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THE FREETHINKER AND ITS READERS

AGAIN no news on the front page! What's happening to the FREETHINKER? Well, what *should* be happening? What, for instance, is the FREETHINKER'S purpose? What cause, or causes, does it serve? What are its aims and objects? How may they most effectively be pursued? And with what image, appearance and material?

To these and other such questions positive answers were needed and, greatly through readers, these answers have been found. The time had come for a hard look at the FREETHINKER, to review its development and progress, to determine how it should continue, and to formulate a new and clearer editorial policy. This has now been done.

Readers, of course, have every right to be kept informed and, for the next week or two, answers to many of the questions they ask will be produced.

The policy has not been shaped to accord with the wishes of the readers; nor even with the wishes of the majority of the readers. Nevertheless, it is hoped the policy will, in fact, suit the majority. But to endeavour to frame a policy on this basis would prove disastrous; and an editor who tried to please everyone would soon be in trouble. The views of readers are as diverse as those of the contributors. Instead, the policy has been framed to most fitly serve what is considered to be the true purpose of this paper at this point in time.

But before we examine the new policy, it may prove useful to take a look at the diversity of opinion which reaches this office in readers' letters.

As may be expected, the biggest bone of contention relates to supernaturalism and organised religions; Christianity and the Roman and established Church in particular. There are those who insist that the FREETHINKER should adhere to its original (1881) policy of continual opposition to these institutions and their teachings. This group advocates continuous frontal attack—and nothing else. Another group calls for learned treatises from both atheists and believers with a view to academic research and philosophic debate. Then there are those who say "To hell with the Church, it will soon lose what little power it still holds in this country" and who advocate the promotion of secular campaigns which undermine the churches but which pay no heed to them. There are those who shout for "more militancy" yet seem uncertain what is specifically required. There are those who feel it possible to secularise the nation without meeting any opposition from the Church.

Although the FREETHINKER has long been a non-political paper, it is quite easy to spot the occasional Fascist, Anarchist, Communist, Tory and Socialist note. Certainly a sizeable proportion of the readers feel political aspects are

germane to what the FREETHINKER is doing. "The Catholic Church is a political organisation and can only be tackled at a political level" and "You cannot diminish the influence of organised religion until you unseat the system which encourages organised religion" are, together with many other oft-repeated cries, frequently heard.

Then there are those who, stressing that clergymen are simply poor mortals like the rest of us, born into a hostile world and trying to cope with the conditions common to all men, feel that the clergy are similarly subject to rational enlightenment and human values. The churches are becoming more humanistic, the clergy 'more human', the supernaturalist's influence must inevitably diminish and finally disappear.

Again, there are those who would like the FREETHINKER to give priority to a particular issue, campaign or ideal which they consider of chief importance: the population explosion, education, civil liberties, world-government, Jean Straker, conservation, sex on demand, etc.

Freethought, Humanism, Rationalism and Secularism are attacked most strongly by Freethinkers, Humanists, Rationalists and Secularists and, if the supernaturalists want to be really vicious, they simply quote one or two such writers. Then we have the militant atheists calling the less militant atheists 'agnostics' and the less militant atheists, noting the source of the comment and preferring to remain disassociated, indiscriminately accepting the name.

On the appearance and content of the FREETHINKER readers have plenty to say. Most seem to prefer the new front page with its three columns of news items (absent last week and this) and favour the 'newspaper style' layout'. Some insist, however, that news items should only be reported when they are suitable as a media for 'our' propaganda. Against these, are those who demand that news should be reported impartially and without comment. An attempt to take a 'middle course' usually meets with objections calling the attempt half-hearted or intrusive.

Some groups would like the whole of the front page to be given over to a report of their local meeting ("despite the cold, five members attended the August meeting of the Secular Progressive Humanist League at Littleacne to hear Miss Babs Sillery speak on 'International Rationalism and the Local Group'") while others feel that local group activities should be afforded no place in a national (or international) paper.

The Editor is urged to come forward and carry the banner handed down by Foote and Cohen, others more

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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, SE1. Telephone HOP 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Letter Network (International) and Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). 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

Birmingham University Humanist Federation, The Union, University Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, Monday, February 12th, 5.15 p.m.: JEAN STRAKER, "Obscenity and Censorship".

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, Regency House, Oriental Place, Brighton, Sunday, February 4th, 5.30 p.m.: Mrs. H. KOUCHEKZADEH, Illustrated Talk on Persia.

Enfield and Barnet Humanist Group, 57 Sheringham Avenue, London, N14, Thursday, February 8th, 8 p.m.: Informal social evening.

The Cambridge Humanists, Mill Lane Lecture Rooms, Cambridge, Thursday, February 8th, 8.30 p.m.: Sir FRANK MILTON, "The Nature of Crime".

Leicester Secular Society, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester, Sunday, February 4th, 6.30 p.m.: P. F. TURNER, "Censorship and Mass Media".

Lincolnshire Humanist Group, 12 The Avenue, Lincoln, Thursday, February 8th, 7.30 p.m.: Group discussion on Morals and Religion.

Luton Humanist Group, Central Library, Luton, Thursday, February 8th, 8 p.m.: GRAHAM RICHARDSON, "The Language of Music".

The 59 Society, Kensington Central Library, Campden Hill Road, London, W8, Thursday, February 8th, 8 p.m.: Dr ALFRED HEIDENREICH, "The Personality of Rudolph Steiner and His Work".

INDOOR

The Progressive League, Weekend Conference at Eastbourne, February 23rd-25th. Subject: "Public Law and Private Morality". Speakers include LENA JEGER, MP, H. A. HAYDON, AVRIL FOX, AMBROSE APPELBE. Bookings and enquiries: Terry Gabriel, 9 Russell Gardens, London, NW11.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Sunday, February 4th, 11 a.m.: H. J. BLACKHAM, "The Use and Abuse of Agreement"; Tuesday, February 6th, 6.45 p.m., "America Today". Speakers from the US Embassy.

South Place Sunday Concerts, Conway Hall, London, WC1, Sunday, February 4th, 6.30 p.m.: Alberni String Quartet. Haydn, Sibelius, Beethoven. Admission 4/-.

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

West Kent Branch NSS, Public Library, The Drive, Sevenoaks. Public meetings on the first Wednesday of the month at 8 p.m.

BIRTH CONTROL

A Roman Catholic mother who had 13 pregnancies in 18 years has obtained a court order to have six of her children brought up as Protestants.

Born into an Irish Catholic family, she (Mrs 'X', in court) has had nine children, including two sets of twins, and six miscarriages. Her Roman Catholic husband, from whom she is now estranged, said: "I kept telling her Catholics always have big families. I was one of 21 children . . . and I never heard my mother complain. And, damn it, we only had nine children . . . that's not much of a family".

Mrs 'X' said she had turned Protestant herself but had the children originally baptised as Catholics 'to keep the peace'. "My husband would not allow birth control because of his religion."

"The continual strain and miscarriages wore me out and affected my health."

"If we had been able to plan our family we would still be as happy as when we married in Dublin in 1948."

"After what I have been through, the pain and the worry, it was my duty to make certain that my children had a chance to escape from it all. No mother could stand by and watch her babies turned into battery chickens, producing children as a duty in the name of religion."

"I do not want my daughters to suffer this misery, hardship and illness I have experienced because of the Catholic attitude towards birth control."

She and her husband parted six months ago and in February the court placed six of the children in the care of Dorset County Council after a welfare inspector found them living in poor conditions.

* * *

JUDGE DIDN'T SWEAR

ON taking up his duties as a new High Court judge, Mr Henry Fisher, son of the former Archbishop of Canterbury and husband of a Roman Catholic, took the rare and possibly unprecedented step of affirming instead of taking the oath.

* * *

QUOTE

"IT should be clear to any Catholic that there is a current attitude of free thought which is seriously endangering moral principles and the Rights of Man."

Catholic Herald, January 12, quoting Michael Laurence of the Guild of Catholic doctors.

GOVERNMENT OR RELIGION

E. G. Macfarlane

I HAVE long held we should not concern ourselves exclusively with non-political argument; that we must go into politics before we can rid the world of the power and dominance of various forms of idolatry, superstition and irrational opinions. If we want to abolish the 1944 Education Act (for example) then we must realise that it is going to be a very long, slow and difficult haul if we rely on appealing to individual MPs to swim against the main streams of all their parties, in a 'Christian state', and expect to get enough MPs to abolish the religious provisions in the Act.

If we want to turn Britain from being a 'Christian state' into an 'Open Society' state, then we have to do a political job. There is nothing to be gained by pretending otherwise and creeping about like snakes trying to do the thing by stealth; it won't work—because it's cowardly and dishonest. The alternative is to form ourselves into a World National Party and to fight elections as the Scottish National Party is doing in Scotland.

Rubbish? Don't you believe it. We will never have such a favourable opportunity as exists at the present time in British politics. Politicians of all regular parties are in the dog-house simply because most people understand (even if only in a dim and vague way) that they are all—to some extent—liars and con-men. People are looking for an alternative and in Scotland over 90,000 have joined the SNP in the hope that SNP will be different.

It won't of course. The SNP is going to fall down over the question of what is going to happen to the Scottish Churches. Already people are beginning to ask the SNP speakers: "What is your attitude to the established Church?" etc. And what can the poor patriotic Nationalists say but, "Oh yes. We are all Christians!" The laugh is of course that Christ wasn't a Scotsman at all, and even he wouldn't accept Mrs Winifred Ewing's slogan 'Put Scotland First'. Why should any intelligent person put Scotland or Britain first when we all know perfectly well that the main political problem facing us all is how to organise the world to effect the *peaceful survival of humanity*? Clearly this is a problem of government as well as of beliefs, and a look at the world as a whole area will show that we have a lot of sorting-out to do before the necessary global re-orientation of ideological thinking is achieved. Paradoxically, the very success of the Scottish Nationalist movement will probably be its downfall if the explanation of its significance is thoroughly spread about.

Comparing the popularity of the SNP in Scotland with that of Humanism, why should the SNP blossom whilst Humanism fades? The answer is that the SNP advocates direct political action and asks for votes. What does Humanism ask for? Not even non-participation in schools, non-kneeling during church prayers or non-participation in standing to attention during 'God save the Queen'.

Ted Willis, in writing plays like 'Dixon of Dock Green' and 'Mrs Thursday'—always evading the very appearance of religion and patriotism—produces a milk-and-water effect which is anything but inspiring. Then we get others who are boasting about being members of the Labour Party when people know very well that Mr Harold Wilson and Mr George Brown are great Bible readers in church and so on—and are therefore most unlikely to agree to revision of the 1944 Education Act of the sort we want. People

aren't stupid. They can see and smell these obvious contradictions even if they cannot always put them clearly into words. And I believe that if they are given a clear and strong lead with a chance to vote for a radically new political ideology they will rally to the cause. If we do this I am certain that the 90,000 members of the SNP will seem like a mere drop in the bucket in comparison with the support a genuine Open Society type of political party would have once it gets under way.

Only this week I got a phone-call from a reader of *World Forum* (where I have been proposing forming a World National Party) and he has offered to act as Secretary. This is a pattern which can be repeated many times over. People will sacrifice time and effort to a cause, founded on a sound basis, when there is some hope of practical results. People are fed up with talk. They want action, and significant action (such as taking votes away from the old parties) will make the kind of news which will tell the world about us.

Official beliefs are established fundamentally through political enactments. The way the law is framed enables ministers, here in Dundee, to gain entrance to schools every Friday; for such things as this to be prevented, action must be brought to bear on the government to change the laws on religious privileges. And, of course, we mustn't overlook the old problem of censorship; hear, again, Thomas Payne: "Certain I am that when opinions are free, either in matters of government or religion, truth will finally and powerfully prevail".

THE FREETHINKER AND ITS READERS

(Continued from front page)

cautious, advise the Editor to remain unobtrusively in the background. The recent absence of the Editorial is celebrated by three and mourned by five.

Articles should be shorter (a frequent request) or longer (rare); they are too intellectual and highbrow (!) or too paltry and lowbrow; they are of high standard (sometimes) or they are "appalling" (here, a would-be contributor is quoted whose description best suits his own work). The correspondence section should be removed (shame) or it should be increased (three requests). Book and theatre reviews raise little comment.

The flag's change from red to blue, and the change from black to blue in the information box, are generally approved, though some think it is indicative of a secret change in political sympathies. Some say the red was too garish and strident—and one reader has come to see that the paper costs sixpence and isn't free at all.

However conflicting, all these comments and criticisms are most welcome and declare an interest in the paper out of all proportion to its circulation. How they come to influence the new policy will be seen next week when the policy will be outlined. This new and firm editorial policy should not be taken to imply that it isn't subject to amendments. Experiment with new ideas will continue indefinitely. Its main purpose is to define a direction and aim for the FREETHINKER and to minimise confusion for the reader.

THE PROBLEM OF NEW MORALITY

Bob Crew

THERE has been some publicity on television and in the press recently about Mothers in Action (a group formed to provide self-help for unmarried mothers). According to the secretary of Mothers in Action, Barbara Ford, the illegitimate babies of the group's members were accidents and, because of the low incomes on which members are attempting to survive with their babies, much-loved children have become millstones round their mothers' necks. According to Quintin Hogg, the men who refuse to father their illegitimate children should be made to pay more maintenance money. The anonymous men of the mothers in action are not, presumably, much concerned about the fate of their bastard children.

If illegitimate children are being born in Britain at the rate of 70,000 a year and if, at the last count, 360,000 were known to exist under the age of sixteen (and official statistics indicate that this is so), it is a sad reflection on our political and social-welfare systems that it has taken a handful of courageous unmarried mothers in Kentish Town to set the nation talking about a problem that should never have arisen.

Legacy of Religion

Of course, it has a great deal to do with the traditional influence of the churches why legislative reform and, subsequent social action, has been subjugated for so long to that jaded and ever-failing alternative, personal compliance with conventional morality. I should think it not untrue to say that, if it weren't for organised religion and the trappings of conventional morality to which that has largely given rise, there would be no problem of illegitimate children; we should have had abortion, birth control, sex education, freedom to be illegitimate and social ethics a long time ago, thus precluding many of the cruel and absurd tragedies with which we are faced today.

The *religioso* tell us that, if it weren't for people defying the moral teachings of the churches, the problems would not have arisen. But that is no solution at all to the great many people who happen to find the teachings of conventional morality, in relations to sex, intellectually and emotionally inadequate, if not impoverished; people who could have organised themselves very well and without tragedy in life's sexual pleasures if it weren't for the impertinent and at times malicious interference of the *religioso*.

The attitude of conventional moralists, to people who have refused to deny themselves the sexual freedom against which they have been warned, has been one of spite and ethical sabotage. Any attempts by moral heretics and defaulters to organise the expression of love and/or the pursuit of libidinous pleasure in a responsible, constructive, socially ethical and harmless manner, have become the object of social scorn and attack; both by the creation of

prejudice, with which to inflict mental cruelty, and by legislation, with which to prevent moral heretics and defaulters from arriving at the kind of society that could remove the pitfalls into which the conventional moralists have been content to see them fall.

An Anomalous Situation

At the time of writing, there is among the conventional moralists, an attitude of revenge and churlishness to unmarried mothers. This attitude boils down to the opinion that society shouldn't be expected to pay for the mistakes of the permissive and that people who are permissive should have to suffer in the process; suffering, it seems, is the only alternative to conventional morality that its upholders are prepared to consider and, certainly, the continuance of suffering is the only way left for them to preserve a morality which is now obsolete. One might say, by the same token of the necessity of suffering, that if a person fails to observe the highway code and suffers injury in a road accident, society should not be expected to foot the bill of the injured person's mistake; but conventional moralists do not say that.

The whole subject of national assistance and the welfare state is, of course, anomalous, in respect of the sick, the injured, the old, the unemployed and the unmarried. But the point at issue in this particular fracas is whether unmarried mothers are as entitled to full benefits as anyone else. The matter is further complicated by the consideration that we are approaching a time when, the world population explosion with which we are faced, might well necessitate the need to introduce taxes or some other restriction on parents for the children they wish to bring into the world; at which time, a further anomaly could arise with unmarried mothers drawing national assistance to help pay the taxes put on childbirth by the state!

Mothers in Action sacrifice a great deal to keep their children, rather than have them adopted at the expense of the state, which they could do so easily. It is quite stupid, of course, that people should wish to deny unmarried mothers an increase in maintenance money out of the national exchequer when, some of the money that they guard so jealously from unmarried mothers, is used to subsidise the orphanages to which these mothers can otherwise send their children. If people are against money going into the pocket of the unmarried mother who wishes to keep her child, they should equally be against money going into the orphanages to which she can send her child at their expense. Such is the hypocrisy and moral ineptitude of a conventional morality which appears to prefer the existence of state-subsidised and motherless orphanages to that of a community of unmarried mothers subsidised by the state. Conventional moralists, opposed to the financial assistance of unmarried mothers as a form of national assistance, might equally be opposed to the assistance of alcoholics, drug addicts, the unemployed and the mentally sick, but one does not hear that they are. Orphanages, if really concerned about the sum total of welfare among the nation's illegitimate children, might make a donation to Mothers in Action . . .

Moral Immorality ?

It is solely to do with the sexual aspect of the unmarried mother's plight why conventional moralists are capable of such prejudice and inhumanity to her, even though, in her

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alleged immorality, there are many qualities of morality of which they, her accusers, are manifestly lacking.

Unlike women who marry simply to provide a father, name and security for their families, rather than marrying for anything remotely resembling love (and we all know that there are many such women), members of Mothers in Action go out to work to provide for themselves and their children. Instead of having their babies adopted and leading what might otherwise be a very comfortable and much more successful life, Mothers in Action work harder than the average housewife, sacrifice a great deal and undergo many hardships. Unlike many of their maternal counterparts elsewhere in society, they do not seek anything for nothing and they try very hard to put things right for their children; they accept full responsibility for what has happened, they stand independent of the men who have helped to cause their condition and they try to cause the rest of society the least nuisance and imposition. They do not slink-off irresponsibly, like the "baddies" leaving the "goodies" to hold the baby; and this is probably their biggest mistake.

By staying to face their responsibilities, professing dignity, a lack of guilt and a true love for their children, they do not appear in the wicked-women role traditionally prescribed for them by conventional morality; thus they offend against social respectability and values so much that they reduce the extent to which the so-called "goodies" can appear good by the actions and subsequent need for help of the so-called bad. By refusing to be utterly irresponsible and "bad", they have less chance of survival than they would otherwise have if they admitted to their "sin", sacrificed their dignity and pride to the superiority of a told-you-so conventional morality, and handed over their babies to the self-appointed "goodies" to be saved and to serve as an ever-lasting warning to others who might not be so loyal to the teachings of their morality without concrete or, more appropriately, flesh and blood evidence, of its pitfalls. Conventional morality resents nothing more than a responsible and moral-minded "sinner" and it is prepared to go to great length and expense to reduce moral heretics and defaulters to "sinners" with real sins that can offend against the majority.

Questions

There are many questions to which the formation of Mothers in Action has given rise. What measure of responsibility should a woman accept in *allowing* a man to enter her and is this the kind of responsibility that can be taught to children in school? Are men really so intellectually superior to women that they have the guile (if that is what it is) to have the advantage over women in bed? Why not an accident of birth, to rate for national assistance, as would an accident of health, fortune or even death? What degree of guilt ought to apply to bringing unwanted children into the world, particularly when those children cannot be provided for? Is it enough that a woman who cannot provide for a child (even if she is married) should insist on having a baby for her own (selfish) emotional satisfaction, when that child will soon remind her that it didn't ask to be brought into this world and when there is a serious population explosion to be dealt with in our time? Should women be equally responsible for the maintenance of illegitimate children as are men? Can man be expected to take complete responsibility for a joint action with woman if equality between the sexes is to be achieved and respected? Do illegitimate children have more complexes and handicaps than the thousands of legitimate children of a similarly handicapped condition of whom we have ample evidence? Aren't mothers who marry simply to save face and pro-

vide security (who are often unloved, unloving, hateful and quite unsuitable for bringing up their legitimate children) guilty of generating more unhappiness and psychological complications than those who don't? Should society encourage more mothers in these circumstances to remain unmarried and thereby increase the population of illegitimate children? Do women *need* husbands any more? Would unmarried people have children carelessly if they could claim national assistance for them?

Questions, questions, questions! The whole problem of a new morality (or more precisely, social ethics) and the permissive society is loaded with unanswered questions which have long been neglected if not deliberately suppressed by the churches and conventional moralists. The case of Mothers in Action is a part of the problem, but there are as many unwanted and ill-afforded children inside marriage these days as there are out of it. And there are as many *bona-fide* marriages that are changing the nature of the sacred institution as are the emergence of illegitimate unions. There are, further, schoolgirl mothers who are unmarried and would marry if the law permitted them. The problem is one of achieving a new morality far more creditable than the existing morality which we have inherited from morally inept, if not corrupt, institutions.

A HUMANIST IN CHURCH

Margaret Green

I DIDN'T want to go to church. But my 4-year-old was one of the kings in a nativity scene staged by his playgroup. The hall was too small to house all the parents and children, so the Church was used—and I went along.

What were my reactions as I crossed the threshold? The Curate had often said of others "once over the threshold . . ." But the physical act of walking into a building didn't alter my mental conclusions of disbelief.

I sat at the back and surveyed the scene. Parents and children chatted together, heads turned as group photos were taken of 'actors', and the children showed each other the gaily wrapped presents they clutched for 'little Jesus' (but as my 4-year-old said, "Little Jesus is only a doll really"!). The general buzz subsided as the Curate welcomed everyone and announced the first carol. The actors took up their positions as the appropriate part was sung, and between carols the chatting of the congregation continued, drowning the readings from the Bible. It was only silenced when we were asked to 'kneel in prayer'.

As I sat, while the congregation obediently knelt, I looked back to my first conscious memories of Church, when everyone was kneeling in prayer and I not knowing what to say, said the National Anthem, as this was the most devout thing I knew!

But what were the other parents thinking at that moment? Were they saying, as I had done on many occasions, "that's enough kneeling, I'll sit up now", or were they thinking how useful churches would be for discussions, plays, concerts and all the other activities that are normally housed in ancient, overcrowded church halls—or were they really bent on prayer?

Then it was all over and we were herded out as informally as we had gone in. But as one mother said, "It wasn't like church, was it?"

A HISTORICAL GOD?

A. J. Lowry

THOUGH a sceptic for many years, I until recently considered the theory that Jesus never lived as utterly untenable and rather embarrassing to the cause of serious rationalism. However, I was forced to amend this opinion, not by any secularist publication, but by honestly examining the absolute paucity of evidence Christianity has to offer in its own defence. Nineteen centuries ago, the Apostle Paul warned the Christians: 'And if Christ is not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain' (1 Cor. 15 : 14). But today, the situation is even worse than this, for not only are the Christians incapable of proving that Jesus rose from the dead, they appear to have enormous difficulty proving that he ever lived at all!

The Internal Evidence

To many Christians, the way they feel inside is adequate proof of 'the fact' of the risen Lord. But if we can solve questions of Jewish history by such intuitive processes, then the fact that I feel that Jesus didn't rise from the dead (or even lived) must be evidence equally as admissible as the Christians' own.

The Christians next turn to the Gospels to obtain the proof that they require. But the Gospels which we have at present are only four from the very much greater number (those of Thomas, pseudo-Matthew, etc.), which the Council of Nicea rejected, and which the Christians agree are spurious. How, then, may we be sure that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not spurious also? The fact that they are amongst the oldest of the Gospels is not, of course, conclusive, since this proves only that if they are forgeries, then they are older forgeries than most of the others. Neither will the Christians' claim that the mutual agreement between these four positively prove their truthfulness stand close scrutiny. The Gospels often contradict each other, but nowhere with such abundance as when speaking of the death and resurrection of Jesus—the one point absolutely essential to Christian belief. (Compare, for example, Matt. 27 : 37 with Mark 15 : 26, Luke 23 : 38 and John 19 : 19; or Mark 16 : 8 with Luke 24 : 8, 9). But these contradictions, the Christians would have us believe, prove their authenticity beyond doubt, since if the Apostles were making the story up, they would obviously make it up more coherently than that. Apart from placing far more faith in the early Christians' intelligence than I feel willing to share,

this statement means in fact that where the Gospels agree, that proves them true, and where they disagree, that proves them true also! If the Christians can argue no better than this, it would surely be to the advantage of all if they ceased to argue altogether.

My faith in human nature recently took a severe jolt when I read the works of a Christian apologetic wasting enormous quantities of ink and paper in proving the existence and resurrection of Jesus from the New Testament. Of course it is true that if one accepts the New Testament, then one will believe in the resurrection of Jesus, just as if one accepts Hesiod's *Theogony* one will believe that Zeus sits on top of Mount Olympus; but what if one accepts the first of these proposals no more than the last? Christians cannot appeal (as they would like to) to the five hundred witnesses referred to in 1 Cor. 15 : 6; they have only one witness (Paul) that this is not a pure fabrication, and the one witness that they are able to produce is an exceedingly biased one. It is clear then that to prove that the resurrection of Jesus is any more historical than that of Osiris' or Lemminkainen's, the Christians must produce evidence within their own devotional scriptures.

The External Evidence

It is at this point, therefore, that the testimony of Josephus is usually produced. This consists of a small paragraph in the *Antiquities* in which we find Jesus referred to as 'the Christ' and as having risen from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Unfortunately for the Christians, however, the problems involved in accepting this passage are insurmountable. To begin with, the difference between the Christians and the Jews was simply that the former believed that Jesus was the Christ. Josephus, as we all know, was a Jew, and therefore most certainly would not have written this passage attributed to him. We must also believe that Josephus, who was a sufficient sycophant to obtain imperial patronage for his *Jewish Wars* from the very man (Titus) who had led the war against his own compatriots, deliberately made himself unpopular by sympathising with the ostracised Christian minorities. Also, assuming that he did believe this man to be the Christ, why did he employ only one small paragraph of his exceedingly large book in his description? And finally, why was it that the early Christian scholars (e.g., Origen, 185-254) were completely unaware of this much-debated reference to their master? Indeed, no one at all appears to have ever heard of it until Eusebius (264-340). He, of course, wrote in the days of Constantine, when Christianity had attained the status of the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the Christians would have had every opportunity to interfere with Josephus' works to their hearts content. All the evidence then points to the conclusion that the passage in question is no more authentic than the many crude interpolations which it is now admitted the Christians wove into the Slavonic translations of his work.

Without Josephus to rely on, many Christians turn to Pliny the Younger and Tacitus to give them the evidence they need. Both these writers, however, merely mention that the Christians of their day worshipped the god 'Christos', which no more proves that that god ever lived than the fact that the Moqui Indians worship Huruing Wuhti proves the historicity of that enigmatic individual.

100 YEARS OF FREETHOUGHT

By DAVID TRIBE

"No small part in the movement for reform has been played by the freethinkers as David Tribe describes in *100 Years of Freethought*. He surveys the battles fought in Britain by the National Secular Society which celebrated its centenary last year."

—*Portsmouth Evening News*.

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Evidence for the Prosecution

On the contrary, Tacitus openly scorns the Christians for their abominable superstitions in matters of belief. In this opinion he is joined by Lucian, the second century Roman satirist, who speaks of the Christians as poor simpletons who would believe any story. Apuleius, his contemporary, in his book *The Golden Ass*, culminates the list of multifarious sins possessed by one of the characters, by explaining that she belonged to a blasphemous and fantastic monotheistic sect. (Not surprisingly, the Spanish Inquisition failed to see the funny side of such comments, and made great efforts to mutilate as many copies of Apuleius' work as they could lay hands on.) Meanwhile, Celsus, another Roman writer, explains at great length the various forms of Christian knavery practised and current in his day. Such evidence clearly indicates that the early Christians were devoid of any responsibility whatsoever, and were quite capable of producing forged biographies of mythical persons in very large quantities indeed. In view of this, therefore, the 'proofs' offered for the existence of the man Jesus are highly suspect, while there appears no reason at all for believing that this personage (assuming for the moment that he did exist) ever was resurrected from the dead.

A negative proof is, by nature, an extremely difficult task, and since we do not have in our possession the Bethlehem parish register for 1 A.D. or 4 B.C. (or whatever date for the nativity the reader thinks most suitable), it is, of course, quite impossible to state with certainty that the man Jesus never existed. However, we can and we must continually explain that the combined resources of Christendom are completely unable to produce one jot of evidence in defence of its most cherished ideas, and that, under the circumstances, the dogmatic assertions of this belief are totally without foundation or excuse.

REVIEW

David Tribe

MARX and Lenin were great freethinkers and humanists, recognising the complex hopes and fears of mankind, but marxism-leninism has often been interpreted as a political system which too glibly postulated that with changed economic circumstances religion would simply wither away. It is true that without the incessant propaganda for religion one finds in Western papers, radio, television, public pronouncements, festive seasons and schools, and without state subsidies and taxation and rating relief, religion is cut down to size as a minority aberration. But turning a local church into an anti-god museum by no means guarantees rationalism in the parish. Indeed religion as a dynamic force often thrives on persecution. Nor does it seem that any political system, however much it tries to eliminate exploitation, can abolish local injustices, restore confidence to social inadequates, or compensate entirely for life's tragedies like crippling and bereavement. It was too easy to think the expropriated masses, forced to pray to obtain bread from pious soup-kitchens, would cease to pray if able to earn it. Today even Christians recognise the humbug of this dragooned devotion and admit that the lowest strata of society, at least in the towns, have always lived essentially godless lives. You may find them begging at church doors; they seldom go inside. Indeed religion might almost be described as a middle-class neurosis. To understand it one must understand its motivation, and to be a humanist one must have freedom, freedom to reject and freedom to accept.

It was therefore a great pleasure for me to receive *Humanism, Atheism: Principles and Practice* (Novosti Press Agency). It isn't at the time of writing available in this country, but the reader should enquire at Collet's, Central Books or Russian News. (It's in English, generally well translated.) The editor, who has also contributed the first section, is Russian philosopher and journalist

Inga Kichanova. In 1964 she went to Italy as observer at the Second Vatican Council and then made contact with freethought colleagues in the West. Since her return, she has been prominently associated with the newly-formed Institute of Scientific Atheism and the learned journal *Science and Religion*, which did me the honour to republish "The Problem of Death" from the FREETHINKER and an NSS pamphlet. Mrs Kichanova is a dedicated marxist who is eager to talk to people of all ideologies and has a warm regard for the individual with all his hopes and fears and dreams. To produce this book she has gathered around her atheists as sensitive as herself, and the resulting document is—what freethought books in the *blasé* West do not dare to be today—inspirational. "No wonder then that the man who realises the meaning of social activity, the significance of his own efforts in it, does not feel any need of a celestial intermediary in his relations with society or with individuals." "The work of the atheist requires great love for man, great selflessness, skill and infinite tact. It can be effective only if the believer and atheist meet voluntarily and openly."

The editor and Boris Grigoryan go into the philosophy of freethought, with a reference to the FREETHINKER, and marxist dialogue with the Catholic Church; and stress that social co-operation is not to be interpreted as ideological compromise, but will gradually undermine religion without causing the psychological problems of individuals alienated from their surroundings. Art, literature and morality are not sacrificed, but rather humanised. Mr Grigoryan quotes many case histories, one of an attractive medical student whose life had been blighted when she found God and lost man. Vladimir Pomerantsev continues these *vignettes* based on his observations in Estonia. This country he found had been most "degodded" in the last decade and he wanted to test the religious thesis that morality was bound to have suffered. Though he states his conclusion simply as "the loss of faith does not result in an outrage of vice", there is abundant evidence the converse is true: higher standards of conduct, more sense of duty, flourishing social work. The sense of being adrift is found more in those who stay religious, like the old pastor who admitted sadly, "I'm too old to change my profession".

Most moving of all are the personal testimonies at the end. Alexander Osipov was ordained as an Orthodox priest and became Professor at the Leningrad Ecclesiastical Academy. He was induced to see science as the handiwork of God, culture as a vehicle of conversion, poverty as an opportunity of uttering soothing Christian words, ritual as tradition, and the corruption of the priests as vindicated by the Berdyayev formula on the worthiness of Christianity and the unworthiness of Christians. But as he approached 50 and professional decline, with nothing satisfying to look back on, he had a moment of truth and resigned. Even more profoundly evocative is Nikolai Amosov's brilliant reflections on life and death as he, a surgeon, performs a heart operation on a "Brave New World" mathematician. The atmosphere is uniquely living.

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Letters to the Editor

MR LOWRY'S article (January 19) was interesting to read, but it was not quite to the point. My central argument against humanism is not that it fails to produce Hamlets and Macbeths, but that it fails to understand the world from which Hamlets and Macbeths are produced. No one welcomes tragedy into their lives, but nevertheless it must come sooner or later. Humanism cannot avert that.

With regard to Epicurus, I look upon his statement on death as a big joke. Epicurus tried in vain to take the sting out of death. Obviously death means something to everyone. Why mourn for the dead if death means nothing? I leave Mr Lowry to answer that question.

In regard to ethics, Mr Lowry fails to understand what I am getting at, but perhaps through time and understanding he may do so.

When I say the subject of death and suicide are taboo for humanists, I mean the tragic explanations of them which are diametrically opposed to the humanists' high value of life in this world which is altogether very questionable. What is the value of human existence? The proper answer is *nothing*. Death levels all men the same. Those who do not understand this should wear a dunce's cap. One has only to consider the wretchedness of human existence to be aware of the futility of it all. Only a religious man like a humanist would state otherwise.

R. SMITH.

BBC Supporter of Blood Sports?

"... all institutions and movements are judged by the actions of their members" (letter, January 5 issue).

In the case of the BBC, the Corporation is inevitably judged from the material provided by its script writers. During a normal hunting season, therefore, listeners to early morning radio understandably believe that the BBC—if not an official organ for the British Field Sports Society—at least wholeheartedly supports the hounding to death of wild animals for amusement!

(Mrs) VERA SHEPPARD.

God's Bottom

MICHAEL CREGAN, in his article *THE FLAVOUR OF HUMANISM* (January 12) castigates Humanists as a "group of arrogant bigots", mainly concerned with being satirical at the expense of religion. Their satire, he says, sometimes sinks to the level of bad taste, like the remark of a FREETHINKER contributor who "could not soberly credit a Creator with needing something to put his backside on". That statement was made in my article *WHEN THE LAST TRUMPET SOUNDS*.

Where does Mr Cregan draw the line between legitimate criticism and bad taste? Can Mr Cregan credit a Creator with the need to be seated? Is it bad taste to suggest the Almighty, having made man in his likeness, has a posterior? My remark was made to point out the absurdity of the throne notion, or any sitting place for an omnipotent being. The Creator must have a backside if he created man in his own image. His posterior and the glorified chair called throne were obviously human conceptions. If mention of such things touches Mr Cregan to the raw, I am sorry for him. As for his statement that the public has inherited a Christian attitude through a net work of sources, he ought to know that childhood indoctrination is almost entirely responsible for that attitude. I agree with him that there are many sincere clerics, concerned for the general welfare of their parishioners, and refrain from classing them all as humbugs. To impute bad taste to me because of my logical criticisms of the God he disbelieves in, with his mortally-conceived furniture, is nothing less than absurd.

F. H. SNOW.

Humane-ism

I CANNOT agree with Miss Barter (Letters, January 5) when she says the humane behaviour of any Christian group is "beyond reproach". Some Christians are compassionate towards other humans but what Christian organisation unanimously condemns blood-sports, vivisection, circus-training of animals, imprisoning large beasts in zoos, exporting live animals for slaughter abroad, seal slaughter, incarceration of sentient creatures in broiler-houses and battery-cages, or the close tethering of day-old calves; none lead the way in breaking the tradition of eating mortifying flesh; but all Christian organisations speak with one voice of "higher

and lower" animals and acclaim man as the highest; they see nothing immoral in exploitation so long as *human* bodies are not exploited.

What distresses me is that I have yet to hear the voice of the humanist movement declare that there is no higher or lower life and that the principle of justice is indivisible. Man may have more convolutions of 'grey matter' but this only makes him different, not supreme.

Christians tolerate the nauseating term 'animal lovers' but if we introduce the idea of *compassion* for animals, or campaigning for their rights, then they have no time for you.

I ask Humanists to act for the welfare of *all* animals.

(Miss) VIOLET L. MITCHELL.

Hardly Scientific

IN my opinion it is high time argument about the meanings and merits of 'atheist' and 'agnostic' was finished. To different people they obviously have a variety of different meanings to do with belief in, knowledge of or concern with a god. In serious argument we had better define precisely what we mean by either word and also by 'theist' and 'god'.

In ordinary conversation either term is often sufficient, though I submit that the interpretation which says flatly that there probably never has been, there is not and never shall be a god (of any kind), is hardly scientific.

Some of us, with our wits about us, are not content with the theory that things just naturally *are* and that they automatically go on working, though in practice we carry on as though this were the case, and many people evidently have not further interest. A knowledge of science makes things more, not less, intriguing. There is obviously so much we cannot understand, and perhaps, due to our mortal limitations, never could understand, though equally apparently there is 'something' that makes things tick, some explanation of 'beginning', 'end', 'no end' or 'why anything at all'.

Some of the ancient religious "explanations" were quite intelligent attempts to account for what was seen in the light of the limited scientific knowledge of those days; they were certainly poetic and served many social purposes. But the millions-to-one chance of their happening to be true makes it absurd to believe them literally, especially in view of so much contradiction among the 'revelations'!

But it is equally absurd to dismiss all modern speculations about possible higher intelligences manipulating humans computer-wise (and perhaps leaving them limited freedom of will and action). Such creatures, or whatever they were, would indeed approach the God concept, without being supernatural, and might well explain some of our more limited eternal mysteries, even though 'higher' or 'further' truths could still be out of reach. I suppose the religious would not accept anything less than the ultimate as their God, but I should dearly like to know what this 'next step above mortals' could tell us, for example, of the mysteries of time, space and the speed of light, and of consciousness.

MARJORIE MEFHAM.

I WOULD like to quote from *Psychic News* (January 12):

"At the height of that 'flu epidemic we were given from spirit sources a simple but very effective remedy:

The juice of one freshly-squeezed orange, a desertspoonful of olive oil, a teaspoonful of honey. Make the mixture in a cup and stand in hot water until thoroughly blended. Sip while warm, preferably in bed.

It worked wonders then—and still does!"

Those Freethinkers who do not believe in the Soul might try this, and see whether they are led to do some serious re-thinking!

JOHN SUTHERLAND.

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