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Friday,
August 2, 1968**CENSORSHIP AT WESTMINSTER**

Elizabeth Straker

AT the invitation of William Hamling (Member for Woolwich West) members of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society, and others, met in Committee Room 10, at the Palace of Westminster, at 6.30 p.m. on July 10, as the clouds burst outside and flooded England on the wettest day of the year.

I attended the meeting in place of my husband, Jean, for whose Freedom of Vision Campaign William Hamling had organised a previous meeting on the subject of censorship in the arts in October 1967.

As the room could only be booked for 90 minutes, it was a short meeting, and there was little time for discussion or the following up of suggestions. The room was about half-full with a number of Members of Parliament present, coming and going about their business. But Members did stay, listen, speak and showed increasing concern with the censorship laws; some telling points were made. Saying that although everyone knew him as no great friend to liberty, Raymond Fletcher (Member for Ilkeston) said that his experience of what he had seen on the floor of the House had brought him wholeheartedly against the upholders of censorship, for some of the most prominent were among the most salaciously minded: "Down with the conspiracy of cretinocracy".

Stuart Hood, speaking as Chairman of the Society, said that it was not only necessary to raise money for the Calder & Boyars defence of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, but also to defend other works of art, besides providing moral support for those attacked by censorious organisations. Legal reform was necessary; the Obscene Publications Act were too vaguely worded: "What was corruption? And what corrupts?" In his childhood he had been corrupted by the Old Testament, then by Virgil and later by the Army. The problem was how to prove a defence. Jill Mortimer made the point that although there was a defence of artistic and literary merit in the Act, and the evidence of experts could be given in court, such evidence did not appear to be acceptable to the jury. Hugh Jenkins (Member for Putney) regarded as hopeless any attempt to get an abolition bill through the present House of Commons. Stuart Hood said that the Society wanted legal reform at present and abolition as a long term policy.

I said that I would speak both on Jean's behalf—as he was absent through illness—and on behalf of Freedom of Vision, who, in conjunction with COSMO, had proposed a draft Freedom of Communications Bill (see *FREETHINKER*, May 17, 1968) which had the object of abolishing the words 'obscene' and 'indecent' as definitions of crimes. Jean's attempts to prove a defence for his photographs both on the grounds that they were sold to mature and responsible persons, and also that, even if they were obscene in some-

one's judgment, they were justified on grounds that they were of artistic and scientific value, had failed.

I referred to the information recently published in the *FREETHINKER* (May 24 and June 7) about the change in the Danish obscenity laws, and to the setting up of a US Commission of enquiry (*FREETHINKER*, July 12) to study the effect of obscenity and pornography on the public and the relationship of such materials to crime and other anti-social behaviour. I proposed that Parliament should set up an official committee for a similar purpose, and I said that we would pass on the great amount of information we had gathered about arts censorship in society to such a committee. Ben Whitaker (Member for Hampstead), and Chairman of the Freedom of Vision Teach-In on "Censorship in the Arts"—see *FREETHINKER*, April 7, 1967—said that he supported me in this proposal.

The downpour had delayed Bernard Williams (Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge) who had come to the meeting to define 'indecent'. He did not hold an *a priori* view that there should be no censorship; he would not regard this as a natural right. He felt that censorship in sexual matters in literature and art revolved round a conception of *decency*, not *obscenity*. What was indecent was not necessarily wrong, but unsuitable in public. As a philosopher he might define 'indecent' in literature as 'a private act in public'. Ben Whitaker wanted a more precise definition and inquired what censorship he would retain. Bernard Williams answered that he could not define indecency in less general terms. He had felt that the banning of horror comics was a useful and successful censorship.

Dr David Kerr (Member for Wandsworth Central) objected to censorship because it was impracticable. It never stopped any activity it was aimed at. In fact it was a curtain to prevent society from knowing what was going on. What was the object of the locked cupboard in the House of Commons Library (which had contained a copy of the book *Nudes of Jean Straker*)? "To stop books from being stolen", the Chairman interjected.

The Rt. Hon. George Strauss (Member for Vauxhall) thought that there had been a great increase in liberalism in the House. His own Act removing the Lord Chamberlain from the theatre, was, he felt, a great step forward, although "he knew Jean Straker was angry that the effect was to bring the theatre under the Obscene Publications Act". (See *FREETHINKER*, March 29.) Total abolition was not practicable, and for the foreseeable future prosecutions were going to be decided by juries. It was necessary to strive for a better informed public opinion.

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

BLASPHEMY

Correspondence continued

IT is useful that David Tribe has confirmed again that Blasphemy has been abolished as a crime, which is all I said in my original letter to the FREETHINKER. Nothing I said in that letter has been invalidated by anything subsequently published.

So that no one may be in doubt as to what the Law now says, I think it necessary to quote verbatim from the Criminal Law Act 1967 (Chapter 58). It was enacted by Parliament on July 21, 1967, and came into force, for the most part, on January 1, 1968. The rubric to Section 13 of the Act says:

"Abolition of Certain Offences and consequential repeals". The Section says:

13—(1) The following offences are hereby abolished, that is to say—

(b) any offence under an enactment mentioned in Part 1 of Schedule 4 to this Act, to the extent to which the offence depends on any section of part of a section or part of a section included in the third column of that Schedule.

Schedule 4, to which the rubric refers to Section 13, is headed: REPEALS (Obsolete Crimes)

Part 1

ACTS CREATING OFFENCES TO BE ABOLISHED.

Chapter	Short Title	Extent of Repeal
9 Will.3.c.35	The Blasphemy Act 1967.	The Whole Act.

I should have thought that this was clear enough; but this is not to say that there are not other Statutes which still remain and need to be repealed. What these Statutes are is listed and explained in a statement originally issued by the National Council for Civil Liberties and reprinted by the National Secular Society, titled *Religion and the Law*. Part of this statement includes the following words:

"The 1698 Blasphemy Act, still on the Statute Book, makes it an offence to 'by writing, printing, teaching or advised speaking, deny the Christian religion to be true, or the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be of divine authority'."

When I call attention to the fact that blasphemy has been abolished as a crime I mean that this Act has gone from the Statute Book and do so because it appeared to me that the inclusion of the word 'blasphemy' in the NCCL AGM resolution does not appear to take note of that fact. It would, I think, have been more appropriate for the NCCL executive committee to pass a resolution to the effect that it noted with pleasure that HM Government had removed from the Statute Book the Blasphemy Act of 1697/8 which had defined the offence in Law.

As to whether any offences at common law have outlived the codification, only tests at common law can show; but it is safe to say that the crime of blasphemy, as defined by Act of Parliament, no longer exists, and therefore becomes out of order in any attempt to repeal other Statutory offences, such as 'obscenity' and 'indecentcy' in the field of publication.

If there is a case for the Statute barring of any residual common law offence in the field of blasphemy—as against the use of the word to imply discrimination against free-thinkers—I continue to think that it should be dealt with as a separate matter and not part of the obscenity-indecentcy proposals.

I think that David Tribe contradicts himself: If in previous years NSS motions on blasphemy he says went through with considerably more support, why then does he find it necessary to couple blasphemy with indecentcy and obscenity now? There is a mystery here which I do not understand.

I recognise that there are a great many varying ethical, moralistic and humanistic interpretations of what is good and bad and right or wrong. I stand in a completely amoral position on all these issues and seek to demolish only barriers to discovery and taxes on knowledge. The laws which Freedom of Vision are asking for repeal are concerned with current Statutes which make certain types of biological, sexual and para-sexual information illegal. I am not aware that there is any legal limitation on the criticism or testing of the Christian religion, in any of its forms there is only the private censorship by those in the service of vested interests in the maintenance of institutional authority.

It is significant that almost everytime I couple religious belief with the obscenity issue, these statements are deleted from recorded speeches and written texts—except in the FREETHINKER. And if, on this occasion, it seems that I am seeking to exclude one particular religious target from personal attack, it is because I think that this target has been removed from the field.

JEAN STRAKER,
co-sponsor Secular Humanism Promotion Unit,
and correspondent Freedom of Vision.

THE ETERNAL FIXITY

F. H. Snow

ONCE upon a time, they say, a Being who could do anything and everything, and had lived from before time was, came to dislike the fact that there was nothing but himself in all space. So he created a host of balls, and spread them everywhere. Then he bethought himself to make living things, and put them on one of the balls. Then he forgot about them, or died, which would account for his showing no interest in them ever since he put them on their dot in the firmament.

That is not what the storytellers say. According to them, he is very much alive, and has had the living things in loving mind all the time. He has done wonderful things for them, as vouched for by the book in which the story is told, and is doing wonderful things for them still. And a great many of the ball's inhabitants believe that, even though nothing wonderful happens. The story must be true, they say, because the Being wrote it—or caused some of his creatures who lived long before them, to write it—which is the same thing, because he told them what to write. And so, though the marvellous one might well have lost all memory of them, to go by the never-changing conditions of the world on which he put them, the continual severities of their lives, and the hardships and disasters that afflict them, he is worshipped as good, kind and wise, and thanked for his mercies.

The Being's ways are unquestionable, according to those who claim authority to speak for him. Nevertheless, to others among his prisoners on the speck called Earth, it appears reasonable to question those ways. They exercise their thinking powers upon the riddle of their circumstances, which they fail to reconcile with the loving concern credited to the mysterious arbiter of their destinies. Unclouded by obligation of belief in the story bequeathed them by ancient forefathers, they subject their indiscernible and apparently inert creator to the analysis of objective reason, and dare to doubt his authenticity.

Meditating, recently, in the depths of my armchair, on the motivations of the Being who, in the belief of many, called our world and the universe into existence, I endeavoured to logically conceive them.

I visualised the lone dweller in space, suspended on wings—unless those appendages are purely ornamental, which scripture does not attest. Alone in nothing from time immemorial, the almighty one ends his solitude by making our globe. After spending three days on the task, he takes but one to create the countless and many far larger worlds that spangle the sky, and sets up a sun and moon to light the earth, although he has already created light for that purpose. Which, if it were not in the story-book, would make nonsense even to believers. But why, having decorated his firmament with all those objects and furnished the earth with living things, has he ignored the whole concern?

It is only sensible to think that in studding the heavens with stars, the Being was pleasurably motivated. Yet that pleasure is utterly unmanifest. It is certainly mystifying that he hasn't played a little with the toys he made—changed their position somewhat; shaped them differently; exercised his unlimited powers on them in some regard. Nary a thing

has hinted at the omnipotent one's interest in the numberless balls he hung about his firmament. The great magician appears to have lost all magical incentive.

As the story goes, the creation of our globe afforded the Being supreme gratification. "He made the stars also", the screed mentions, as of an accessory deed. The tenanting of the Earth with creatures of many kinds, shapes and hues was evidently a greatly congenial task. He blessed the denizens of the deep and air, and blessed the human animal he had made in his own likeness, with the exception of wings. How far, however, has mortal experience affirmed these implications of benevolent purpose?

By what divine motivation does the desert inflict its torrid heat on every generation doomed to live within it? What providential design maintains pestilential and volcanic regions, grievously disastrous to those fated to exist there? Does the changelessness of the vast snow-clad steppes suggest almighty rightness towards the hunger-maddened beasts that rove them, or the inability of a myth to alter their conditions? Is the alleged creator of the polar areas phantasmally incognisant of, or sadistically indifferent to, the eskimo's animalistic existence amid eternal ice? By no feat of reasoning can I conceive a conscious deity allotting barbarous environments to some or any of the beings he made either in his own image or otherwise. Still less, if possible, could I conceive their perpetuation. Even assuming the feasible inception of such conditions, to replace fierce heat and cold by genial temperatures, arid regions by fertile, to render the pestilential innocuous and the volcanic inert, would surely be the motivation of a factual genitor of Earth's inhabitants.

And then, our world's haphazard aspect repels the assumption of design. Its great uncultivable areas, its frozen wastes, its virtually impenetrable jungles, its colossal mountainous barriers, its monstrous irregularities and general disharmony of form and feature, suggest far more the work of mindless forces than of almighty intelligence. Their interminable immutability, and the eternal fixity of everything, accord with the complete inevidence of a celestial architect.

How long will human beings continue to think like children? When will the normally intelligent cease to be nursery-minded, and superstition to raise its ugly head against the findings of science?

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MR. THOMPSON AND HIS UN-ETHICAL CHURCH

Michael Gray

MUCH publicity has been given in these pages to the apparent formation of a new-style Ethical Church—the “Philosophian Church” of the ‘Reverend’ J. J. Thompson. It would be in my opinion both an unhealthy and a dangerous development if professing unbelievers and sceptics, especially from the ranks of Secularists and Humanists, were to be drawn into this new movement. This clinging to the crumbling structure of the Church with all its archaic superstitions, albeit emotionally satisfying, ritual is a sufficiently disturbing demonstration of the strength of the indoctrinating powers of the Church—with its powerful appeal to the unconscious and unreasoning primitive instincts. We should be concentrating our energies not in adding to this hypnotic hold but in seeking to break its influence once and for all.

Mr Thompson wishes to bring about a Second Reformation of the Church, to rid it of its superstition and make it more scientific (and do I hear this cry for de-mythologising from other more orthodox circles attempting to revive a dying faith?). Yet he clings to the most basic evil of the Church, this absurd insistence on an ‘absolute’ standard of morality. I have read with great patience his views on the Social-Survival theory, his Perimanism, Anthropism or whatever other -ism he likes to call it, and might even agree that the preservation of society has been the motive, unconscious or otherwise, behind the formulation of each society’s moral code. But whether we accept this as a fair and just yardstick of morality, and I most certainly do not, is a matter of purely personal opinion, i.e. it is *subjective*. It cannot “justify a basic formulation or law” that “all moral behaviour is directed towards survival of the agent’s society”. It does not follow that because this Social-Survival theory explains the formulation of the ethical codes of the past that this must be the correct basis for a morality of the future.

Under Mr Thompson’s morality all social rebels and revolutionaries would *ipso facto* be immoral persons; it assumes by very definition that there cannot exist any such thing as an immoral society. Presumably then society would be justified in taking any measures it deemed necessary to suppress these revolutionaries. Such an ethical system could even justify the Inquisition, lauding the Inquisitors as moral men since they were seeking to protect their society from destruction by wicked heretics. Such a system would be, as it has always been in the past, an extremely effective device of the Establishment, of the ruling classes (notably the Church), to justify their persecution of any social reformers and revolutionaries whose ideas on changing and improving the social structure might endanger their privileged position.

In the first of Mr Thompson’s “95 Theses” he asserts incredibly, but not surprisingly, that “the Church . . . has been through the ages and can continue to be a force for good. The Church upholds morality . . .” Perhaps we might, in the light of the preceding paragraph, accept that the Church does indeed uphold a morality which maintains it as a rich and powerful parasite upon society, and justifies its suppression of any opponents. But that the Church’s own propaganda about being the traditional force for good should be so naively and uncritically accepted even today would be laughable if it were not so pathetic. Anything good which the Church has taught, such as “love

thy neighbour”, was certainly not original to it. It was taught long before Christ by infinitely more moral, humane men such as Confucius and Lao-Tzu, who differed however in that they attempted to practise what they preached. The only doctrines original to the Church were incontestably evil, such as the exhortations to asceticism and anti-intellectualism and the heinous doctrine of eternal torment in hell, still preached literally today. The torture and murder of heretics, the burning alive of ‘witches’ and countless other incredible atrocities were encouraged and praised as acts of the highest morality by the Church. The Crusades, the Thirty Years War and the Inquisition were all direct results of the Church’s perverted thinking and preaching on morality and typify the monstrous inhumanity which has always been its trademark.

The Church too has been praised for keeping alight the candle of learning through the Dark Ages, when in truth it was responsible for those ages. It controlled education for centuries, and while it did only priests were allowed access to learning while the masses of the people were deliberately kept in ignorance to be ripe for exploitation. The historian Lecky says: “The period of Catholic ascendancy was on the whole one of the most deplorable in the history of the human mind. . . . Not till the education of Europe passed from the monasteries to the universities, not till Mohammedan science, and classical free thought, and industrial independence broke the sceptre of the Church, did the intellectual revival of Europe begin”. (*History of European Morals*, Ch. IV).¹

The Church has always been more concerned with preaching other-worldliness than with trying to improve man’s lot in this world (it is easier to steal from a man while his eyes are uplifted to the heavens). It has been indifferent to social and scientific progress in those few instances where it has not actively opposed them, condoning slavery and injustice by reference to Holy Writ. As recently as 1951 when the Government of Eire introduced a Bill to produce a free health service for mothers and children it was withdrawn on the last moment at the insistence of the Bishops that it was contrary to the moral teachings of the Church. The despicable regimes of Franco and Salazar in Spain and Portugal are supported by the clergy and the apartheid-lovers of South Africa and Rhodesia are good church-going Christians. Nor will readers of this paper be ignorant of the role of the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

Aside from the callous exercise of its temporal power the Church has also a wonderful record in the application of its spiritual (i.e. its psychological) power. How long will the faithful have to wait for a new sane declaration by the Pope about birth control? How many lives have been ruined, how many minds churned into a senseless turmoil of guilt or frustration because of the Church’s attitude to abortion, euthanasia, divorce, homosexuality (or *any* kind of sexuality)? What vestige of evidence is there to support the ‘Reverend’ Thompson’s claim that “the Church . . . has been through the ages and can continue to be a force for good”?

Since Mr Thompson’s theory of ethics is based on an invalid conception of what constitutes a moral action it is not surprising therefore that some of his theses are in fact

immoral. He supports capital punishment (thesis 38) by a process of Old Testament reasoning, yet he insists (thesis 43) that the state has not the right to authorise euthanasia or abortion (except where the mother's life is in danger). Thus under the 'Reverend' Thompson's morality it is perfectly permissible to end a life in a cold-blooded act of vengeance, but not for humanitarian reasons in order to prevent futile and hopeless suffering. He also well demonstrates the lesson that 'absolute' moralities go hand in hand with authoritarianism, requiring (theses 58 and 59) "prospective sexual unions be publicly declared and recorded" and insisting that "clandestine fornication and adultery are hence morally wrong".

It is my view that the 'Reverend' Thompson's Philosophical Church is as dangerous a threat as the traditional

Church, not only to Humanism but to every human being. I see no reason to object to any religious mumbo-jumbo Mr Thompson wishes to cling to in his own church, but it is a great pity that he should be taking up so much space a Secularist journal to propound his ideas. I hope that he will not receive any support for them from Secular Humanists. Any religion or philosophy founded on the concept of the Absolute can only lead to intolerance, for it encourages "the logic of the persecutors" who reason that "we may persecute others because we are right, . . . they must not persecute us because they are wrong".²

¹ For a more comprehensive account of the moral history of the Church refer to *Christianity: the Debit Account* by Margaret Knight, a pamphlet published by the National Secular Society.

² John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty*, Ch. IV.

KNOWING GOD

A. J. Lowry

CHRISTIANS, as those who have had experience of them will no doubt agree, are not the kind of people who only think that there's a God, or who believe that it would be nice if there was one. In their own minds at least, they know with absolute certainty that he exists, and can even list many of his characteristics without the slightest wavering in their absolute confidence in the truth of the assertions to which they subscribe.

Such an attitude at once leads those of a philosophical inclination to ponder upon the question of how they are so certain of God's existence. How, indeed, may we be certain of the existence of anything at all? Our view of the world beyond our own consciousness is wholly and entirely dependent upon the information which our senses feed into the brain. For the congenitally blind, colour does not exist any more than does sound for those born without the faculty of hearing. Once this admission has been made, however, it at once becomes apparent that there is no logical connection between the statements, 'I see X' and 'There is an X which I am seeing'. Because I see something, it does not follow that it is there; nor is the fact of its non-existence. The ability of our sense to deceive us is well known to us all. I may mistake an absolute stranger for a close friend (an illusion), or, suffering an hallucination, may perceive a pink elephant without there being anything there at all.

Now, the Christian claims to know God by observation. In other words, he is claiming that by the operation of a 'God-sensitive sense' (dormant in we unbelievers), he may directly perceive the divinity, and hence become aware of its existence. But, as we have already seen, in the absolute sense in which the Christian makes his claim to knowledge, we cannot know anything at all. Unless, therefore, he can show some unique infallibility accruing to this God-sensitive sense (over and above his simple assertion of it), his argument cannot be used in any objective manner to prove the existence of a supernatural being. We accept that he perceives a God, but as we have seen, from this it does not necessarily follow that there really is a God which he is perceiving.

Though in all such matters the sceptic's logic is impeccable, we nevertheless ordinarily distinguish between verifiable and erroneous sense-impressions; between what we think is real and what we think is illusory. We do this, I

would say, by slackening the definition of our words, and by restructuring the cognitive world in which we live. Should one wish to determine whether or not to apply the term 'existent' to any observed phenomenon, the observation is ordinarily subjected to a number of tests, and it is to these tests that the Christian must subject his perception of God, if it is to be accepted as valid in the normal sense of the word.

We may begin by enquiring as to whether or not it would be logically possible for the object under discussion to exist. On these grounds we could discount the strongest and most consistent accounts of the observation of square circles, for the very simple reason that such things, being a contradiction in terms, could not possibly exist. But in that case, what are we to make of the Christian deity, who accomplishes the remarkable feat of being three Gods and one God, at the same time, and who, being omniscient, displays his wisdom in prohibitions against eating four-legged birds, and marring the corners of your beard (Lev. 11 : 20; Lev. 19 : 27 ?

Secondly, we may examine the reports with which we are presented to discover the consistency between them. By this method also, the Christian God scores but poorly. There are at least 800 Christian churches today, many of whom are at complete odds with the remainder, about almost all the characteristics of their divinity. One may therefore be excused for finding it difficult to accept the accuracy of the Christian's 'God-sensitive sense', when it leads into error at least 799 out of every 800 organisations which employ it.

We may next examine the relationship of the observed phenomenon to the body of knowledge which we already possess. A principle fundamental to the philosophy of science—or any other reasonable understanding of the world—is that axioms and hypotheses should not be multiplied if this can possibly be avoided. If, therefore, I were to receive a report of, say, a herd of elephants flying over the North Pole, I should view it with very much suspicion, since its acceptance would necessitate the re-adjustment of much of my knowledge and beliefs, concerning elephants, aviation and the like. I should therefore probably reject the report, on the grounds that it required fewer assumptions and far less credibility to believe that the observer was mistaken, intoxicated, deranged or mendacious, than it did to believe that so curious an event had taken place.

By the same logic it is clear that the Biblical God, no matter how well observed, cannot be accepted as anything but an hallucination. Any object or being which habitually breaks the majority of scientific laws, and leaves behind it not the slightest evidence of its deeds for posterity's conviction, cannot be accepted as existent, as that word is normally used. It requires fewer axioms to believe that the reports of him and his activities are fictitious, than it does to reconstruct our knowledge in all the physical sciences, on the strength of reports for which we have no first-hand verification.

Finally, we must look at the people who claim to have observed the phenomenon under discussion, to assess the likelihood of them being subject to delusions. But once again the Christians fare badly in the test. They have on numerous occasions announced the end of the world (notably in A.D. 1000), though fortunately they have all failed to arrive. They have produced such men as St Simeon Stylites, who spent thirty years on top of a pillar, and St Jerome, who claimed that he could see fauns and satyrs. Their geocentric universe and their devil-theory of sickness, been totally discredited, and their fanatical excesses during

the Middle Ages cannot be defended by even their most sympathetic critics. In short, in the name of absolute truth, they have continuously and inexcusably been in error, and their insistence upon the virtues of faith rather than rationality, makes the fallacious nature of their beliefs all the easier to comprehend.

Whilst acknowledging the sincerity of the Christian's beliefs, we cannot seriously accept the accuracy of his observations. Any object whose characteristics cannot be observed by a considerable proportion of the population, and cannot be agreed upon even amongst those claiming to perceive them; whose nature and deeds contradicts, not only itself, but also most of the canons of established knowledge; and whose very existence is a matter for devotional faith rather than for rational discussion, cannot be accepted as a part of the existent universe. It is true that in an absolute sense, we have no knowledge of what exists and what does not, but if we are to give words their ordinary meaning, and attempt to create some form of order out of the universe of our sensations, we can only conclude that subscribers to the faith of Christianity are woefully deluded in their claims to a knowledge of God.

HARRIET MARTINEAU: *The courage of her convictions*

Eric Glasgow

MOST of us remember Harriet Martineau, if indeed we remember her at all, as a Victorian authoress who wrote extensively about political economy when that science was in one of its dullest and most gloomy stages. We recall her works in economics and the poor law between 1832 and 1934 as well as, perhaps, her study of *The History of the Thirty Years' Peace: 1816-1846* (1849) and her books on taxation, factory legislation and shipping controls. We may recollect, too, her espousal of the radical social philosophy of Auguste Comte, so challenging to the accepted ideas of Victorian society, which she promulgated in what is, perhaps, the most scholarly of all her works, published in 1853.

In all these activities, however, Harriet Martineau was, of course, entering strange tracts of thought traditionally considered to be unsuitable or closed to women and so she represents a full-scale female reaction against the prevailing winds of custom and prejudice. At least she has shown us what an intelligent woman could do and write.

Born in Norwich on June 12, 1802, Harriet was the sister of James Martineau the celebrated Unitarian divine, and her early religious ideas were thus schooled in the Unitarian tradition and attitudes, Joseph Priestley being one of her great mentors. She began writing in 1821 for a Unitarian organ, the *Monthly Repository*, and it was chiefly encouragement from that quarter which persuaded her, as she said, to discard "darning needles for literature".

All was not plain sailing however; for she did not find it easy to cast off the dark melancholy which always afflicted her; and by 1827, she was castigating, rather unfairly, her own writings, both poetry and prose, as being "dull and doleful".

As a woman stifled by the domestic suffocations of the Victorian female idea, she could not only aspire to emancipation since, unfortunately, she lived at a time when the active militancy of the suffragettes had not yet arisen or achieved its results. Therefore, she largely depended for support and encouragement upon men, amongst them the distinguished Unitarian W. J. Fox (1786-1864). His brother,

Charles Fox, was an aspirant publisher who brought out some of Harriet's stories from 1832 and these were very successful. Although most of them would not be read today, they did provide Harriet with a useful *entrée* into the literary world of London, and she was soon on terms of friendship with such people as Sidney Smith (1764-1840), H. H. Milman (1791-1868), Richard Monckton Milnes (1809-1885) and Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873).

This male recognition was, of course, exceedingly gratifying for her; and she demonstrated, very effectively, that the somewhat arid and academic doctrines of the economists, Malthus, Ricardo and James Mill, could acquire a new and often startling relevance when they were presented to the public by so lively and agile a female pen. Perhaps, by the very fact of being a woman, Harriet Martineau was very readily able to set aside many of the most concealing and shrouding of the social prejudices of her time: certainly, her sex was an essential qualification which enabled her to write plainly and clearly about the problems of society from the detachment of an outsider; and the fact that, as a woman, she was destined by the circumstances of her time to be forever storming the citadels of male power and ascendancy, I am sure, served to keep her on her toes intellectually, even, perhaps, to drive her further to the left in her ideas and her thought than she might otherwise have gone.

At any rate, most of her later writings, such as her *Letters on Man's Nature and Development* (1851) and her dissertations on Comte, sadly displeased her brother, James Martineau, who always had, of course, a very profound feeling for the mystical reality of God. Indeed, it must be noteworthy that Harriet in that respect broke utterly with the family tradition and ceased to accept Christianity in any meaningful sense: thus, she wrote in her *Autobiography* (1877 edition, Vol. 2, p. 185), "I had long perceived the worse than uselessness of enforcing principles of justice and mercy by an appeal to the example of God".

So she became, courageously, a free thinker in the highly

intellectualised Victorian implications of that term. For that alone—a bold, brave bid for an absolute intellectual honesty, a refusal to be intimidated by social pressures or the forces of tradition—Harriet Martineau would well deserve our praise today, even if many of her economic and social ideas must now seem to be crude and dated. She inherited, not the theological attitudes, but certainly the majestic, eloquent literary style, the beauty and the fluency of language, which one finds also in the treatises and sermons of James Martineau. Such passages, by Harriet, occur frequently, like brilliant flashes of light and humanity, in her *Autobiography*, and this same, extraordinary and hereditary literary genre, although it was always somewhat deadened and overlaid by the burdens of social criticism and political economy, found another very congenial and acceptable outlet in Harriet Martineau's writings about the English Lake District and the beauty of natural scenery.

Perhaps we do tend to become too obsessed with Harriet Martineau as a social thinker, an economist and a grimly serious intellectual. We erect her into a blue-stockinged paragon of mind, a reverberating champion of the rights of women to think and to expound about matters of public and permanent concern. If we do that, however, we will present her as being a good deal less agreeable than she was, whether as a person or as a writer, and also, exaggerate the extent of her breach with the true Martineau heritage. Despite her persistent advocacy of free thinking, Harriet felt deeply for the fresh, open appeal of the English countryside, and she became a keen admirer of the English Lake District, especially after she had settled at "The Knoll", near Ambleside, during the winter of 1845-46.

This inspiration was the basis for her *Forest and Game-Law Tales* of 1845, as well as for her *Complete Guide to the English Lakes* of 1855, with its separate sections on Windermere and Keswick. So the determined critic of English conventions, the relentless pursuer of ideas, the devoted seeker for truth, political, social or theological, was able to spend the last thirty years of her life in a relative peace amongst the congenial, enduring hills of the English Lakes with all around her the village of Clappersgate and, beyond, the Brathay River, Lake Windermere and the Furness Fells to Hawkshead and Coniston.

Harriet Martineau died at "The Knoll" on June 27, 1876; but, significantly, she was buried beside her mother in the less salubrious surroundings of Birmingham. Despite all the appearances, she never really rejected the traditional Unitarian pre-occupation with social ideas and social service: hers was, fundamentally, an initial insight which was perhaps by the mere accident of her being a woman in a society which was still dominated and limited by men transmuted and diverted from the family field of theology and community-service in Norwich and East Anglia, into a different but equally serious and austere pursuit of truth, justice and integrity in the analysis of social and economic facts in public life and some attempted dissection of the direction and the purpose of English society during the middle years of the nineteenth century. It was a worthy aim, courageously tackled; and the task, besides affording a necessary outlet for thought and personal achievement, also yielded from Harriet Martineau some works of an enduring merit such as *The History of the Thirty Years' Peace*, *The Philosophy of Auguste Comte* and the lucid, liquid *Autobiography* "with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman" (London, 1877, 3 volumes).

Whatever one may think of the conclusions or the attitudes of Harriet Martineau—and the reception of these today after the elapse of about a century is bound to be

very mixed—one should still admire her passionate concern for ideas, her courageous determination to present the truth as she saw it, regardless of the pressures of social prejudices or conventions, and also her tireless literary industry which was so often maintained in the face of serious handicaps of health and personal circumstances. With the perception of genius and the bluntness of utter intellectual honesty, Harriet Martineau offered, in her *Autobiography* her merits as "earnestness and intellectual clearness within a certain range", and her shortcomings as "small imagination and suggestive powers", and an inability to either discover or invent. This diagnosis may well be accepted as we view her works from the eminence of another century: but certainly it need not, and it should not, detract from Harriet Martineau's ultimate claim to be remembered. She must always remain as a very remarkable example of Victorian womanhood at its best and an early protagonist of the right and the need for a more enlightened attitude towards the role of women in our English society. Apart, too, from her importance as a voice in the protracted movement for women's emancipation, Harriet Martineau still offers, as a thinker, a fearless dedication to the truth, which must be a source of encouragement and guidance even today.

It is a pity, I think, that so few, except for specialist students of her times, read Harriet Martineau's books nowadays. Despite their close link with the burning questions in the public life of their own period, many of them are still fresh and enduring enough to be worth reading, even in the changed circumstances of the present; and I would recommend, particularly, Harriet's less well-known works about English topography, especially her *Complete Guide to the English Lakes* (1855). This, if any, reveals a different Harriet Martineau from the stern authoress of the *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834). There are two good modern biographies: Vera Wheatley's *Life and Work of Harriet Martineau* (1957) and R. K. Webb's *Harriet Martineau: a Radical Victorian* (1960).

CENSORSHIP AT WESTMINSTER

(Continued from front page)

John Calder said that his was a small firm which had not yet made an overall profit and that the defence of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* had to date cost £20,000. They were unable to undertake their "own defences like Jean Straker". Funds were urgently needed, if necessary to carry the appeal to the House of Lords.

Someone asked how it was that verdicts of guilty had been brought in without the prosecution bringing proof of corruption. I made the point that they didn't have to, for the obscenity and indecency Acts put the burden of proof on the accused—he was guilty unless he could prove innocence; but George Foss Westcott, speaking for the Secular Humanism Promotion Unit at two minutes to eight probably gave the true answer, put the problem into its social context and defined the nature of the chains: for he said that the legal definition of obscenity was made a hundred years ago on the Christian dogma that sex and thoughts of sex, outside marriage, were sins and therefore depraved the sinner, so that there could be no defence acceptable to any magistrate who was required to work on such a definition. Many magistrates still upheld Christian attitudes on the bench.

William Hamling closed the meeting saying that he was a magistrate. There are, of course, all sorts. Division bells called Members to the Lobbies and we walked out into the indecent summer rain.

Letters to the Editor

NOTE: Letters exceeding 200 words may be cut, abbreviated, digested or rewritten.

'Total rationality'

JUST a brief line to say how exceedingly sorry I am to read that you are giving up the editorship of the FREETHINKER. It does seem a great pity. It cannot be a good thing for any paper to have such frequent changes in editorial direction. Moreover, under your direction, the paper seemed to be moving in the direction of total rationality, that is the only real justification for freedom of thought. I can only hope that the new editor will be equal to the burden imposed by the situation, and that he will be as kind to my own contributions (if any) as you have been.

... good wishes for your own personal future, and once again my sincere regrets at your departure from the FREETHINKER.

PETER CROMMELIN.

'A very necessary change'

I AM sending you what, it seems, will be the last article from my pen, in view of the totally surprising news of your resignation from the post of editor. It was very regrettable news, from my point of view, I can assure you. I had envisaged a long spell for you, after all the short editorships in recent years. You seemed to have settled down to the job very well, and to be happy about it.

I can understand your unwillingness to carry on, owing to the restrictions placed upon you by the Board. To pursue your policy under the circumstances was of course impossible, and as a man of integrity, you have done the only thing open to you by resigning. I am quite sure there will be many readers who will regret your vacating of the editorship. Personally, I have not felt such contributions as those of J. J. Thompson, with their length of several issues, and their—in my view—lack of appeal to the plain man, were in the best interests of the FREETHINKER. That apart, your policy has been forthright and admirable, in my opinion, and, if you had been free to put it through, would have effected a very necessary change in the aspect of the paper.

I do hope things will go well for you in the future, as I am sure you will continue your able work for secular humanism.

F. H. SNOW.

Communication and less suffering

THANKS to J. W. Nixon for comments on my "Thoughts on Karl Marx". He may, perhaps, have overlooked the final sentence: 'When communism is permitted to come into contact and communication with more liberal forms of secular humanism and more refined forms of atheism the results might be more visibly impressive than anything that could be imagined a century ago'. I am certainly very happy to acknowledge the FREETHINKER as a unique product of the "Free World". My only regret is that it does not enjoy a much larger circulation.

Of course we all know that millions have been conditioned to feel that it is better to be dead than 'red'. What is not so freely acknowledged is that millions have been conditioned to feel exactly the opposite; that communism is the ultimate political good for any society that must depend more and more upon the mass-production of goods and mass media of communication. The humanist task, as I see it, is to diminish the suffering caused by conflicting theologies and ideologies.

PETER CROMMELIN.

NOTE FOR NEW READERS

THE FREETHINKER may be ordered through any reputable British newsagent. The newsagent may order it through most of the larger wholesalers and distributors (Marlborough, Menzies, W. H. Smith, Wyman, Marshall, etc.)—though some newsagents are not yet aware of it and may need it to be pointed out to them. If you wish to order through a newsagent (rather than subscribe to the publishers) please notify your newsagent of this; you will be helping yourself, and helping widen the FREETHINKER'S circulation.

'Struggling into 1970'

IT was with genuine regret that I read of Karl Hyde's decision to resign from his editorship of the FREETHINKER. Whilst I am not in the position to know the reasons for his decision I would like to express my appreciation for the improvements which I believe he has made in the paper.

Whilst the changes in its format have not been as great as I (and, I believe, Mr Hyde) had hoped for, he has moved the paper slightly more towards a radical and humane journal of the progressive World Humanist movement. The FREETHINKER has been fighting and still is fighting, I believe, the religious battles of 1870 in a manner which was relevant at that time. I, and many other Humanists and Atheists with whom I speak, feel that if the FREETHINKER is to survive for another 100 years and become a paper with any influence in society and the wide spectrum of the Humanist movement it must radically change its attitudes. It must fight the Church of 1968—the contemporary as well as the fundamentalist theologian. It must carry articles of a more general nature as well as anti-Christian propaganda. It must crusade for social battle not yet begun, and its criticism of the Church and Establishment must be constructive as well as destructive.

I am convinced that changes of this nature must be made if the FREETHINKER is to attract and hold the readership of a younger generation with new attitudes. A generation to whom Oxfam, Freedom from Hunger, CND, Shelter, etc., mean much more than the NSS. Few indeed have ever heard of the NSS or FREETHINKER and many would be just as critical of sterile anti-Christian propaganda as of the opposite.

I too wish Mr Hyde's successor well and hope that he will have the courage to bring a paper with a great name and history struggling into 1970. Let it encourage true Freethought and question the values of the NSS, the Church and society from a truly rational point of view in a manner which will enable the rationalist/Humanist cause to capture the imagination of a wider and younger section of society.

CLIVE H. GODFREY.

Ethics

OF course you are right in your contention (July 19) that the term 'good' merely describes that which we personally approve. It is equally true that the good actions we do are those that give us the greatest pleasure at the time of performance. But the good people seem to like to think that they are sacrificing a greater pleasure and that the bad people should learn to sacrifice their greater pleasure—which is unsound psychology and unlikely to promote good behaviour.

HENRY MEULEN.

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