores), most insistent that it is a simple matter to control sexual response and most likely to offer themselves as examples of the possibility of the diversion of probably non-existent sexual energies. But such inactivity is no more sublimation than blindness, deafness or other perceptive defects."

When a subject is shrouded in so much secrecy that few people are frank about this aspect of their lives, it is rather difficult to know whether the cheerful little widow next door who has lived for years alone, or the spinster shrivelling away in the service of a widowed parent, or the regular church-goer with her happiness in her religion and her church organisations, really miss the love and companionship of men. We can't know. But Humanists who do not seek to evade facts and who do not bluff themselves will admit that "we are created male and female" and that the union of male and female is the ultimate joy and fulfilment in life. There is no substitute for this basic biological need.

Kit Mouat, who has said it all so much better than I ever could, starts her article on "The Problem of Loneliness" by saying "Loneliness is a major and inescapable human problem, if not in our experience, then in our responsibility to others. There is no automatic preventive, but there is nevertheless a great deal we can do about it."

Let's hope that in a saner, more rational society, something will be done about this problem along with the many others facing us.

[*The Humanist Letter Network (International)* is especially anxious to hear from middle-aged men and young women Secular-Humanists, Atheists, etc. Kit Mouat would also like to hear from readers who are prepared to make personal contact with Freethinkers, Humanists, in their own locality. Write, please, to Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.]

NEWS AND NOTES

IT IS GOOD TO SEE that the "Humanist Lobby" is now going into action with regards to the **Church Schools Bill**. Since the beginning of this year the National Secular Society (apart from its continuous campaign for secular education) has been holding public meetings in protest against the Bill, and, as reported, a deputation which included Miss Brigid Brophy was given a fifty-minute interview by the Minister of Education and Science last April. Miss Brophy broadcast on the subject, and was also one of the 16 eminent Secular-Humanists who signed a letter to *The Times* which brought forth a lively response. This was a letter which Professor Ayer refused to sign. While wishing David Pollock (Gen. Secretary of the "Lobby") success, and hoping that he receives all co-operation from the Movement, we also hope that he will bring himself up to date with what has already been done, and acknowledge it in future "hand outs". There is no doubt that we all need to do a great deal more.

"A place for everything" but which place for protests?

NINE PEOPLE were arrested, remanded in custody and refused bail for heckling the Prime Minister about Britain's support of American policy in Vietnam; or rather for heckling him in "a place of worship". Bail is usually only refused when there is a likelihood of the accused absconding or interfering with witnesses.

One step backwards

WHILE we apathetic democrats stumble towards reform of our laws of abortion, Rumania has become the first Communist country to ban abortion (*Guardian*, Oct. 6). Five workers with the average age of 20 have been sentenced to death in Russia for killing a local deputy police chief. And how, in either of those two countries, does one set about starting a campaign for the abolition of capital punishment or the return of a more humane law of abortion?

Censorship again

JEAN STRAKER (not the woman I thought he was) is fighting a long but efficient battle against the seizure of 600 negatives which have been pronounced "obscence" because they ignore the law by which the nude human body in photographs must be "touched up" so that no body hair is shown. It is one of our more ludicrous laws! Personally I found the banned examples of Jean Straker's work aesthetically much more pleasing than his rather trivial pursed-lipped pin-ups who are (in my view) as remote from the substance of the "Female" as an Army recruiting poster is from the essential "Male". But good luck to him anyway, with his intention to petition the European Convention on Human Rights for the return of his negatives. My sympathies are *not*, however, with the Romford magistrates who have pronounced that the cards depicting torture, war, and general cruelty sold in bubble-gum packets are *not* obscene. Even if we are in favour of abolishing censorship of the arts (including radio and TV), we may well have the most serious doubts about allowing a free-for-all production and sale of horror comics and cards to which children may be subjected without even the most responsible parents knowing about it. Of course, if the bubble-gum cards depicted scenes of sexual love (even heterosexual), and if Jean Straker were displaying untouched photographs of the backside of a tank, it would all be a very different matter. I don't know about Russian nudes or bubble-gum, but in future a political joke may land a Russian in prison for up to three years according to the *Guardian*. Where *can* sanity be found?

One down for the Romans

MONSIEUR HENRI DE MONPEZAT, the French diplomat who is to marry Princess Margrethe of Denmark, is to swap his Roman Catholic for the Lutheran faith. The *Catholic Herald* writes in its leader (Oct 7), "Since the Church does not impose its views on the State" (the reporter must be joking) "why should the State not release its stranglehold on the Church?" Can anyone remember the Catholics deploring the fact that the Princess Irene of the Netherlands became a Roman Catholic in order to marry the Spanish Prince of Bourbon Parma? But of course that was "one up" to the Vatican.

Crumbs from a religious corporation's table

ALTHOUGH Woman's Hour received some fifty letters last March asking for more Humanist items, it was October 18th before another Humanist spoke, and Bet Cherrington described her Humanist attitude to suffering to Leslie Smith. On November 9th Professor A. J. Ayer and Sister Martina will be discussing "Conscience", but although this adds one more to the very short list of Humanists who have been allowed to present their views on Woman's Hour, it also adds one more to the very long list of Christians who so frequently give theirs.

THE EDITOR of the FREETHINKER was very grateful, however, to be invited recently by the BBC African Service to record her paper's views about Rhodesia. She was given the opportunity to make it quite clear that although this paper is not *party* political, it *is* dedicated in its opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, political as well as religious, and therefore views Rhodesia with its totalitarian régime white supremacy, racialism, educational restrictions and censorship, with the gravest concern.

BLOCK 'B' BRIXTON

W. Bynner

IN AUGUST 1961 the Committee of 100 launched a major effort in support of Bertrand Russell, who was then in Brixton prison. My first experience of a police cell was overnight in East London, where the blankets smelt strongly of feet. This reminded me of my army days and of nights spent sleeping in the gunpits during the blitz. The fine of £2 at Marlborough Street remains unpaid to this day, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

When the police called about it, it was only to enquire in a friendly way whether I intended to pay up or not. They were quite satisfied with the answer, "no", and went away again. Before leaving they told me, somewhat surprisingly, that some of their number felt the same as we did, adding, "We've got children, too, you know!"

I was arrested again in December outside the American base at Ruislip. It was rather difficult to get myself arrested, as the police merely dumped me on the pavement twice; then I joined a small group sitting in the road, away from the main body. We were all bundled into vans. Whereas in August we had been ushered into the dock two by two, this time I went in alone, having refused to give my name and address to the Court. With my two friends, I was remanded in custody for six days, and taken to a cell in "B" Block of Brixton Prison.

I have unpleasant recollections of being kept locked up in that cell for two days, the door only being unlocked at mealtimes, and in the morning for necessary occasions. Food was brought to the door and eaten in the cell. By Monday some of the initial hostility had worn off, and by volunteering to work (washing up dishes and scrubbing corridors with a fellow prisoner) I was able to get outside my cell during working hours. I learned something of my

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OH, HELL!

F. H. Snow

A GREAT NUMBER of people today disbelieve in hell. They are not necessarily irreligious, but revolt against the idea that there is a place of everlasting suffering, for which there is a possible chance of their becoming eligible. Most of these rejecters of hell still believe in a real God and a real heaven. Why?—they just don't know. However, it doesn't hurt them to believe in God and heaven. So long as there isn't a real hell they can't come to much harm after death. And, besides, so many people are of the opinion that hell, if anywhere, is within one, that they find it easy to believe so.

A great number of people still believe in a literal hell, with Satan as chief jailer, and fire to burn those who go there. Until fairly recently, this belief was held by almost all members of the Christian churches. In my young days, to question it was regarded as atheistic. Hell was as indubitable as heaven, to at least the overwhelming majority of Christians. The Lord Jesus had spoken, in unmistakable terms, of the furnace his Father had lit for the eternal torture of the damned. To Roman Catholics, this roasting place has appealed with special force as God's instrument of justice and been used for the intimidation of sinners.

It was with astonishment, therefore, that I saw an article in the Catholic *Universe* of December 31st last, by a Father St John, headlined: "Hell: Loss of God, yes; but not endless physical suffering". I knew that, for some while, the fiery aspect of hell had been left unmentioned in Catholic preachings, as well as in those of important Protestant sects. The great bulk of Christendom was engaged in surreptitious abandonment of the old-fashioned inferno, which offended modern thought too dangerously. That its rejection should now be openly advocated by a representative of that most stubborn upholder of horrific theology, the Roman Church, greatly intrigued me, and it was with avid interest that I read the article, the purport of which was that the pains of hell were caused by the sense of separation from God. Nothing more.

Divine confusion?

The question immediately sprang to my mind: If Jesus meant that, why had he not said so? If his meaning was that the pangs of a soul through exclusion from God would be as terrible as though it were being burnt by fire, as our priestly writer inferred, why did he not make that clear? He had plenty of opportunity to do so, but, during his many talks with disciples and others, uttered nothing contrary to his assertions of hell's physically-agonising flames. According to the Gospel of Matthew (13, 40-42) Jesus said:

"As therefore the tares are burned in the fire, so shall it be at the end of the world. All things that do iniquity shall be cast into a furnace of fire", and in Matthew (18, 8), "Wherefore if thy hand or foot offend thee, cut them off; it is better to enter life maimed or halt than having two hands or feet to be cast into everlasting fire."

Quite obviously, "cast into" does not favour Father St John's supposition. To speak of throwing a person, soul or whatever one may term a candidate for Satan's domain, into a state of separation from God, is to be guilty of a ludicrous malapropism. Besides, it may be safely asserted that Christ would not take pains to so cloak his meaning that it would be completely misunderstood. Had he been the divine person Christendom claims, he would not have vanished from earth leaving his followers in a false belief—one, moreover, that would last throughout many centuries.

In Matthew (25, 41), we have Jesus, referring to Judgment Day, declaring:

"Then shall he (the supreme adjudicator, God) say unto them on his left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

To me, the preparation of a state of separation from God, as a punishment for the devil and his satellites, is the strangest of strange things. For that's what hell's fire means for Lucifer and cronies, if Father St John is to be taken seriously. The reverend author gives no hint of real fire for devils. And I would like to ask him why, as Satan and company have had the privilege of roaming outside hell since being toppled from heaven, what is the object of that domicile? If they suffer from a sense of separation from God, hell is everywhere they happen to be. A further point—if devils can suffer the metaphorical fire envisaged by Father St John, without being contained in the place called hell, why has unsaved humanity to be confined there? One could suffer loss of God anywhere. The poor wretches who found themselves excluded from heaven couldn't gate-crash into the divine presence any more than devils. The very establishment of a "place" for eternal suffering makes nonsense of Father St John's "loss of God" substitute for hell-fire.

Human expediency

I approached the Catholic Enquiry Bureau on the subject of the article, and was informed that the Church had never taught as a dogma that people burn in hell. The Church had never defined the precise nature of the fire referred to by Christ, but as fire cannot affect spirits, which the disembodied souls were that went to hell, it implied suffering resultant on loss of God. In reply, I suggested that God's almightiness ensured that he could burn spirits, if he wished, and that, anyway, Jesus had said (Matthew 10, 28), "Fear him that can destroy both body and soul in hell". I pressed for an admission that, although the Church had not defined the nature of the fire mentioned by Christ, St Thomas Aquinas and many other of her "pillars" had believed it to be literal, and that the Church had sanctioned that belief by its millions of members from its earliest days. The Bureau went silent on the matter.

Of course there is no such thing as hell fire. We could not agree more about anything, but we detest and condemn Catholic Church's misrepresentation of the statements of the Christ she holds up to the world as the essence of truth, in order to put upon them meanings that serve her in her fight to keep her superstitious doctrines alive in the minds of the unreasoning.

Of course there is no hell or eternal suffering whatsoever, and no Granddaddy of a God, as the Bishop of Woolwich aptly puts it, but secularism will have to work mightily to rid the people of such delusions, and must relentlessly expose the unscrupulous sophistry by means of which the Catholic Church fosters them.

From F. R. GRIFFITH, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

DEFINITION OF HUMANISM ON A POSTCARD

"HUMANISM" is the philosophy that puts the happiness, welfare and self-realisation of the human individual in the context of a world community at the centre of its concern. Humanism is also concerned about the survival and improvement of the human species.

[Your own definition in not more than 150 words is invited. Please send it to the Editor.]

THE CASE FOR ATHEISM

Sune Hjorth

Sune Hjorth (b. 1923) is a Swedish teacher, who was brought up in a Baptist home but has been a convinced atheist since his adolescence.

THEISM in a broad and unsophisticated sense may be classified as a kind of animism. Like animists in general, theists believe in mystical entities called "spirits". They believe in the "souls" of men, in "angels" and "devils", and above all in the Supreme Spirit called "God", about whom they have read in "holy" books.

Is there any factual evidence whatsoever for the existence of "spirits"? From a scientific point of view the answer is no. Nobody has ever been able to prove he has seen or heard or otherwise directly perceived one, nor have any traces of their alleged activities been established. Mystics claiming to have had "divine revelations" have obviously misinterpreted their hallucinations. So called "miraculous healings" mostly turn out to be no healings at all on close examination, or else they have their natural explanations. For lack of evidence alone we can safely assume that "spirits" are only figments of the imagination.

Still more important is the fact that theistic-animistic beliefs are not compatible with scientific knowledge in general or with well established natural laws in particular. Biblical stories about the Father in Heaven listening to human prayers and his Son exorcising evil spirits and performing other miracles on earth are quite as superstitious as tales about Santa Claus and witches riding on magic broomsticks. They are in fact so ridiculous that no sane grown-up person would hesitate for a second to reject them unless he had been exposed to religious indoctrination and propaganda from early childhood.

The progress of science has revealed to us the absurdity of outmoded animistic conceptions. Nature is not controlled by any mystical "spirits" who must be exorcised or appeased by prayers and sacrifices, it works according to mathematical laws. There is no mystical entity within a human being which governs his body when he is alive and leaves it for an eternal life after his death. The "soul" is only the sum total of the functions of the brain, and these functions, which are to be identified with the electrochemical processes of the brain, cease for ever when we die.

There is no room for God in the modern scientific picture of the world. In the Middle Ages, when people believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and surrounded with crystal spheres on which the stars and planets were fixed, it was still possible to put the idea into their heads that the Almighty resided on top of the Sphere of the Fixed Stars. Since Galileo and his followers proved that there were no crystal spheres, as little remains of this celestial abode as of the grin of the Cheshire cat. No wonder that the Russian cosmonaut could report back from his space-ship that he saw neither God nor his angels!

The conception of the Supreme Spirit as a being existing somewhere has only been taught to simple people, in fact. Among themselves theologians have developed more subtle speculations. God is not "somewhere" but "everywhere", they say, and he also "transcends" our physical universe, existing "beyond" or "beneath" it as the "absolute" or "ultimate" reality. These statements, however, are completely meaningless.

Limits of the imagination

All meaningful language must somehow be related to human experience, but we cannot even imagine a being

which is not finite. Talking of an "infinite being", therefore, is nothing but nonsense, a misuse of language of the same kind as if we talked of a "square circle". Just as nonsensical is talking of a "transcendent being" or an "ultimate reality". Descriptive language cannot transcend the human experiences it serves to describe. If it does, the result is gibberish, and this is exactly what the theologians have produced.

The quality of theological thinking may be further elucidated by examining the dogma of the simultaneous goodness and omnipotence of God. Considering all the suffering and misery in the world, this dogma involves an obvious contradiction. If nothing ever happens against the will of God, then he must be an evil spirit, the world being as it is. There is no escape from this dilemma by talking of "human free will", as divine omnipotence is not compatible with human freewill. An almighty God is ultimately as responsible for the evil wills of men as for their evil deeds.

There are numerous contradictions of this sort in theological speculation: God loves human beings, and yet he is prepared to punish disbelievers with eternal hellfire; God is one, and yet he consists of three persons; Christ was divine, and yet human, and so on. Such contradictions do not seem to bother theologians very much, but rather add to the thrill of their "scientific" work. Their use of euphemistic terms such as "paradox" and "tension" whenever they deal with a contradiction, is typical.

Playing into the hands of the clerics

A critical examination of theistic beliefs and dogmas thus reveals their absurdity. If they are intelligible at all and do not contradict themselves, there is still not the slightest empirical evidence for them, and they are not even compatible with scientific knowledge. Under these circumstances it is rather astonishing that some free-thinkers should still make concessions to theism by refusing to reject its theses and saying they do not know whether they are true or not. Of course we know that they are false or meaningless, otherwise we should have to throw empirical knowledge to the winds. Christianity is an insult to human reason. By their apparent lack of conviction and by their too respectful attitude towards absurd doctrines, agnostics simply play into the hands of the clerics.

Theoretically the case for atheism is so strong that the intellectual honesty of those who make a profitable livelihood out of expounding the doctrines of theism seems rather problematic. Even if most Christians are sincere believers there are always those who must be suspected of exploiting the gullibility of uneducated people to their own advantage. If so, this makes it all the more urgent to promote the cause of atheism. By exposing religious superstition we may liberate the minds of our fellow citizens and make for a more enlightened and ethical society.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Items for insertion in this column must reach THE FREETHINKER office at least ten days before the date of publication.

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1. Telephone: HOP 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Letter Network (International): send s.a.e. to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs CRONAN, MCRAE and MURRAY.

Manchester Branch NSS, Platts Fields, 3 p.m. Car Park, Victoria Street, 8 p.m.: Messrs COLLINS DUGNAN, MILLS and WOOD.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOOR

Bromley Discussion and Social Group (14 Great Elms Road, Bromley), Friday, October 21st, 8 p.m.: Speaker, JOHN WESTERGAARDE (London School of Economics).

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester), Sunday, October 23rd, 6.30 p.m.: C. B. HOLLIDAY, "Further Impressions of the Soviet Union".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1), Sunday, October 23rd, 11 a.m.: Lord SORENSON, "Ethical Humanism"; Tuesday, October 25th, 6.30 p.m.: JOSHUA FOX, Dr ELEANOR MEARS, "A Synthesis on Sex".

South Place Sunday Concerts (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1), Sunday, October 23rd, 6.30 p.m.: Dartington String Quartet, Gillian Steel, Penelope Howard. Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Dvorak. Admission 3/-.

West Ham and District Branch NSS (Wanstead and Woodford Community Centre, Wanstead Green, E11). Meetings at 8 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month.

The Progressive League. Weekend Conference at High Leigh, Hoddesdon, Herts. Friday, November 4th to Sunday, November 6th. "Creativity in the Man-Woman Relationship". Full details from Mrs Joyce Coles, 120 Corringway, London, W.5.

BLOCK 'B' BRIXTON

(Continued from page 332)

neighbour's plight and did what I could to help him. His story would take up another article and I regret to say that I have lost touch with him; he may still be "inside" for a long spell. Another man I met there obligingly

"scoffed" the uneaten slices of thick bread which I could not eat myself; and he showed me a letter from his devoted wife, whom he clearly adored. These were the only two ordinary prisoners I got to know, except the "Trusty" who is in charge of the boot cupboard which served as the library. The only books seemed to be a few dog-eared and tattered remnants of Westerns, Deadwood Dicks and Lone Gulch Rangers. I wondered how the fastidious taste of my eminent predecessor, Bertrand Russell, had fared on such a scanty selection. By diligent searching however I managed to unearth *A History of England* by C. V. Wedgwood, which became my constant study for the rest of the week.

We were obliged to wear the prison uniform of grey denims, and to be photographed in the Governor's Office wearing a convict's number on a white cloth or card attached to the forearm, which had to be held horizontally across the body. Since I was not yet convicted of any offence I imagine the whole procedure was designed to intimidate as well as to humiliate the prisoner and was probably thoroughly illegal.

THE GREAT GOD MANGLE Oswell Blakeston

"CAN ANYONE in the class tell me the most significant attribute of the mangle?"

"Please, sir, that it goes clank, clank."

"And so it says to you something which seems profound because it is incomprehensible?"

"Please, sir, that it shakes everything in our home."

"And so fills you with awe?"

"Please, sir, that grandmother says it was so useful."

"And so makes you feel that it cares?"

"Please, sir, that the handle turns round and round."

"Ah, you can see the cosmic implication. Like the world, the mangle turns."

"Please, sir, why are you so interested in mangles?"

"Shall I tell you that . . . my mother's name was Mangle?"

"Oh, sir, you think there could be any connection with the mangle in my grandmother's house?"

"It is all very mysterious, my boy. I think often about virgin birth. I mean, how can we explain the mangles which turn up in attics and old abandoned sheds, without anyone knowing how it got there? Sometimes one is forced to believe that a mangle just materialised itself in an impossible place, such as an old gravel pit."

"Do you think, then, sir, there are lots of mangles we don't know about? Perhaps living in . . . catacombs with secret worshippers?"

"Strange cults, my boy, have often ripened in caves, and have then appeared in the market places as great religions. Now a statue of a mangle would surely be a majestic subject for some of our modern sculptors. Can you not imagine it dominating the central square of our town?"

"Please, sir, when my dad was shown over the old royal palace, he saw the royal mangle. On the ironwork, there was a crown."

"The king of kings . . ."

"Please, sir, ought we to inform the Minister?"

"Maybe . . . but maybe the hour has not yet come, although assuredly it will."

"Please, sir, may we have a holiday tomorrow for St Washing Day?"

"An excellent notion, my boy. It is good to revive memories of the old days of slavery in the new religion. One day I will reward you well for your piety. I mean one day you will be rewarded."

"Please, sir, can I leave the room?"

REVIEW

Ruth Hooker

Ruth Hooker was born and brought up in Alabama, USA, where her father was a Baptist minister. She has lived in this country for over 40 years.

The John Birch Society—Anatomy of a Protest (TAB-Beacon, 16s), by Allan Broyle, is a revision of a doctoral thesis submitted by the author in 1963 to the Graduate School of Boston University. In a preliminary note the author explains that "the major emphasis has been upon interviews (including the use of a questionnaire) with leaders, members and opponents of the John Birch Society, in many States and in various parts of the country". He "never sought to identify himself as a convert to the John Birch Society, but always clearly identified himself as a graduate student doing research".

The leader and founder of the Society is Robert Welch, and so I was curious why it does not bear his name. John Birch, it seems, represented, to Robert Welch, all that was finest and best in the youth of America, and the huge organisation Welch founded was named in honour of his hero.

McCarthyism before McCarthy

John Birch came from a fundamentalist family in Georgia who described themselves as "Bible-Believing Baptists". Finishing High School at the head of his class, John went on to the Southern Baptist Mercer College. One of his classmates remembers him "... as brilliant ... with a deep conviction and evangelistic passion. ... When he believed a thing he was absolutely unbending". Birch was convinced that several professors at Mercer were teaching heresy. With twelve other students he circulated charges of heresy against the professors, and was one of the star witnesses at the heresy hearing. The teachers were in fact exonerated of the charges, but one professor "never overcame the mortal wounds of the affair".

It was during his years at Mercer that Birch decided to become a missionary. He elected to go to China and began his work there in 1940. Two years later the USA and Japan were at war. Birch's knowledge of the Chinese people and the Chinese language gave him unique opportunities for intelligence work, and he was given the rank of captain. While leading a party of American, Chinese Nationalist and Korean officers and soldiers on a special mission into a "no man's land", he and his party were stopped by a band of Red Chinese. Exactly what happened is not clear, but it would seem that Captain Birch unwisely tried to bluff his way out of a difficult situation, that harsh words led to insults, insults to arrogance and finally the Red Chinese leader, in a fit of anger, shot Birch. Whether acting wisely or not, John Birch did die serving his country as best he knew how. He received two decorations—one posthumously, and there the story of his life would have ended but for Robert Welch, to whom the really important thing about the death of John Birch was that he had been murdered by Communists. This symbolised the determination of communism to stamp out all that is fine and good in America. John Birch became that symbol, capturing "in the story of one American boy, the ordeal of his age".

Broyle drily points out that it was realised "that the sayings and writings of a fundamentalist Baptist missionary would have but limited appeal for an organisation whose membership, according to Welch, was 40 per cent Roman Catholic".

Robert Welch had a brilliant academic career, graduating from the University of North Carolina at the age of seventeen. He had a strongly religious background, but as he grew older he rejected much of his earlier teaching.

He comes from a wealthy family and has himself inherited the facility of making and accumulating money. His time, therefore, can be devoted to saving his country from the communism which he believes is threatening it both from within and from without. However great the threat from foreign Communist countries may be, Welch sees the threat from "fifth columnists" as the greater danger, for they are the unknown and often unsuspected enemies. "One of the hardest things for the ordinary, decent American to realise is that a secret Communist looks and acts just like anybody else, only more so; or that anybody he, the ordinary decent American, happens to know personally, could possibly be a Communist." As Mr Broyle comments "the task of hating Communists can get very complex, and a good many of the followers of Welch take the easy way out and just hate everybody except their friends—whom they only suspect".

Welch likes to think of himself as an individualist, asking for help from no one. And he seems to think that everyone should be

equally self-sufficient. He and many of his devotees, according to Senator Fulbright, "often equate social legislation with socialism, and socialism with communism". Therefore "much of the Administration's domestic legislative programme, including continuation of the graduated income tax, expansion of Social Security (particularly medical care under Social Security) federal aid to education, etc. under this philosophy would be characterised as a step toward communism". Indeed, as the members of the John Birch Society are largely well-to-do, their rejection of everything savouring of communal help for the old and destitute and needy, seems a largely "I'm all right, Jack" philosophy.

Welch and his followers are convinced of a widespread communist infiltration of the Government itself. The *Los Angeles Times* writes in 1961:

"What are we to think when our last three Presidents, Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower, are accused either of being Communist or Communist dupes? ... when these charges are levelled against Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, against his brother Allen who heads our vital Central Intelligence Agency, against the Chief Justice of our Supreme Court? What are we to think when we are told that our Nation's press almost without exception is Communist infiltrated and inspired? ... when we are told that our churches almost without exception are corroded with active agents of Moscow? What is happening to us when all loyal Americans are accused of being Communist dupes unless they subscribe to radical and dictatorial direction of one self-chosen man?"

McCarthy is dead. But his mantle of hate and suspicion and bigotry has fallen on Robert Welch, that "self-chosen man". Through him and the John Birch Society the spirit of McCarthyism still flourishes.

LETTERS

Free Will

MICHAEL GRAY'S article "Determinism and Free Will" (August 19) goes astray at several points.

First, even a cursory study of the traditional religions shows that the concept of free will is not "basic to all Christian teaching (and thinking)". St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards are some of the prominent Christian theologians who upheld the doctrine of Divine determinism or predestination. The Calvinists especially, including their founder and the eloquent Edwards, preached a stern doctrine of predestination that regarded men as the puppets of a vengeful God.

Second, when Mr Gray stresses the effect of "chance factors" in human life, he automatically discards the theory of universal determinism. For chance or contingency represents another ultimate trait of Nature operating alongside of the established if-then sequences or laws that represent determinism, necessity or mechanism. It is chance that opens the door to freedom of choice or free will, which comes into existence only after biological evolution has produced thinking beings such as *Homo Sapiens*.

Third, when Mr Gray points out how Christianity and in particular Catholicism attempts the mass indoctrination of the young, he seems to forget entirely that he himself was a Roman Catholic during his youth. What happened was that he, like millions of others in the past, was able to throw off the intellectual shackles of the Catholic Church. I suggest that he exercised free will in doing this and that his own life constitutes a refutation of the deterministic viewpoint.

Of course as a Humanist I agree with Mr Gray that all supernaturalist doctrines "should be relegated to the land of myth". But the thesis of free choice is not tied up with supernaturalism and can be consistently maintained by a Humanist, a materialist, a naturalist, a rationalist or a freethinker.

New York.

CORLISS LAMONT

What Every Woman Knows

EVERY woman knows that Isobel Grahame is absolutely right and has hit the nail on the head. We must bring Humanism into everyday life and start at the grass roots. It just isn't good enough to depend on schools to do the job. When our son was born I said to my husband that I didn't care what exams he passed or failed, so long as he was really alive, and we always tried to show him just what being a man really means. And when the two girls came along we did the same thing and set out to show them just what being a woman really means. We don't just need politicians and a policeman in our family. Soap and commonsense, sexology and science go so much further, don't you think?

Walton-on-Thames.

(Mrs) PENELOPE HUDSON