

FREETHINKER

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GOSPEL TRUTH

(April 23rd, BBC1 TV, *Meeting Point*—Robert Robinson questioning Bishop B. C. Butler, OSB, and Professor Dennis Nineham, Regius Professor of Divinity of Cambridge.)

ROBERT ROBINSON: The character of Jesus is sometimes one that we project upon him. The only evidence we have, of course, is in the Bible and this must be interpreted. No doubt each of us interprets the evidence according to his own character as well as according to the character of Jesus. I was recently reading in the Gospels—almost for the first time since Sunday School days—in *The New English Bible* version this time, and the Jesus I found there was neither the stained-glass window man of the Victorian and Edwardian tradition nor the robust straight-from-the-shoulder rebel much beloved of priests and parsons of a later date, but a somewhat cantankerous rather hectoring faith-healer. I found a good deal of law-giving but not much evidence of love and affection, a good deal of spell-binding metaphor mixed with a good deal of harshness and rebuke. I don't think I would have recognised divinity if I had come across it, having no standard to judge it by, but at the human level I saw little sign of the perfection that some churchmen have found in Jesus.

PROFESSOR NINEHAM: You're assuming that the Gospels give us the exact words and actions of Jesus and his attitudes and so on. Now of course, that is what a modern biographer or even a modern journalist seeks to give us. But I would want to say that I don't think the Gospels are that kind of document. You have to remember that the early Christians who wrote the Gospels thought of Jesus as a supernatural figure who was now exalted in Heaven as their Lord, and even during his earthly life they believed that he'd been a supernatural figure who'd been God's agent, the vehicle of God's revelation to men and so on, and when they related stories about his life I don't think they were primarily interested in getting exactly what his words had been or his emotional states had been. They were interested in the religious significance of his life, in the way in which it had been the communication of God with men. And I think sometimes, given the attitude to history in their day, they were quite prepared to modify the story a little bit in order to bring this out, rather as a portrait painter might sometimes elongate somebody's nose, let us say, in order to bring out the general character of the face. Now you see, the stories about Jesus that we've got in the Gospels had been handed on from person to person by word of mouth for many years before they came into the Gospels. And if you realise this process was going on and the kind of attitudes they had, you realise that what the Gospels give us is a picture of Jesus as the agent of God expressing God's power, God's action, God's truth and I don't think that they're necessarily always to be relied upon to give us the exact words and attitudes and emotions of the man Jesus.

ROBERT ROBINSON: Yes, I follow that. But as well as my own general response to this, there are a good number, I might even

claim to generalise, a majority of churchmen who preach and speak and advert to the Jesus of the Bible as though you could construct a scheme of life on the behaviour and on the life of this person and that this person was immediately accessible in the Bible. Now it seems to me that in what you say you are in a minority amongst your colleagues.

PROFESSOR NINEHAM: Well, it depends on what you mean by my colleagues, I think. If by my colleagues you mean other people teaching theology in universities and colleges I don't think I'm in a minority at all. I think that the general sort of position that I've just been putting forward about the Gospels would be generally accepted.

ROBERT ROBINSON: I'm sorry. I should be more precise. I meant churchmen.

PROFESSOR NINEHAM: Well, I think what I would want to say about this is that it's always the case that the insights to which scholars are led in the course of their studies take some time to filter through to those whom they teach and who go out preaching and so on and that it is true that many people—many people who are preaching and teaching in the churches—are prepared to take a more literal view of the Gospels than I think most scholars at the present time would be prepared to do. But I believe this is just a matter of a time lag.

ROBERT ROBINSON: What in your opinion is Gospel truth?

BISHOP BUTLER: Well, very shortly, I would say to that that Gospel truth is what the best interpretation leads you to conclude that the individual evangelist intended to convey by his words which, as the Professor has told us, are not a pure historical record but a theologically interpreted record.

THE year is 1967. A Protestant Professor of Divinity and a Roman Catholic Bishop sit comfortably in a television studio and, to the millions watching and listening, calmly admit that they do not believe the Gospels are literally true. 100 years ago they would not have made such an admission with impunity. That they can express their beliefs freely today is largely due to those who fought for freedom of expression, particularly in the field of religious belief, and fought at a cost. Men like Peter Annet, Richard Carlile, James Watson, Henry Hetherington, G. J. Holyoake, G. W. Foote—all of whom bought a little bit of freedom for many others with their incarceration in the fetid prison cells of this land of hope and glory.

Biblical criticism was long resisted in England and elsewhere and those who dared advance the cause of truth by questioning accepted doctrine paid the price of deprivation. On the Continent men such as David Friedrich Strauss and Ferdinand Bauer in Germany and Ernest Renan in France, carved the way to honest and profound scrutiny of accounts which had largely been accepted as literally true for centuries. What happened to these bold biblical critics? The first lost his post at a theological seminary when his *Life of Jesus* was published in 1835. The second was deprived of his professorship at Bonn after the publication in 1840 of his *Review of the Gospel History*. The third dared to write and have published the *Life of Jesus* (1863) at a time when he was Professor of Hebrew at the

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University of Paris, with the result that he was suspended from his professorial chair.

In England the popular freethought work of Thomas Paine, whose *Age of Reason* is a milestone in the application of sound common sense to the study of the Bible, was continued by W. J. Fox, Charles Bradlaugh, Moncure Conway, T. H. Huxley, F. J. Gould, C. A. Watts, J. M. Robertson, Joseph McCabe and Chapman Cohen—to name just a few. Their freethinking attitudes, writings and public speeches helped create a social acceptance of scrutiny, even of what had hitherto been regarded as sacred and divine and inscrutable matters. And social acceptance of scepticism and probing of religious issues helped to facilitate scientific research and thus initiate and propel the 20th century Scientific Revolution. Vivian Phelps, author of that widely read and excellent book, *The Churches and Modern Thought*, makes this important point in the sequel, *Modern Knowledge and Old Beliefs*, published in 1934 by Watts and Co.:

'Scientists, in these days particularly, have to be specialists.

Harry Lamont

Speaking Personally

I OFTEN WONDER why people like being preached at. For long it was assumed that one could be made good by listening to sermons; some still harbour that delusion. Long ago extreme penalties were inflicted on those who failed to attend church; delinquents were placed in the stocks and even had their ears amputated. Those of us who had to listen to long dreary sermons twice every Sunday as children usually dislike such exhortations to piety. Of course a good preacher will always have his fans. It is a form of entertainment. Those who listen to an eloquent orator get a kick out of it. They admire the *tour de force*.

Many parsons preach abominably badly, ranting and moaning like nanny goats with the belly-ache.

Verlaine urged that one should take eloquence and wring its neck. The eloquent preacher sweeps you off your feet, but proves nothing except that people like a feast of oratory.

Arnold Bennett said that the parson's pulpit and the schoolmaster's desk are admirable wooden structures, but productive of much balderdash because no contradiction is allowed. Parsons attempt to prove the validity of dogmas by quoting from holy writ, but such tactics do not impress the educated sceptic who disputes your premises.

It has been affirmed that many persons attend church to pay the weekly premium on their fire insurance policy. Attendance at church or chapel is a talisman against eternal damnation.

In Croydon I used to sit in the garden of remembrance outside the parish church. I noticed that most of the worshippers were elderly women, presumably because, as Shakespeare reminds us, women are more superstitious than men.

In a village church the pulpit was rather rickety. A big fat parson ranted and raved, after taking as his text: "I shall come down and dwell among you". Eventually the crazy structure collapsed and the portly parson fell among the choir-boys to whom he apologised for knocking them flying. "It's our fault, mister, you warned us often enough", cried an urchin.

They have every reason to think twice before taking on additional work off their line. The world, too, with which they are familiar is that of science, not that of the colossal ignorance and infinite credulity with which Rationalism is at grips. Often they are quite unaware of the frightful history of supernatural religion, or are so superficially informed that there is nothing to induce them to take an active part in combating religious error; nothing to arouse their interest or their ire through a full knowledge of the curse of superstition. All they ask is to be left alone; but they do not recognise that they owe their freedom from interference to militant Freethought. They, together with many men of letters and philosophers holding advanced views, fail to perceive, apparently, how much they have to be thankful for to the brave Freethinking pioneers, "the born champions, strong men, the liberatory Samsons of this poor world". The outstanding exceptions, the Huxleys among the scientists, or the Ingersolls and Bradlaughs among the orators, are few and far between.'

'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.' Gospel truth is only credulity deep. The fight for freethought must continue. Those who think this unnecessary should speedily enlighten themselves by regularly reading the FREE-THINKER.

SERMONS

Many years ago I asked about a preacher who had taken up residence in the district recently. "Oh, he's a wicked old devil", replied the Welsh deacon, "but he's mighty powerful in prayer".

Some preachers pray so lugubriously they give one the creeps. Apparently God will not bless the poor, the sick, the bereaved and other unfortunates unless exhorted to do so every day.

In South Africa I had a missionary friend who acted as chaplain to the local lunatic asylum. Frequently I accompanied him to a service at the institution because I did not like to refuse. The antics of the congregation made it difficult to keep a straight face. One furtive loony crept out to clean my shoes!

The successful preacher is usually a bit of a mountebank. He is well aware that his histrionics impress the congregation. I studied many ranters. Their antics did not impress me, but they were certainly effective on the rabble.

I used to derive considerable amusement from listening to the performances of aspirants to the clergy who had to preach a trial sermon. The antics of some holy wiseacres as they mouthed chunks of flapdoodle were really funny.

In the west of Ireland I used to stand outside a big church on Sunday mornings. From far and near the flock came in cars, donkey carts, on bikes and on foot. The bad eggs of the community dared not enter the holy edifice, so assembled in the porch. The doors remained open, so I was able to observe the priest at his mumbo-jumbo. He wore vestments that appeared to be covered with snakes and dragons. Acolytes rang bells, waved censurers, spread incense. It amazed me to see the hold the Church had on those simple peasants.

A friend asked me if I did not think such flummery stupid.

"No, I'm all for it", I replied.

"Why?"

"Because it comforts people. Few of us are strong-willed enough to be agnostics. Most of us need consolation. The priest gives it to the faithful who die happy, convinced they are going to play harps and wear crowns of glory eternally."

NEWS AND NOTES

IN AN editorial entitled "Danger Signal from York" the *Architects' Journal* recently drew attention to the state of disrepair into which York Minster has fallen. It has long been known that the building had serious defects, but the full extent of the danger was not realised until a young architect started climbing and made a close examination of the fabric. The *Architects' Journal* anxiously asks how many of these huge buildings are in a similar condition, adding that the deans and chapters should know. I have yet to see—before closing time—a dean clambering to the top of a cathedral to examine the fabric, so assume they cannot answer the question.

An unintended "danger signal" comes towards the end of the article. After calling for the state to take responsibility for "overseeing, protecting and preserving" such buildings as York Minster, it calls on the Church Commissioners to "create a body, backed with adequate public funds, and recruiting expert staff, to be responsible for the upkeep of our cathedrals, and indeed our historic parish churches of all periods which form an important part of our heritage". It is just possible that the Church Commissioners will allow themselves to be persuaded to do so—adequate public funds have always been a powerful incentive to the Church by law Established.

The National Secular Society's views are expressed in a press release:

"As a body concerned about the preservation of ancient monuments as a record of man's creativity and craftsmanship in the past, the National Secular Society deeply regrets the structural deterioration of York Minster.

A national fund for £2 million is soon to be launched and many unbelievers will no doubt contribute. Yet the building will still be owned and used by the Church of England, whose annual income approaches £50 millions. Though some of this money is spent on social work, the great bulk goes on perpetuating a legacy of the past we can very well do without—the myths and superstitions of pre-scientific man.

Here is one more argument in favour of disestablishing and disendowing this national anachronism. If the Church of England were then unwilling or unable to maintain the fabric of its ancient buildings it should hand them back to the State whence they came. If they were worth preserving they would be devoted to secular functions—social and cultural—in which the whole community could share. Alternatively, if the buildings were unworthy of or past repairing, the site could be redeveloped for the use of all and the benefit of the local ratepayers."

Whistling in the dark

ALTHOUGH the words "steadfast" and resist" are boldly and profusely scattered throughout the 136th annual report of the Lord's Day Observance Society, one suspects that the authors are not quite so confident about the future either of the organisation or "our Lord and His day" as they would like readers to imagine. Being more shrewd and worldly-wise than their supporters, they realise that even with a substantial income, a full-time staff of twenty and the Lord himself on their side, the LDOS will not be able to prevent a radical change in Britain's Sunday Observance laws.

On the first page we are told "the Society knows its

enemy", and it is not long before it is made clear that the enemy consists of an alliance in which Lord Willis, the devil and the National Secular Society figure prominently. Humanists and secularists are described as the devil's agents; vigorous swipes are made at other bodies outside the Secular Humanist movement including the British Council of Churches, the Free Church Federal Council and the Methodist Conference.

The report—the text of which includes a verse about the troops of Midian which McGonagall himself could not have bettered—chronicles the work of the Lord's Day Observance Society over a period of twelve months. We are informed how a show at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, "was resisted by the Society and stopped through the intervention of the Greater London Council"; of opposition (in vain) to the British Horse Society show at the White City and the Royal Academy's opening time being extended. Other examples of "this satanic onslaught upon the Sabbath" given are the reception of the Football Cup winners at Liverpool, skiing in Scotland, swings in a park in Portadown and Harold Wilson's attendance at the British Trade Fair in Moscow.

The activities of the LDOS have added to the gaiety of nations—including our own—but most people agree that the joke has now gone on too long. The strident battlecries which emanate from Lord's Day House will delude only the most optimistic and gullible sabbatarian.

Tragedy

MOST of us have at some time been irritated or amused by doorstep encounters with earnest but exceedingly naïve Jehovah's Witnesses. But their repeated visits to a happily-married mother of three young children led to the development of a religious obsession. Mrs Sylvia Adams, a twenty-six-year-old Leamington woman was persuaded by her husband to break with the sect, but they gave her a Watchtower leaflet foretelling the end of the world. She became frightened, developed insomnia and lost weight. Mrs Adams threw herself under a train. In her pocket was a note written in religious terms.

Conferences

THE annual conference of the National Secular Society will be held in Manchester on Sunday, May 14th. It was decided to hold the conference in Manchester to mark the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the local branch. Several veterans will be honoured at a luncheon, and the previous evening there will be a public meeting at which David Tribe (President of the NSS) and B. J. Barnett (Chairman of Merseyside Humanist Group) will be speaking. The conference and the public meeting will be held in the Register Office Hall, 64 Lower Ormonde Street, All Saints, Manchester.

The British Humanist Association (13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8) has issued a General Statement of Policy for consideration at its conference which will be held at Nottingham University during the weekend July 21st-23rd.

Invalid

READERS everywhere will join in sending good wishes to Mr William Griffiths (Chairman of G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd) who is now recovering from an operation. The operation was successful, but a long period of recuperation is necessary.

INTO THE SECOND CENTURY

Jean Straker

THE 61st annual dinner of the National Secular Society informally ushered the Freethinking movement into the second century of its corporate existence. To the two peers and the 170 commoners present it was an occasion for looking backwards and for looking forwards, for taking stock with pride and for studied self-criticism.

The presence of the peers as guests of honour gave David Tribe, who was in the chair, the opportunity of reminding us that the Society was in the vanguard of support for both the republican and the House of Lords' abolitionist movements in the 19th century—in 1885 it was the People's League Against the Hereditary System of Government—and, he commented, "we've come a long way since then"; and many of those present who had come along too nodded in pleased concurrence.

Lord (Ted) Willis and Baroness (Barbara) Wootton were welcomed as 'dogs without a licence', representing a chamber which had become, in many ways, more radical than 'another place'. Members of the Society present had come not only from the London areas, but also from Aberdeen, Birmingham, Nottingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Taunton, Brighton, Folkestone and other places; and a welcome was extended to friends from the South Place Ethical Society, the British Humanist Association, The Rationalist Press Association, and the Progressive League, organisations with which the National Secular Society has the strongest of fraternal relations.

Introduced as one of the leaders of opinion and one of the great voices of the radical movement in this country, Miles Malleison rose to say that he could not think of any toast in the world that he would rather be asked to propose than that of the National Secular Society. He was reminded of a remark he had once jotted down in a notebook, "Belief in God is a form of madness", and had been wondering if this thought wasn't going a bit far; so he looked up a new translation of the Gospel of St Matthew:

"Now in that gospel I marked twenty-six passages in which Christ definitely and categorically said he had not come to save mankind; he had come to save those people who had faith in him and they were to enter into everlasting and eternal bliss; but the rest of them would be a large majority who would burn in hell forever. He didn't seem at all to be upset by that; he seemed to be rather looking forward to it."

Miles Malleison found it impossible to reconcile the concept of an almighty and merciful God with the fact that he had created mankind in such a way that three-quarters of all people were consigned to eternal torment. Religions throughout the world were dividing children and producing mentally deficient adults; there was famine in India because religion there protected the rats who ate vast quantities of grain. History had shown that religions imposed physical and mental cruelty. The world would be a wiser place if the histories of such religious developments were taught to children instead of teaching them religious beliefs. He didn't see why anyone should have a kind of myth to live by.

"All of us are born with two duties and two responsibilities: the first one is to ourselves, to develop and use any talents, gifts, genius, capacity, so as to bring ourselves as near a hundred per cent as possible of the best we can be; that is a perfectly good and selfish duty. The other is to our fellows, to those around us, whether it's a small private group, or whether it's a larger public group, to devote your life in whatever way you can to bring more civilisation and culture and justice into the world."

These two duties, Miles Malleison felt, often contra-

dictory, selfish and unselfish, were quite enough to knit together in life.

Replying to the toast, Lord Willis, a member of the National Secular Society, said that if he could describe himself as one of Wilson's peers, then Miles Malleison was one of Nature's aristocrats. In kicking off the second century of the Society, and coming close to the essence of what many of his listeners felt, he said:

"All that sickens me, really, as I am sure it sickens you, is that we've had a hundred years of it, and we've still got a hell of a long way to go. It's a pity that we really don't need this dinner and don't need the National Secular Society. In fact we all ought to live in a secular society."

He had been in the firing line a little this year with his Sunday Entertainments Bill. In some ways this had been like lifting the lid off a dustbin and seeing what crawls; but there were fringe benefits.

"I shall never forget, for example, one of the remarks I heard at the wonderful meeting we had at Caxton Hall, which was so brilliantly organised by our Secretary, William McIlroy, and also, may I say, in spite of some of the criticism I read in the FREETHINKER, brilliantly chaired by that same gentleman. I remember that at one point—I think it was in reply to the discussion—I made the comment, because someone had expressed some prejudice from the point of view of colour, that the Jesus they believed in was born in the Middle East and probably had a brown skin; to which somebody, in a high state of hysteria shouted out, 'Ah yes, but he had a white heart!'"

Ted Willis thought that that meeting had been worth it just for that remark; but he had also enjoyed and savoured letters which were sent to him and said that he should be tied to a stake, and that his eyes should be put out with hot irons, and which were signed 'Yours in Christ'. The attribution of the seaman's strike to the playing of cricket on Sunday, and the description of the *Torrey Canyon* shipwreck as God's answer to Ted Lewis's pollution of Sundays were other fringe benefits we could all enjoy.

He thought that the Bill, soon to be up for its report stage and third reading, would sail through the House of Lords and have equally easy passage in the Commons. What had impressed him was the lack of serious opposition to it. There had been the cranks of the Lord's Day Observance Society going through their usual somersaults and antics; but the shift in public opinion in the last ten years had meant that there was little opposition, apart from certain doubts about professional football on Sunday afternoons and some odd clauses. He felt the National Secular Society could take some pride in this, because this really was the result of tilling the field and planting the seed; and now, at last, the crop was beginning to show.

The churches' attitude was quite remarkable. He had never ceased to wonder at their adaptability, at the speed at which they could retreat from a prepared position, abandon it and establish another. This was to be a lesson for Freethinkers, for lest we rejoice too quickly and too soon on a position abandoned by the churches, we should realise that on a much more important issue, basically, that of religious education in schools, the churches had made a significant advance in the last year; there was, alas, an increased grant from the Government for religious schools. The National Secular Society, never idle, had moved into action on this; he wanted particularly to congratulate Brigid Brophy and David Tribe on two brilliant pieces of pamphleteering. All were urged to ensure that these publications, one issued by the Fabian Society and the other by the NSS, have the widest possible circulation where

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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY 61st ANNUAL DINNER
April 8th, 1967

Top left: David Tribe; top right: Miles Malleson; centre left: William McIlroy, David Tribe, Baroness Wootton; centre right: Lord Willis; bottom left: David Tribe; bottom centre: Baroness Wootton; bottom right: Margaret Knight, David Collis.

Photographs by Jean Straker.



they can do the most good among teachers, educational authorities and other key people; they were weapons to be fired in the right directions.

Finally, Ted Willis wished to thank, as an ordinary member of the NSS, and on behalf of all the members, those people who did the solid work: William McIlroy, the underpaid and overworked secretary; Bill Griffiths, the treasurer, whose devotion over the years had spared the Society that anxiety that so many other societies have on the matter of finance; and our brilliant and intelligent President, always in the forefront, always having a go, always fighting so hard for radical causes. But before he sat down Ted Willis wanted to plant one tiny and serious seed:

"I think that we've got to give more thought than we do at the moment in the National Secular Society to the popularisation of some of the points of view and the principles that we hold. I must say that I do feel sometimes in reading our literature, in hearing, sometimes, the approach we make, that it's too precious, too narrow, it's too confined to a certain intellectual circle. There are, as I've noticed from my Sunday Entertainments Bill, a tremendous number of people in this country who basically feel as we do, but who can't intellectualise it, who can't put it into the realm of ideas and thought, whom we must somehow win, with whom we must somehow make contact; and I do feel sometimes that we are a little too complacent, a little too self-satisfied, a little too sure that we carry the cross—if I can use a kind of 'cross' analogy—that we do sometimes take this attitude that we are right, that we have found salvation, that we have found the way out; and in this sense we are making exactly the same mistake as the kind of people we so often attack."

This was a worry that Ted Willis shared with others in the Society—the fact that a movement with such an important part to play in the realm of ideas, in the fight against obscurantism, was too isolated, too narrow, lacking, somehow, the means if not the will to communicate with the great mass of ordinary people. We had something to offer those who felt a void when they lost their beliefs, and that something was a sense of intellectual independence, a sense of human dignity—the sort of thing described by Margaret Knight in her broadcasts 'Morals without Religion'.

Margaret Knight then told us how the broadcasts came about. She rose to propose a toast to guest of honour Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger, the first woman to sit on the Woolsack, the first professor to express secular views in print, in 1950, in her book *Testament for Social Science*. She recalled that she had first met Barbara Wootton in 1954:

"When she was a governor of the BBC and I was engaged on what seemed a pretty forlorn hope of trying to persuade the British Broadcasting Corporation to let me give a talk on humanism on the Home Service. We had, as fellow academics, some correspondence about this, and Barbara asked me to come and see her about it, and took me to lunch, which was quite a memorable occasion for me.

"To begin with, I think, we were both just a little wary. I was thrilled to death to be meeting the author of *Testament for Social Science*, a book which had impressed me more than

anything I had read for years. I was also anxious not to put a foot wrong for this BBC governor whose influence might be important.

"Barbara thoroughly sympathised with my broadcasting ambitions, but, I think, to begin with, didn't feel quite sure that I mightn't be the sort of wide-eyed zealot who would try to stampe here into all sorts of impossible commitments; but, however, that stage didn't last: I lost my shyness, she, I think, lost her doubts, and, well I can only speak for myself, but I enjoyed that lunch very much—and, as you may remember, the broadcasts were eventually given, and I doubt very much if they would have been if Barbara hadn't been a BBC governor."

Since then Margaret Knight had read Barbara Wootton's autobiographical reflections, *In a World I Never Made*, and had discovered that they had many other things in common, not only humanism and feminism, but also an enthusiasm for tennis, the poems of A. E. Houseman, and for the sort of English country life that is typified by pet donkeys and the paddock.

Baroness Wootton rose to reply, and pointed out that the title of her book, which she had taken from A. E. Houseman's lines

"Not I, a stranger, am afraid
In a world I never made",

would have a different meaning in America—"the world I never got to!"

She was honoured to be present, and very much wished to congratulate the Society on entering upon its second century, and upon the work which it had done, which, with that done by kindred societies, had completely changed the nature of the battles that we had to fight. Our forebears, T. H. Huxley, Darwin, and others, had to fight people who had firm convictions, and who, if they went down at all, went down with flying colours. Now we were engaged in a subtle and difficult type of shadow boxing, for the people we were now fighting retained their positions in the churches and at the same time expressed disbelief in the traditional doctrines with which their churches were associated:

"But when you find a clergyman of the Church of England saying that the motto for the twentieth century should be 'The maximum of faith and the minimum of dogma' you ask yourself 'how silly can you get?'

"How can you have faith in something which is undefined and which is not to be defined because to define it would be dogmatic?"

There were still battles to fight, particularly in schools. Although the Education Act, 1944, demanded that there should be a corporate act of worship every day, it never said worship of what. It could well be worship of Mammon. But not only in schools, for we had also to fight the battle of religion in prisons and in hospitals:

"If you go to prison, let me warn you, and you put yourself down as being of no religion, you will be put on the list for the Church of England—this seems to me extraordinarily insulting to the Church of England.

"It is also true in hospitals. It has been my experience on more than one occasion to be visiting patients in hospital who were extremely ill and likely to die, and to find a gentleman intruding himself, with a dog collar, without any kind of explanation or apology, in order to take part in the conversation—and I have found myself in the position of having to say to him, 'I am very sorry but I don't think I know you, and I don't think I asked you to come here'. But these situations of great embarrassment still go on."

A majority decision of the Plowden Committee had said that children should not be taught to doubt before faith was established. Could anything be more outrageous? This was not only cynical but also hard on the emotional development of the child. The report had also said that some of the teachers did not like to profess agnosticism because they thought this would be damaging to their careers. In spite of Margaret Knight we had not been very

(Continued at foot of page 144)

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EVERYWHERE WE ARE BEING MANIPULATED

Otto Wolfgang

THE SHREWD demagogue, General Franco, declared a few years ago:

"Every day, the world sees with greater clarity the inefficiency and futility of inorganic, formalistic democracy. In the political field the solutions and doctrines adopted by the world today resemble those adopted by us more and more." (Quoted from *Socialist Leader*, April 1.)

Immediately the example of Harold Wilson, the dog-handler, springs to mind, whose pack has got to learn that Master knows best what is good for all of us. It is remarkable that just now in Communist Czechoslovakia a formula for avoiding political degeneration through legitimizing political conflict is being discussed.

Wherever we are, in the so-called "free" world or behind the "Iron Curtain", the citizen is being "manipulated". In an address in Conway Hall (partly quoted in the *FREETHINKER*, May 1966), I stated that the media of opinion production—school, press, radio, etc.—are in the hands of the ruling class. "As a consequence, no election however 'free' allows an expression of the aspirations of independent thinkers or the under-dog. Democracy merely lays down the rules of the game to give the man-in-the-street the impression he has a say, whilst leaving the decisive direction of public affairs in the hands of Big Business and their managers (Government)".

In a striking analysis of the basic character of political power, Michael Lakatos, a Slovak legal theorist, wrote in *Pravny Obzor*—the monthly journal of the Law Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences—that the major problem confronting all societies 'is the conflict between those who are more or less the subjects who make the political line and those who are primarily its objects', in other words, the conflict between 'those who rule and those who are manipulated'. This is to a great extent even true in the so-called Peoples' Republics, because participation of workers goes through channels which are not always effective. In the existing electoral system 'the actual value of the act of voting (has been) reduced to the right to elect the proposed candidate' nominated through pressure from above.

The new electoral system ought to correspond to the structure of our society, which is heterogeneous and differentiated, made up of a variety of highly different social groups with differing interests and needs depending on their socio-economic position (level of income, type of job, ethnic origin, age group, etc.). These interests and needs are frequently in conflict and unless they are openly ventilated and thrashed out, their existence is merely papered over.

It is remarkable that such a view could be published in a Communist state, as it stands in stark contrast to the doctrine of total harmony after the elimination of hostile social classes. But our system of candidates presented by the political party machine and the nomination of Ministers by a Manager of Big-Business is no less deceitful (let alone the dictatorship of the parliamentary Whip). The result is the alienation of a number of strategic social groups, particularly the youth upon whom the future of the régime largely depends. They become either disinterested in social and political problems or start blind-alley rebellions by becoming beatniks and drug-addicts.

The rôle of the intelligentsia

Afraid of the intelligentsia, Mao-Tse-tung teaches that

revolutionary élan is more important than know-how and that, in order to avoid revisionism, experts should be replaced by devoted revolutionaries of peasant or workers stock. In Czechoslovakia the party leaders too regard intellectuals of bourgeois origin with suspicion, but living in a modern, industrialized society, the view is accepted that this society cannot be developed without talented men at the helm. 'The further development of productive forces and of socialist relations requires a more active rôle and participation of the intelligentsia in our life', which has 'become the guarantor of social progress'. In this sense, 'it has become the most revolutionary factor in society' (*Rude Pravo*).

The Czech and especially the Slovak writers exert full freedom in what they wish to write in their literary journals; theoretical economists have also been allowed considerable freedom to express their views; but the most far-reaching demands emanate, not surprisingly, from the youth, and *Student*, the new weekly published by the University Committee of the Czechoslovak Youth Federation, demanded a say 'in the decision-making agencies and representation in all the state bodies'.

In an article in the Party's main theoretical journal, *Nova Mysl* (New Thought), Pavel Auersperg, head of the Ideological Department of the Central Committee, admitted the necessity for reform, and Law Commission Secretary Mlynar endorsed the main features of the Lakatos proposal of interest-group autonomy, so long as there is no danger of 'overall governmental political leadership being influenced by tendencies to place local or group interests above the needs of society as a whole'.

Whether concrete action will follow or whether the Party leadership will try to get away with empty words, is to be seen. Yet it cannot be denied that some groundwork has been laid, the discussion has been joined. Moreover, a group that definitely won't gain influence, is that of organised religion, whilst in this country the priests are able to boost or blackmail a political party. As a result, cultural legislation has to heed scriptural doctrines dating from stone age ideas, and MPs are wary to offend religious interests.

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DAVID TRIBE and B. J. BARNETT

SUNDAY, MAY 14th, 10 a.m. and 2.30 p.m.

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(For members only)

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OUTDOOR

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

Manchester Branch NSS, Platts Fields, Car Park, Victoria Street,
Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.: Messrs COLLINS, DUIGNAN, 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

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute, Margaret Street),
Sunday, May 7th, 7 p.m.: MARY HILL, "We Learn and Live".

Belfast Humanist Group (War Memorial Building, Waring Street),
Monday, May 8th, 8 p.m.: Annual General Meeting.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group (Regency House, Oriental
Place, Brighton), Sunday, May 7th, 5.30 p.m.: Tea-party, fol-
lowed by Annual General Meeting.

Havering Humanist Society (The Social Centre, Gubbins Lane,
Harold Wood), Tuesday, May 9th, 8 p.m.: J. BURROWS, "The
Welfare State".

Manchester Humanist Society (Geographic Hall, Parsonage Gar-
dens), Sunday, May 7th, 6.30 p.m.: Public Meeting, MARGARET
KNIGHT, "The Rise and Fall of Christianity".

The Progressive League. Spring Dance at The White House Hotel,
17 Earls Court Square, London, SW7 (near Underground),
Saturday, May 6th, 8 p.m. Tickets 6/- (PL members) and 7/-.

Reading University Debating Society (The Theatre, Faculty of
Letters, Whiteknights Park, Reading), Monday, May 8th, 8 p.m.
Debate. Subject: "God does not exist, Jesus was not perfect,
Christianity hinders society". Speakers include David Tribe.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall Humanist Centre, Red
Lion Square, London, WC1), Sunday, May 7th, 11 a.m.:
Professor HYMAN LEVY, "War as an Industry".

The Cosmo Group, East Devon Branch (Church Hall, Rolle
Street, Exmouth), Saturday, May 13th, 3 p.m.: Rev. RONALD
ADKINS, "Censorship and You".

LETTERS

Aims and constitutions

THE inclusion of terms like rationalism, humanism and secular
education among the aims and objects of an organisation will do
nothing to reduce its wooliness.

The sciences dealing with behaviour have already made nonsense
of such concepts as the supremacy of reason, and ethics cannot be
defined as anything more than customary behaviour. Bridgid
Brophy and A. E. Macfarlane have pointed out in different ways
that everyone is rational because we all use our reason, especially
when judging other people's reason as good or bad according to
whether we agree with it or not.

Humanism has no precise definition and is as woolly a term as
Christianity or religion. Is a secularist an agnostic or an atheist,
and would secular education teach children to be agnostic or
atheist or would it include the study of comparative religion.
Incidentally what on earth is a Freethinker free from? Not him-
self his ancestry or his environment, surely?

Religion is a product of humanity just like its other man-made
problems, let us treat it humanely instead of with constant carping
bitterness, and engage in social action which is inclusive rather
exclusive.

ISOBEL GRAHAME.

INTO THE SECOND CENTURY

(Continued from page 142)

successful with broadcasting; but we did appear to have
reduced religious broadcasting to a state of confusion, for
different preachers were contradicting one another on such
matters as the resurrection, life after death and other be-
liefs. In many religious programmes religion was played
down. Many of those who held high positions in the
Church frankly confessed they didn't believe a word of the
dogma—a position which was not tenable.

"But we need to be not only negative, but positive; we need
to make open, frank confession of our agnosticism if only to
strengthen the hand of people who are in a weaker position
than some of us might be.

"Those of us like Lord Willis and myself, who cannot be dis-
missed from our appointment—we cannot even resign from our
appointment—have nothing to lose; and I am sure that it is very
important that those of us who are in that kind of position
should stick our necks out. I think it may possibly be said that
Lord Willis and I have stuck our necks out and our heads are
still attached to our bodies.

"It is also true, I think, that we have to be positive in the
sense of propagating a positive morality which has no super-
natural sanction—which Margaret Knight did so admirably in
her famous, and infamous, series of broadcasts. I am sure that
we need to do that. I think it is true that there is a moral
vacuum, that we have brought up children to believe that what
is right and what is wrong is bound up with what they learn in
religious instruction and that when they come to query the first
the whole of the moral correlatives are thrown away too. It's
like throwing away the moral baby with the Christian bath-
water."

In fighting these battles, Barbara Wootton did not want
us to identify ourselves too closely as secularists with any
of the immediate topical issues, as, she felt, we would then
start to fall out with one another; but we did need to make
it perfectly plain that the basis of our morality was sound,
was humanistic, was of this world. A society was in a very
dangerous position if it tied its moral teachings to such a
grossly improbable story as the story of traditional
Christian doctrines.

To say that it was no good fighting over religious instruc-
tion in schools because the parents wanted it and the Min-
istry wanted it was the argument of the craven spirit and
compromiser. Politics, concluded the noble baroness, was
not the art of the possible, but the art of making the im-
possible possible, and that was what we had to do.