

FREETHINKER

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A MATTER OF DRUGS

"Destruction of health; disease in every form and shape; stunted growth, and general debility and decay in the young; loss of life by paroxysms, apoplexies, drownings, burnings, and accidents of various kinds; delirium tremens, one of the most awful afflictions of humanity; paralysis, idiocy, madness, and violent death, are of numerous medical witnesses, to be the baneful consequences of drunkenness." (Report of parliamentary committee on drunkenness, 1834, quoted in an address to Christian magistrates on 'Intemperance In Drink; The Great Evil of the Day', submitted by the Committee of Ashton Hayes Temperance Society and published in the *Church of England Magazine*, July 16th, 1853.)

LIKE many people I am very ill-informed about the problem of drug-taking, on which so much hot air is talked and, it would seem, so much hot action taken. I am ill-informed and wish to become better informed, rather than simply emulate the hysterical reactions of others to what is, no doubt, a very grave problem. You may well ask why I write at all on a matter about which I admit to knowing so little. I write these few lines because there are obvious inconsistencies in some of the arguments advanced on this subject and I am troubled that some people, even if only a few, should be sent to prison for periods of anything from several months to several years as a result of the inconsistent thinking and arguments of those with the power to legislate and imprison.

I accept that drug addiction, which can result in personality break-up and even death, is no matter to be taken lightly. I accept that drug-taking can be dangerous and ought to be discouraged. But drinking alcohol is dangerous. Smoking cigarettes is dangerous. We do not make it a criminal offence to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, despite strong medical opinion that smoking cigarettes increases the risk of lung cancer and despite the indisputable

fact that drinking alcohol can lead to alcoholism. We do not send the alcoholic to prison for having been stupid and irresponsible enough to drink alcohol to excess, and we do not vindictively stop the pension of the widow whose husband was foolish enough to smoke forty cigarettes a day and thereby incur the lung cancer which secured him a premature place in the public cemetery. We do however send to prison a man or woman convicted of possessing a certain proscribed drug, even when a substantial body of medical opinion holds that particular drug to be a 'soft' one and non-addictive.

I notice that Mr Michael Argyle, QC, Recorder of Birmingham, commented in court recently that of 70 registered 'hard' drug addicts in the city, 69 had begun with cannabis. He then duly sentenced a man to five years' imprisonment for possessing this particular drug.

Now if a magistrate were to say that of 70 registered alcoholics in the city, 69 had begun with beer, and he were then to sentence a man to five years' imprisonment for possessing a bottle of beer, one would wonder who most needed to be locked up for his own protection and for that of society, the magistrate or the man with the bottle of beer.

I have never taken any of the proscribed drugs. I have drunk alcohol and continue to do so in very small measure. I smoke cigarettes, far too many. I smoke four times as much as I did before taking up the editorship of this paper. I do not doubt I am a fool for spending so much on cigarettes, nor do I doubt that so much smoking is injurious to my health. The question is, should I be sent to prison for five years, five months, or even five days, simply because I am a fool and medical opinion holds that I am endangering my health by so much foolish smoking?

I notice that in the States many negro women eat laundry starch. At the District of Columbia General Hospital in Washington, Chief Obstetrician, Dr Ernest Lowe, estimates that up to one-fourth of his patients are starch addicts. At Los Angeles County Hospital, three or four patients a week are diagnosed as having anemia apparently caused by starch binges. Some women eat two or three boxes of starch a day. According to medical opinion, eating large amounts of laundry starch often brings on anemia by blocking the body's absorption of iron, and some doctors go so far as to say that over-eating laundry starch may also cause a deficiency of folic acid, which in pregnant women may lead to premature births or bleeding near delivery time. No doubt these women are very silly to eat laundry starch and so much of it. The question is, should they be sent to prison for doing so?

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	LETTER

Miss Alice Bacon, Minister of State, Home Office, told the House of Commons on July 28th that she had visited the hairdressers the previous day. She supplemented this highly interesting piece of information by saying that, although she does not normally read *The Queen*, she was passed the magazine to while away the time. She was horrified by a long article in it called 'The Love Generation'. Apparently Paul McCartney had said that God was in everything and had realised this from LSD. The only person with any sense, said Miss Bacon, seemed to be the little pop singer Lulu. Lulu had said: "Love is far older than pop, and goes right back to Jesus. I am a believer."

I must say I cannot see much to choose between the two of them. Paul McCartney sees God in everything, which says wonders for his vision. And if Lulu believes love goes as far back as Jesus but no further, it speaks wonders for her belief but not much for her sense.

Harry Lamont

Speaking Personally

MUSSOLINI said that England had the best and the worst newspapers in the world. This observation seems to me correct. Some papers sell in millions because they are expert at appraising the idiotic idiosyncrasies of the herd.

It is generally admitted that in all countries the mob is stupid, therefore some clever editors exploit this trait.

Sex and crime constitute the chief stand-bys of the popular journal. A few years ago I copied some headlines from a Sunday newspaper with a vast circulation. Here is a sample:

HUSBAND SMASHES LODGER'S TEETH WITH COAL HAMMER.
WIFE CAUGHT WITH LOVER IN CAR.
SCOUTMASTER AND LITTLE BOYS.
ORGY OF VICE IN VILLAGE.
PARSON AND CHORISTER IN VESTRY.
NEST OF HOMOSEXUALS IN CLUB.
BARMAID CONCEALS BIRTH.
WIFE FROLICS WHILE HUSBAND IS ON NIGHT SHIFT.

Since most members of the herd are morons (or as near that state as makes no difference) they are quite uncritical and ready to accept big headlines for a few items of tripe.

An intelligent person prefers a judicious paper that does not insult his judgment, but the blockheads who constitute the majority of the population have no discernment worth a tinker's cuss and lap up any nonsense from the dish put before them. The editors of successful rags with vast circulations are always praising the gumption of their readers, but no person with an ounce of grey matter could read their rubbish without disgust.

Unscrupulous journals slant the news to make it seem important, when they know full well it is absolutely trivial and of no importance whatsoever.

Oscar Wilde said that great art is never popular and popular art is always bad. I would paraphrase this statement and say that a paper with a vast circulation never appeals to intelligent educated people, and is *ipso facto* of poor quality.

However, Miss Bacon continued: "It is time to make clear teenage drug-taking is ill-advised, if not dangerous, to personality and health". Miss Bacon is probably right and would doubtless wish to extend this remark to drug-taking by any group of people. I suggest it is also ill-advised, if not dangerous, to sentence a person to several years' imprisonment for possessing a drug, even though it is currently proscribed.

We should, moreover, not forget that what is proscribed today may be proscribed next month and what is proscribed today may be proscribed next year. I refer my readers back to the extract quoted at the very beginning and ask them to remember the period of Prohibition in the USA. We may well find ourselves, in thirty years or less, looking back on these harsh prison sentences for drug-taking and wondering at our lack of humanity in a so-called humanitarian age.

NEWSPAPER LORE

It is the fundamental dishonesty of certain newspapers that annoys the fastidious reader with a little intelligence. All sorts of silly stunts are devised to boost the circulation. Red herrings are cultivated just as assiduously as mares' nests.

Serious papers find it hard to survive because their revenue from advertisements is small. Advertisers prefer the journal with the big circulation, so we have a good example of the vicious circle.

Many years ago I called on a friend of mine who was one of the sub-editors of a trashy Sunday newspaper with an enormous circulation. He was on night duty and sat in his shirt sleeves with a green eye-shade in a small room full of rank tobacco smoke. From about 50 news items he had to select half a dozen for the next edition. He wanted to give me the impression that his task was very onerous, but all the snippets were so futile and silly that it seemed to me to make no difference which ones he selected. Papers with immense circulations always tell their reporters they have to get a story, so the searcher for news intrudes on private grief and lacerates wounds.

In South Africa many years ago a newspaper misrepresented my views on some aspect of the racial question. I 'phoned the editor to protest, but he put the receiver down. I wrote, but he ignored my letter. I asked a lawyer if I had any redress. "No," he replied, "they haven't libelled you and therefore you can do nothing."

Once upon a time I told an editor friend I envied him his job, particularly his *carte blanche* to speak his mind in leading articles, but he replied he was a prisoner of the owner's policy and must never print anything to offend advertisers. For example he considered the drink traffic a menace, but dared not say so for fear of losing the brewers' advertisements.

Journalese is rightly anathema to schoolmasters. It looks slick and smart, but must not be allowed to supplant standard English. Of course one must not expect much from writing that is hot news today and in the dustbin tomorrow.

The editor of a popular newspaper, discussing "Scoop"

(Continued on page 263)

FORUM ON CENSORSHIP: II

Jean Straker

PETER FRYER found it highly appropriate for the NSS to arrange the forum, for just 90 years ago the redoubtable Charles Bradlaugh, the Society's founder, had fought and won the most important 19th century battle for freedom of expression. We had recently been subjected to a wave of censorship and attempted censorship in all the arts. Those of us who oppose censorship should thank God for Lady Dartmouth who was good enough to attack the film *Ulysses* without having seen it. Her mother had apparently advised her to read it—and she did this very quickly, because she was a very quick reader, used to reading through quick council agendas—and she had found it 'the most horrible book she had ever read in her life'. He suspected that her understanding of *Ulysses* was as limited as that of the Bombay bookseller who displays under the heading of EROTICA a copy of *The Naughtiest Girl is a Monitor* by Enid Blyton. The British Board of Film Censors had set out their principles in a pamphlet chiefly concerned with protecting children from images of violence; in practice, however, the Board was using its scissors to protect adults from the idea that sexual activity is uniquely pleasurable, and from images of human nakedness. Recently the Board refused a certificate to Miss Yoko Ono's experimental film consisting entirely of naked male bottoms; it was not a film he very much wanted to see himself, but he did not see why those who wanted to see it should not have the right to do so. He had recalled that a member of the Board once put it: 'We are paid to have dirty minds'. When we turned to the arts of literature and painting we found that the self-appointed censors during the last two or three years have done their best to uphold their rôles as professional manufacturers of sexual anxiety. There were cases involving books, paintings, magazines and happenings; actions were taken not only under modern statutory acts, but also old acts and common law processes which give little or no scope for defence. Then Peter Fryer said:

"Mr Chairman, another form of censorship with which we should concern ourselves has recently arisen in connection with the sentence of nine months' imprisonment imposed on John Hopkins, one of the editors of *International Times*, for possessing cannabis resin and allowing his flat to be used for smoking it. Medical opinion on this question is divided but a substantial body of medical opinion now hold that cannabis is less harmful medically or socially than either alcohol or tobacco. I do not here take sides on this question; however that may be, to send this young man to prison for nine months seems to me calculated (a) to make a martyr, and (b) far from deterring young people from smoking cannabis, it seems to me its effect is likely to make them more cautious. Now, it has been impossible to get a letter of protest against this savage sentence into either *The Times* newspaper or *The New Statesman*. The case itself was virtually unreported in the press, and now it seems to me that there is virtually a conspiracy of silence—a censorship to prevent any protest against it: all honour therefore to *Tribune* which today prints a courageous article of protest by Clive Goodwin about this case."

It seemed to him essential to a proper functioning of a democracy that the individual should be free to express and receive ideas through any medium and that censorship was an interference with this right presupposing that there were some people with a right to deny knowledge to others. The motive force of censorship was always fear that people may know too much.

"Now few people would seriously argue any more that sexual ignorance is bliss. The right to knowledge and the right to free communication can no longer be limited to extra-sexual matters; nor can these rights be limited to scientific knowledge for the

artist too has the right to put forward his ideas on sexual questions and I find it intolerable to suppose that it is not a legitimate function of art—among many other legitimate functions—to arouse erotic feelings, and that merely to do this is to deprave and corrupt. It is a strange view of life which sees the appetite and the act through which life is created as intrinsically depraving and corrupting when portrayed in art whereas the act of destroying life can be described on all hands in copious detail."

It was, he said, the act of love which aroused the deepest anxieties and the strongest taboos in Mrs Mary Whitehouse, Sir Cyril Black, and their friends; it should not be illegal to describe an act which was not itself illegal, and it was no worse to publish a bad erotic book than a bad book of any other kind.

Father Ian Hislop, Friar Provincial of the Dominican Order in England, did not find much personal meaning in the question of censorship; in his very narrow context—"probably not quite so narrow as some of your people think"—censorship meant the control of statements in order that they may be as accurate as possible and the right to publish or not in relation to the possible effect of any such statements. Once he had said that he did not like it, for the right to censor presupposed a claim to know better than others—and this did not make much sense in the kind of democratic society which we paid lip-service to and which most of us thought we lived in today.

As a Dominican who had taken vows, he felt there was a case for censorship in the Church in order to uphold the general system of beliefs:

"... but beyond that I can see no point in censorship at all in the Church. Any attempt to impose censorship in fact inhibits theological discussion, as it has been inhibited for the last 150 years, I should say, among Catholics, until very recently—because theological discussion was simply regarded as arguing for certain positions which you held already."

The snag which Mill pointed out was that freedom from any restraint applied only to those in the maturity of their faculties.

"Now what, in the name of God does that mean? Who is in the maturity of his faculties? How do you decide that you qualify to take part in free and equal discussion, in a discussion, let us say, for responsible citizenship?"

It was convenient for the mid-nineteenth century European to leave out those who were members of backward societies, but he felt that all human beings had the right to take part freely and equally in any kind of rational discussion. The only restraint should be that harm is not done to others; but otherwise, unless one was a superman dealing with a society of obedient morons, restrictive activity usually defeated itself. When, as a young man an aunt snatched *Lady Chatterly's Lover* from him, he simply turned to other equally interesting topics to satisfy his sexual curiosity, an easy thing to do in the rural Scotland of his youth.

One had to examine the motivation of those who attempt to change or influence or mould our opinions. The only protection against sophistry was 'to show where the catch is', and the only 'safeguard against dishonesty is publicity'. Without free and open discussion there could be no social comfort or security. He would conclude with what Lacordaire, who belonged to his order, had said, 'I am a penitent Catholic, but an impenitent liberal'.

(To be continued)

NEWS AND NOTES

IN a statement issued last week the National Secular Society welcomes the close attention the Home Office is now giving to the law on adoption, and hopes that it will reconsider representations they have already made in this field.

The Society asserts that the excessive emphasis on the claims of natural parents is a residue of the days when they were deemed to have chattel rights over their children. Today there is more recognition of the obligation to put first the needs and interests of the children themselves, and next those of the adults who, as foster parents or prospective adopters, are actually looking after them. Recent cases of the uprooting of children from homes which over a long period they have come to regard as their own have rightly caused widespread concern.

The NSS draws attention to one aspect of the problem which has not received the attention it deserves. This is the right of the natural parent or guardian, under the 1958 Adoption Act, to lay down the religious denomination in which the child is proposed to be brought up, at the very moment of signing a form stating "I understand that the effect of an adoption order will be to deprive me permanently of my rights as a parent/guardian and to transfer them to the applicant(s)". The practical effect of this has been that children given certain religious labels, e.g. Roman Catholic, have found it difficult to attract adopters with the proper qualifications, while parents without religious affiliations at all have found it difficult to obtain children.

The number of babies needing adoptive homes increases yearly and the gap between the number of babies and the

numbers of adopters available is widening fast. There exists, however, a large number of potential adopters who could make their valuable social contribution if an adoption society existed whose criteria for selection supplemented those of the traditional religious adoption societies.

The Agnostics Adoption Society—officially registered for adoptions in February in 1965—is such a society. It aims to provide an adoption service of the highest standard in which the well-being of the child is the first consideration: to provide counsel and help for the unmarried mother both before and after the birth of her baby, whether or not she decides to have it adopted; and ultimately to conduct research on adoption and social problems connected with it.

The AAS has made considerable progress since it was formed, although operating on a shoe-string budget with only two full-time workers. Obviously they work under great pressure, dealing with adopters, unmarried mothers, foster homes, office administration, etc. The Society has a fully qualified Case Committee which places a premium on the highest standards of case work, thus ensuring that each child will grow up in the environment best suited to his needs.

The Society plans to consolidate its position and increase the number of placements each year. It is also intended that the geographical scope of its work should be gradually extended to cover the whole of the country by opening up small centres of qualified workers in areas where demand is greatest.

An attractive brochure has been published containing information about the Society's achievements and outlining plans for expansion. Copies are available free of charge from Agnostics Adoption Society, 69 Chaucer Road, London, SE24.

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Methodist membership falls

IT has been announced that the total membership of the Methodist Church in England, Scotland and Wales at the end of 1966 was 678,766, a decrease of over 11,000 on the previous year. Only one district (the Channel Islands) recorded a net membership gain, and the biggest decrease was recorded in the Manchester-Stockport area.

NSS Working Party

AT the first meeting of the National Secular Society's Working Party on Social Security, Tony Lynes of the Child Poverty Action Group, gave detailed information on the present state of family allowances and benefits, and the changes which will take place in October and April. The Working Party is giving careful consideration to submissions from the CPAG and other groups and individuals, and hopes to link the need to provide for children in impoverished homes with the important question of population control.

Last word

"TODAY it is difficult not to suppose that in certain quarters at least the Roman Church sees the Ecumenical Movement as a useful means of asserting its authority once more over the whole of Christendom; that the Anglican Church is ready to sell its birthright for a pot of spaghetti; and that the Free Churches are being asked to sell their birthrights for a Lambeth stew."—Canon John Collins.

E.A.

RELIGION AND REASON

Cyril Marcus

"PAUL JOHNSON (Editor of the *New Statesman*) is irritated every morning in his bath by the BBC's religious pep talk"—I quote from Pat Sloan's article "Religion in Decline" in the *Humanist*, February 1967. Personally, I am not so much irritated by these pep talks as nauseated by the not infrequent "logical" proofs that divers speakers in "Five to Eight" give in their broadcasts of the truth of the Gospels. No such proof has been propounded that is in the least acceptable to a rational thinker.

And there is no doubt but that the number of rational thinkers, or of those rational thinkers who dare come out in the open, is growing. The latest Gallup poll (*Sunday Telegraph*, 14th May, 1967) shows that the number of people who consider that religion is losing its influence today in Britain amount to 65 per cent. Indeed the survey shows "that less than one person in ten thinks that religion as a whole is increasing its influence on British life".

"Compared with 10 years ago, when 52 per cent felt that the Church was losing its influence, 65 per cent take that view today."

Latest estimates of the age of the earth put this at 3,000 million years. Reflect on this for a moment—three thousand million years. The human skull lately discovered by Dr Leakey has been estimated by him as 20 million years old. By comparison with the age of the earth this figure sounds recent.

The first organised civilisation seems undoubtedly to have been the Sumerian (Dr Glyn Daniels, *Origins of Civilisation* (Duckworth 1966)) and this may be less than 8,000 years ago.

Christianity is not even 2,000 years old. Consider *this* in relation to the 20 million years old skull, to the 3,000 million years of the earth's existence. Those who are Christians believe that Christ gave his life to save the world.

Is it seriously accepted that the world, which has been inhabited for at least 20 million years, was *saved* less than 2,000 years ago?

In what way has it been saved? In our day we have napalm bombs, A-bombs, H-bombs, killings on a vaster scale than anything that happened 2,000 years ago; segregation, Berlin Walls, Vietnam. The world has *not* been saved. It is difficult to write calmly when one thinks on this matter of saving.

And really few people believe it today. According to the Rev. J. Kenneth Lawton (*Humanist*, April 1967) 15 per cent of the population claimed to be regular churchgoers. But churchgoing does not mean 'believing'. From my observation I have come to the conclusion that many churchgoers are not such for religious reasons. They pay lip service to Christianity (or to minority religions which in all amount to less than 2 per cent of the population of Britain) for various reasons. Social grounds play a big part, business interests even more. I remember how at an inaugural meeting of a Humanist group, there was considerable difficulty in forming a committee as some otherwise eligible office-holders did not want it to be known that they were Humanists (and therefore not church men) as this would affect business or profession, and the *Daily Mail* (August 29th, 1966) reporting on the BHA Conference in

Leicester, with the banner head-line "Isn't it incredible that in Britain 1966 people live in fear that someone may find out that they don't believe in God", cites one instance where a Tory candidate at the last election said, "It would never do for Central Office to know, my name would be struck off the list in no time", and one where a school-teacher said, "I'd be out of my job by Christmas if it were known". Other instances cited include one from a manager in engineering who said if he were known as a Humanist "it would kill my chances dead". That sums up the situation. Hundreds of thousands of non-believers fear to acknowledge publicly their convictions because they are afraid for their livelihood, or for social or family reasons. One lady writes to me from hospital; "When I said I was C of E in my earlier letter it was only on account of my 81-year-old widowed mother who would be shocked and hurt if she knew I was an agnostic".

In Protestant Bristol, less than 150 years ago, there was a flourishing trade in slaves. Bristol was a very religious city. There were so many churches in Bristol in the middle ages that "if everyone in the City went to church at the same time there would still be plenty of room to spare" (*Bristol, Seaport City*. Martin Ballard, Constable 1966).

Christianity does not seem to have had an ethical influence on the inhabitants of Bristol (and no effective protest against the slave trade was made there). One would seek far and not see how any religion had any ameliorating effect on a community as a whole, no matter how high the ethical teachings of the religion may have been.

Before going back to Bristol and the slave trade I shall give two examples of the ineffectiveness of other denominations in elevating the behaviour of their adherents.

The Jewish religion forbids the lending of money with interest, yet there are many Jewish moneylenders. One of the reasons given for this is that in Czarist Russia and certain other countries Jews were not able to engage in many businesses and professions, so that numbers went into this reprehensible trade. The position of Jews was also insecure, which may have been another reason for some of them to go in for a business which was mobile.

I must here interpose a childhood impression which accentuates my postulate that religion has no influence in affecting the conduct of adherents. As a boy I saw a moneylender in Synagogue on the Sabbath of Remembrance during the Ten Days of Penitence which precede the Day of Atonement, smiting his chest in contrition and begging for forgiveness—to go back to his moneylending unaffected the following Monday.

It is interesting to note that in countries where Jews felt secure, Britain, Holland, Denmark and the like, a large proportion of the sons of immigrant Jewish moneylenders became doctors, lawyers and scientists, abandoning the base calling of their fathers. (Please don't think that I imply that all or most Jews in professions are the sons of moneylenders, which is certainly not the case.)

According to the teachings of the Roman Catholic church, sexual intercourse is only encouraged in married people for the procreation of children, yet no sane person would even suggest that normal intercourse among Roman Catholic couples for other reasons does not take place. Among unmarried people, sexual indulgence is proscribed,

but it seems an undoubted fact that the illegitimacy figures among Roman Catholics are higher than elsewhere.

At this point it may be pertinent to point out that there is a disproportionately large number of Roman Catholics in the prison population of Britain.

Returning to Bristol and the slave trade, the story of this is to me an even greater indictment of *practising* Christianity than was the Spanish Inquisition.

One of the greatest of the slave traders in Bristol was John Pinney. "I can assure you," he wrote to a friend, "I was shocked at the first appearance of human flesh for sale. But surely God ordained them for use and benefit of us, otherwise his Divine Will would have been manifest by some particular sign or token." (*opus cit.*)

Natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, strike populated and unpopulated areas willy-nilly, sometimes killing thousands, occasionally none, and are evidence of a complete lack of plan. They are to me a demonstration that there is no all mighty, all merciful, all good God. Babes who have not even had time to sin are killed along with good people, bad people, and indifferent people, indiscriminately. "It is God's will, He has a purpose", say the believers. It is plain bad to me, and there is no plan behind such calamities.

The more a rational being reads, the less intellectually acceptable a deistic religion becomes. This is not to suggest

that a Humanist is without faith. *His* faith is in human beings and is reinforced rather than diminished by the fact that he believes in this world and not in other-worldliness. In the conviction that this is the only life, he will strive to do as much for humanity as he can. Even the present wave of crime and violence in this and other countries does not make him despair. One has only to read medieval history to realise how much better the world is today than then, better in these days with religion in decline than ever it was in its heyday.

A great Christian theologian wrote: "No elaboration or enrichment of the details of worship will avail to secure any religion against abandonment or decay if its doctrines are found unsatisfying by the intelligentsia . . . It may well retain the support of the peasantry or the half-educated, but it will inevitably lose the allegiance of the first-rate minds. Even if it endure for a long period it will do so more as a picturesque institution than as a vital expression of belief". (Dr A. C. Bouquet. *Comparative Religion*. Pelican Books, 1942.)

Already there are cracks in the structure of the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant—the Bishop of Woolwich in this country, Bishop Pike in the United States (*Time* magazine, 11th November, 1966) tell us in so many words that the events of the Gospel are not literally true.

Although this article is entitled 'Religion and Reason' it might easily have been 'Religion *or* Reason'.

Denis Cobell

DEAD AND GONE!

"HUMANISM affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any sure knowledge and that human effort should primarily be directed towards its improvement." This is part of the BHA official policy statement, and in this reappraisal of death and our awareness of death I shall try to point out that this mature view of the world can help us all, especially those who grieve over the death of a loved one. We all have to die one day, and fewer people today believe in immortality—quite frankly, no one knows what happens after death; Christ returned, like the compulsive incendiary, to the scene of his earlier miracles—if we believe this! One old man who was an agnostic complained, when he was dying in a Catholic hospital, that the nurses were trying to lull him into eternal sleep with fairy stories about heaven, just as his nurse had done, when he was a child, on going to bed for the night.

Religion has always found its power through fear, and never more than in the fear of death. Even South Bank theologians believe in the fear of death, according to a popular article by the Rev. Nicolas Stacey. But I prefer Bertrand Russell's confidence: "I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation".

However there are problems that we all have to face; the comfort which we can afford to dying people, some of whom may try to protect us, and pretend they are not dying, will depend upon our relationship while they were in good health, and whether we can make ourselves available to talk with them in their last days. This is all they may require.

When a close relative dies we may have to make the

arrangements for their disposal, and Freethinkers should not ignore the wishes of others in respect of funerals, even though they may fear hypocrisy. £80 has been mentioned as an average sum for a 'socially acceptable funeral'. This, and the only very recent acceptance of cremation by Roman Catholics, is deplorable; but foolish criticism will not promote Humanism, which must stand or fall by its consideration for others.

Dying (Pelican, 3s 6d) by Prof. John Hinton, has recently been published in Penguin's Studies on Social Pathology. Unlike earlier books in this series, which have dealt with alcoholics, suicides and sexual deviants, this book deals with a subject that vitally affects us all. Prof. Cartstairs, who edits this series, has written a foreword in which he outlines the two purposes served by the beliefs and practices surrounding death: firstly these are related to the ideas which men have of life after death, and secondarily they cater for the bereaved, many of whom are inconsolable. Gorer, in his entertaining study published a couple of years ago, *Death, Grief and Mourning*, revealed that the more ritual and extravaganza with which people celebrated the deaths of others, the better able they were to cope with continuing life. But this should not be seen as an indictment of disbelief: we should accept it as a challenge to the lingering, irrational past. Again I quote Bertrand Russell: "If we were not afraid of death, I do not believe that the idea of immortality would ever have arisen".

Our attitude to the death of close friends or relatives is still at extreme variance with our attitude to the death of outsiders or, indeed, the purposeful killing of members of alien states. We train troops to do unto other humans what we would deeply mourn amongst our dearest. Primitive nationalism, of which the Old Testament is an ardent

exponent, still incites us to kill violently, as the Middle East crisis has illustrated.

Prof. Hinton suggests that we all yearn for longevity; but if the fictional aspirations of Aldous Huxley's Dr Obispo in *After Many a Summer*, or the achievement of Swift's Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels* are a guide, I think this is highly questionable! However, he does remark, "no one wants to lengthen the process of dying". This would seem to be support for legalising voluntary euthanasia, but really Prof. Hinton is pleading for better nursing and medical facilities in order to *lengthen* the process of dying, not to decrease the pain and emotional distress felt by many during this time. This may be an admirable objective, but it does not destroy the case for mercy killing, which strangely we already permit for animals. Many people who know they have a fatal illness commit suicide, whilst others are given large doses of powerful analgesic drugs which hasten death, regardless of their own wishes. Many people who do not fear death itself are afraid of pain during the process of dying—euthanasia would go some way towards allaying this anxiety.

Cardinal Heenan, addressing a section of the British Medical Association recently, asserted that the protagonists in favour of euthanasia "deny that the incurably sick have the right to live". Demonstrating in one breath that he does not understand the difference between murder and voluntary euthanasia, the Cardinal slanders his opponents into the bargain.

One reason that many religions oppose euthanasia has been the great emphasis placed upon deathbed repentance and final statements. But evidence is scant; I have witnessed many deaths in hospital, and the dying patient is frequently unconscious or drowsy and unaware of the advent of his own death. I would support the physician who wrote: "As for the dying man himself, we rarely find him 'looking death in the face' and knowing it is death. He is either very dubious that death is coming to him, or his apprehension is so dimmed, whether by weakness or by a merciful physician, that the end of life is a dream-state rather than a true awareness".

Despite this, a reversion, as distinct from a conversion, to previously held religious belief, is not uncommon in a dying person. Prof. Hinton thinks it is important for people to know that their mortal life is ending, in order that they may spiritually prepare themselves for the next world! Although Gorer estimated that half the population of the British Isles does not believe in an after-life, many still talk of 'passing on', and teach their children about 'going to heaven'. Primitive religions established elaborate theories about the hereafter, and the pyramids are museums of an age when whole households were buried with their chattels, to aid their journey in purgatory. Alternative views posed a cycle of life and death in which all were regenerated at some future date.

These ideas are unacceptable now that there is not one iota of concrete scientific data to support immortality. One study in the USA discovered that those who had religious beliefs, and presumably accepted the verisimilitude of hell, have more fears of death than the non-religious. The cruelty of death has often been a cause for the bereaved to lose their faith in God; at one time many atheists regarded pain as the major evidence for their unbelief.

This is not a logical reason, but it is disappointing to find Prof. Hinton also swallowing the illogicality which, he

avers, arises through contemporary agnosticism; he believes this "severely handicaps" our recovery from bereavement.

Surely we should share Bernard Levin's idea of the immortal: "To throw a line into the future, and hope it may be caught and fastened to something". Unbelievers cannot mimic the churches; Comte's positivism of the nineteenth century, providing a religious calendar within orders of a secular nature, was a failure. Honesty, even in the face of our own end, will spur us on to achieve better things in this life, without speculating idly on the prospects for another one, which may never come. Bertrand Russell, in *A Free Man's Worship*, writes in beautiful prose: "for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; . . . to worship at the shrine his own hands have built".

NEWSPAPER LORE

(Continued from page 258)

by Evelyn Waugh said this author would not have been very good at collecting news items. I agreed, because Waugh was a very intelligent man who could not willingly stoop to collect rubbish.

Charles Lamb asserted that newspapers always excite curiosity. He declared that no one ever lays one down without a feeling of disappointment. In my view the habit of reading newspapers is a soporific. We are bored and like to have our curiosity titillated. Those who read newspapers with any serious intent are very much in the minority. Strip cartoons and horoscopes are extremely popular. One paper praised a phrenologist very highly, so a woman took her son to consult him. The expert felt the boy's bumps and said, "He will be a great traveller, for he has the bump of travel very well-developed". "Yes, Guv," replied the mother, "he got that falling off the bus this morning."

Many editors pay lip service to virtue, but take good care to print juicy bits of murders and sex crimes in great detail.

Wendell Phillips declared that we live under a government of men and morning newspapers, and there is no doubt that the owner of a powerful newspaper wields great influence. Such people have been known to make and break governments. By giving his views wrapped up as news, the newspaper baron exercises a powerful influence on the rabble, who don't realise they are being hoodwinked.

There are certain journals of the gutter press that have no fixed policy. They are time-servers and blow hot and cold whenever it suits them. They have one object only, to increase their fetid circulation. According to the Duke of Wellington nothing is impossible to certain newspapers. They exploit a canard for the express purpose of demolishing it next day.

I knew the editor of a paper who increased the circulation of his rag by pretending a miracle had taken place on a certain spot on a specified day. He was a sceptic, but in his cups admitted the miracle was good for business.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said.

FREETHINKER

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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) and Humanist Postal Book Service. For information or catalogue send 6d stamp to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

OUTDOOR

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

Manchester Branch NSS, Platt Fields, Sunday afternoon, 3 p.m.; Car Park, Victoria Street, Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.

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

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

"Why?" he countered indignantly, "I'm not doing any-one any harm. The church is in the doldrums and I want to stimulate interest in religion. It is a worthy cause."

"All you want is to increase your circulation," I retorted, "and you trade on the gullibility of the public."

Ben Jonson said he would not willingly be gulled, and most of us would agree with him, but it is hard not to take at its face value what you see solemnly asserted in print. That is why the gutter press constitutes a serious danger.

LETTERS

Editorial policy of FREETHINKER

WITH REFERENCE to the recent correspondence in your columns regarding the "standards" of FREETHINKER, which I gather some of your readers consider have "declined" of late, may I, as a newcomer (having had the paper weekly only a couple of months or so), express one or two personal views.

Firstly, I do not know what the "standards" were prior to my having regularly received the paper, never having read FREETHINKER before my regular subscription (I was, incidentally, introduced to it via a browsing session in Collets, in London), so I am naturally not able to compare standards. Speaking for myself however, I can only say that I am quite satisfied with my six-pennyworth, and despite what has been stated by some of your correspondents, will continue to subscribe to it.

With respect to some of the complainants, I would refer them to the title of the paper—which is: "FREETHINKER". Mr K. J. Ead, in the 28th July issue, asserts that "it is no longer the pugnacious opponent of organised religion" which first attracted him. Well, what attracted me, if I may say so, was the fact that the paper seemed to me to live up to its name—a name that did not imply that each week it would be filled from cover to cover solely with anti-religious type material, worthy as such propaganda is, but that it would cover as many aspects of freethinking and humanism as possible, including, of course, that involving religion which, whilst no doubt being the Number One enemy of free-thought, is by no means the only one.

So far as I am concerned, if the FREETHINKER did confine itself merely to attacking organised religion, it would, I'm afraid, probably lose me as a reader, and would be the worse for it. As it is at the moment, it carries out a good job, in accordance with its title, and I certainly hope it will not change its policy.

If Mr Ead wishes to "stimulate" his own personal "battle" against the effects he mentions—and I sympathise with and share his desire for such stimulation—surely he can do as I and no doubt other agnostics or atheists do—refer to the many books which exist, giving plenty of the stimulation in question. But there are many and varied issues involving freethought and humanism in general, which are also with us; examples of anti-freethought and anti-humanism are constantly occurring, and the FREETHINKER is 100 per cent right in commenting upon these as often as possible, as it is also right, whenever the demon "space" permits, to report and cheer us with any success that freethinking achieves in any and all fields of our society and culture.

L. KLOSS.

FREETHINKER FIGHTING FUND

THE FREETHINKER is the only weekly Secularist-Humanist paper in the country. It is still only 6d. How much do YOU care how many people it reaches? To advertise we need money, and our expenses are ever-increasing. Whose copy are you reading now? Have you got a subscription? Couldn't you contribute something to the Fighting Fund, say 6d or 6s or £6 or £60? How much do you really care about Freethought and helping other people to hear about it? Do, please, help if you can.

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