

# Freethinker

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## THE NSS ANNUAL DINNER

"So I SAID b . . . s to the bishop . . ."  
". . . and my daughter, she's ten you know, well she hates RI but then . . ."

"Um . . . yes. I take your point but then wouldn't you say—philosophically speaking—that the categorical imperative coupled with the Bergsonian doctrine of . . ."

The sixty-third Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society took place on Saturday, March 29, at the Pavour's Arms, Westminster. Well attended and catered for, the proceedings culminated in addresses from four speakers introduced with the right combination of wit and formality by the society's president, David Tribe.

Charles Osborne, Assistant Literature Director of the Arts Council, spoke first, his brief being to propose a toast to the Guest of Honour, Brigid Brophy. One wondered whether Mr Osborne had been asked behind the scenes to



*Brigid Brophy, the Guest of Honour.*

caused some of the more elderly heads to shake when he said, "I can't get excited about the religious debate. Anglican bishops are now just amiable agnostics. There seems to be no danger of a new army of Christian soldiers being recruited in our schools". Turning his attention to Miss Brophy he said that he found her book *Black Ship to Hell* a literary and psychological masterpiece and that this alone was sufficient reason for his proposing a toast to her and "to hell with RE!"

Brigid Brophy spoke briefly saying that she was "more honoured to be the guest of honour of the National Secular Society than I would be of any other body", modestly continuing in her familiar dead-pan style "though I don't think any others would honour me!" She went on to refer to the NSS as "the only one hundred per cent honest and honourable society in this country".

Lord Raglan next proposed a toast to the National Secular Society. He mentioned his recent euthanasia bill and admitted, "I have my reservations myself. I would like the subject to be pushed not simply because its something which is anti Roman Catholic. It is outside the realms of religious bickering. We should talk about it among ourselves as people". He went on to say that the "religious

*(Continued overleaf)*



*Lord Raglan, who proposed a toast to the NSS.*

do what in theatrical terms is known as warming up the audience, for the first part of his speech was a very skilled and entertaining comedy turn. Becoming more serious he

# Freethinker

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are more scared of the heathen than of the devil" and that the people he fears most "are those who believe that God is their guide. Dreadful things are done by these people. I think General de Gaulle is one of them. John Foster Dulles was another". Lord Raglan then told the assembly that he was an "Anglican agnostic", and reminded us how much we owed to the Church of England by pointing out that without it our country would not be the country of free-thought that it is. "For every twelve bishops there are twelve different opinions—sometimes thirteen." Recalling the television series *All Gas and Gaiters* he said, "How can you not feel some affection for this extraordinary

## COMING EVENTS

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 01-407 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 and McRae.

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

Belfast Humanist Group: NI War Memorial Building, Waring Street, Belfast: Monday, April 14, 8 p.m.: "Humanist Christian Dialogue", Professor J. M. Haire.

Bristol Humanist Group: 22 Hampton Park, Bristol 6: Sunday, April 13, 11 a.m.: Walk arranged by Mrs Lester.

Glasgow Humanist Group: Eglinton Toll, Kilmarnock: Saturday, April 12, 9.30 a.m.: To carry out Religious Education Survey to be followed by coffee at the home of Michael Brannan. Ayrshire members meet at Kilmarnock railway station 10.30 a.m.

South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1: Sunday, April 13, 11 a.m.: "Dostoevsky and Anarchism", Dr John Lewis. Admission free. Tuesday, April 15, 6.45 p.m.: Discussion, "Japan—Its Economy and Politics", Speaker from the Japanese Embassy. Admission 2s (including refreshments), members free.

church. At its best it is homely. At its worst absurd—hardly dangerous." Referring to potted ethics and instant morality he made clear that the same could not be said of the Roman Catholic church. However, he thought "We should not forget the equable comfort religion gives some people. If they like to believe it, why shouldn't they as long as they don't bother us?"

John Ryan MP in an amusing concluding speech told how he had, "slipped into atheism through being born into a background of Glasgow Roman Catholicism". He said he was afraid of "a secular theology", and that, "our strength lies in our ability to destroy barriers rather than to erect them. When religion is persecuted it tends to thrive. When left alone it tends to die". Nevertheless, he thought there were various reforms which must be made, in particular that of the Adoption Laws, and these are areas in which, "The real enemy is religion which puts fetters on the minds of men". This he said was a sobering thought when one considered men in high positions, such as Edward Short.

Speaking of young people he said that they "start from the proposition that their fathers and grandfathers are bloody idiots", and that therefore "despite us, religion is a tremendous bore". "We argue about religious broadcasts, but", Mr Ryan said, "I would be quite happy to see religious broadcasts re-broadcast as advertisements for humanism rather than for one of us to go along and give a lecture on humanism".

Thus ended an evening which in its tone was intellectual rather than militant and which gave emphasis to the truth that with the relative demise of religion freethinkers must increasingly look to the future, and pay less attention to the past.

## INNER PEACE?

IN HIS FIGHT against the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia Mr Norman St John Stevas MP reinforced his newly formed 'Human Rights Society' with a letter to *The Times*. On April 1 this received a compelling and well-reasoned reply from a medical practitioner, Dr John Warburton, who answered St John Stevas's points methodically in the following way: "He (St John Stevas) states the problem faced by the dying is more than the need to be relieved from physical pain. He ought to have said it may be so in some cases . . .

He states that the patient needs every help whilst dying to adjust to the coming separation from life. He ought to have said some patients may need this help . . ."

Five of St John Stevas' points are refuted in this fashion a means which will be acceptable to all but those whose reason is clouded by a sense of their own insufficiency which some call God.

Mr. Warburton ended: "Should I be unfortunate enough to contract a painful incurable illness, I shall not have the slightest interest in obtaining an inner peace. I shall, however, have a considerable interest in being relieved of my pain and discomfort. I only hope my medical attendants will observe my feelings in the matters and not those of Mr Stevas!"

At the time of writing *The Times* had not published a reply from Mr St John Stevas, which surprises no one.

## FROM FOREIGN PAPERS

OTTO WOLFGANG

*Información Española* (Magazine of the Spanish Emigration), January.

On December 11 last, the women and children of 14 political prisoners locked themselves in the Church of San Francisco de Bojar, Madrid; to the entrance door they affixed a copy of the mimeographed broadsheet of the clandestine Democratic Movement of Women, *La Mujer y la Lucha* (Woman and Fight) demanding an end to repression. In it they wrote: "... our action is to demonstrate publicly that for 13 years there has not been an act of real amnesty... Today, on the 20th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights—to which the Spanish government is a signatory—we demand a total Amnesty". On learning of this sit-in, people hurried to the church to bring them coffee and snacks; even the priests helped to feed and accommodate the children, and a commission of clerics approached the authorities. A group of 13 lawyers declared their solidarity with the fighting women and went to the Ministry of Justice. A few hundred persons went to the Church of the Resurrection for a sit-in and even the Press could no longer hide the facts. On December 14 Alcalá, Archbishop of Madrid, personally visited the women, promised to support their just demand and to see the Minister of Justice, upon which the women left.

The women of San Sebastian too locked themselves in in the Cathedral of the town in protest against the brutal verdicts of the Military Tribunal sentencing three Basque youths to 48 years. On Christmas Eve another group of women staged a similar sit-in in protest against the deportation of three lawyers.

*Newsweek*, January 13

The Evangelical Church of Germany has remained the last significant institution to which Germans on both sides of the Berlin Wall can claim allegiance. When open discrimination failed to suppress East German Evangelicals (they still claim 14 million members), the regime found a subtler way to split the Church. The DDR's new constitution, passed last spring, forbids membership in international organisations. In six months' time the leaders of East Germany's eight Evangelical regional churches are expected to ratify a new, separate federation. Though the break will not be formally announced, West German Evangelical leaders admit that "the united Evangelical Church of Germany, as we know it, is about to cease to exist".

*Neue Welt* (Vienna) November

A bomb in the Trade Mission, Buenos Aires, destroyed 2,000 Israeli exhibits, valued at over a million dollars. An anti-Semitic organisation, Tacuara, is supposed to be responsible; previously they smashed the furniture in a Jewish Club in Rosario and painted swastikas and Nazi slogans on the walls.

Somewhere in Austria, Ladislaus Mnácko, the Slovak writer, has finished his latest book, *The Sevenths Day*, subtitled "A Communist's Enlightenment and Indictment".

The Freedom of Information Centre of the University of Missouri published the result of an investigation into the extent of international freedom of the press in 1967, showing that only 43.3 in hundred of the world population have a free press. Another 41.1 per cent have a government-controlled press, the rest of 9 per cent lies between these two.

Dr Frey, owner of Neo-Nazi *National Zeitung*, Munich, has acquired several border-line papers catering for Sudeten German refugees and other Silesian revanchists; recently he also bought a country magazine in order to influence Germany's peasantry.

*La Raison* (the French Freethought paper), January

Lately the "Dialogue"—writes our friend Gaubel—"has become great fashion" and the Pope, who in 1964 condemned our 'rusty arguments', our 'wickedness' and 'fossilised dogmas'(!) founded, the year after, a "Secretariat for the Unbelievers" under Cardinal Koenig.

"The inspiration of the Holy Ghost is not always required. On October 1st last year that Cardinal published in Rome a document (or instruction or what you may call it) with directives for the guidance of dialoguists... It is a rather instructive document, from which I need quote but a single passage and you'll know how the wind blows: 'Although the Dialogue is not necessarily an apostolic goal, it gives the Christians a chance to manifest their proper beliefs; and thus it, in a way, is part of the functions of our Church, i.e. to spread the Evangelists'. It is difficult to have a dialogue unless one has a common language, is it not?"

Even in the pious France of Le Général, the French Freethinkers are being allotted ten minutes per month on Radio 'France-Culture'—even though the timing is such as to prevent too many listeners hearing the broadcast.

Commenting on the money crisis in France and in Great Britain, and the adamant refusal of Germany to reevaluate the Mark, a writer claims, Germans and Japanese alike could boast: "Because we were defeated, we are the final victors".

This illogical evasion is frequently used to hide the simple fact that the German workers pride themselves on hard work to increase the national wealth, whilst the French and English workers, for many years, have undermined their national economy in frivolous strikes.

M. Georges Ory, president of the "Cercle Ernest Renan" and known to our readers, has published another book, entitled *Le Christ et Jésus* (Ed. du Pavillon, 219 Francs). It is impossible to give details in a short review, writes the paper, so "let us mention only, that the author does not simply state: 'Jesus has never existed'. He gives chapter and verse for his reasons, why he cannot accept his human existence. Jesus the Man, he says, evades History. Not Jesus has created a new religion, but this new creed has created Jesus".

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Annual report of the

National Secular Society

## THAT FREE WILL IS MEANINGLESS

G. L. SIMONS

IN HISTORY, free will has generally been supported by religious people (although there are exceptions, such as some Calvinists) and attacked by materialists and free-thinkers (with some exceptions here too). Some philosophers, e.g. Spinoza, managed to combine a religious attitude to the universe with a firm belief in determinism and the all-pervasive nature of natural law. In general the opponents of free will have been determinists, e.g. such philosophers as Democritus and Spinoza, psychologists such as Watson and Pavlov, and a wide range of modern neurologists, brain surgeons, behaviourists following Pavlov, and philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (see for instance Chapter Three in his *My Philosophical Development*, Chapter Six in his *Religion and Science*, and the delightfully irreverent Chapter Five in *The Scientific Outlook*).

Determinism, however, is open to a predictable objection—that we cannot be sure that *every* event proceeds from antecedent causes. Science works on the assumption that every event is so generated: an event is defined and possible causes are investigated. When a well-defined cause-effect framework is described the phenomena in question are said to be “understood” by the scientist. But the scientist can never know *all* causes; he can never dogmatically assert that in a mysterious field causes operate necessarily. When a careless scientist makes such an *a priori* assertion then he is erecting an indefensible metaphysics no better than the superstitions that he is struggling to overcome. This is not to say that a scientist cannot have a metaphysical framework as a philosophical base for his view of the world. In *Language, Truth and Logic* (Chapter 1) A. J. Ayer argued that metaphysics are meaningless and that a philosophy containing a metaphysical component could not stand. Despite this, however, it is commonly acknowledged that Bertrand Russell's philosophy has a clearly definable metaphysical component; a good discussion of this is given in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* in The Library of Living Philosophers series (see Chapter 15, volume II, *Russell's Metaphysics* by John Eloff Boodin). Russell's metaphysical ontology is based on the symbology devised for his mathematical work: just as mathematical concepts could be reduced to variables related according to logical operators, so the world comprised a reality definable in terms of atomic facts related in certain ways: hence Russell's *logical atomism*, shared by Wittgenstein. But this is a digression. All I am stressing is that the scientific metaphysic, if such there be, does not involve naive statements *a priori* about the logical necessity of universal causation. Causes may or may not operate in every field. Determinism requires that they should, but a quite adequate refutation of the possibility of free will does not require any such thing. But before indicating why the determinist case is unnecessarily crude, a word in its favour.

Science looks for causes. This is one way of describing its activity. If it does not find causes it does not assume that there are none, but looks harder. This is particularly relevant to modern physics, in particular to quantum physics and Heisenberg's Uncertainty (or Indeterminacy) Principle. Many theologians seized on the work of Planck and Heisenberg as indicating a way out of the theoretical determinist position that scientists were consolidating. But the poor theologians were clutching at straws. Quantum physics does *not* indicate that causes do not operate on the sub-atomic scale, and people who think that it does are misunderstanding the matter. What is *true* is that predictions

can be made about, for example, the radioactive decay of a substance, without the physicist or mathematician being able to say which particular atoms will discharge their particles: put simply, half a radioactive substance will change into, say, one of its isotopes in a certain period but no-one can say *which* half. And as for Heisenberg, it is precisely *because* causal factors operate that particular circumstances cannot be defined accurately: if we wish to observe a phenomenon we have to shoot particles at it or light photons or some such. These are reflected and from their effect on our receiving apparatus (eye, light sensitive plate, Wilson cloud chamber, etc.) we deduce the nature of the phenomenon. But when we shoot stuff at a particle we mess it about and alter its characteristics, and it is very difficult to reconstruct mathematically its original nature. In observing anything we affect it: in the macroscopic world the effect is unimportant; in the sub-atomic world it is crucial. This is the origin of the Uncertainty Principle—and it clearly has nothing to do with absence of causation.

Another word about quantum physics before we finish with it—some people cannot conceive how we can predict that portions of a substance will decay by radiation without being also able to predict *which* portions. An analogy with sociology may help. We can predict how many people will commit suicide in a given part of the country in a certain month of the year, but we cannot predict *which* people. This does not mean that our numerical prediction is inaccurate. What it means is that our statistical tools, with the available causal corollaries, do not give us sufficient insight into the situation which a more specific prediction would require. For such a prediction we would have to go to every individual in the sample and study in depth his personal psychology and set this against a careful estimate of the likely stresses he would come up against in the relevant period. This operation would be quite impossible at present, both because of the inadequacy of psychology as a theoretical science and because of the sheer complexity of the operation. But it would clearly be nonsensical to state that because of our technical limitations in the field it would be impossible *in principle* to study suicide in a causal context. The same is true of sub-atomic physics. We have a certain causal grasp of the phenomena and statistical work can enable us to predict causal lines in appropriate circumstances, but we cannot define the life history of a particle with anything like the necessary precision to talk of operational causes. We just do not know enough. But causes *may* exist in *all* natural fields—and the scientist is sure to keep looking.

If, however, causes do not obtain everywhere then the free will advocate still does not get anywhere. He *may* take the decision to call free will an exercise of will when the causes cannot be completely defined. But clearly this inability may only be temporary and the advocate cannot establish an *a priori* philosophical position. Or he may decide to call free will an exercise of will in circumstances where causes *do not exist*. And the weakness here is that he can never know that there are such circumstances—and even if there are, and this is the crucial point of the present article, what value would a definition of free will along these lines have for the advocate. If free will was simply an exercise of will in the absence of causes then it becomes a purely random, uncontrollable phenomenon. For it is clear that the advocate wants to marry his definition of free will with other moral concepts such as “respon-

sibility", "virtue", "goodness" and the like. But if free will is random, uncontrollable, fortuitous, outside all causal fields, not amenable to moral training or reflection or conscience, etc., then the intended marriage cannot be consummated. Free will just happens and we have to put up with its unpredictable manifestations—this is the advocate's position, whether he likes it or not.

In fact no-one operates on the assumption that the advocates theoretical position is sound. Quite apart from the professional psychologist, who will tell us about all sorts of demonstrable causal factors in upbringing, training, rejection, etc., on human choice and behaviour in general, the plain man constantly assumes that causes operate in the behaviour responses of the people with whom he has to deal. We talk differently to different people, expecting certain types of responses to our overtures; we buy certain presents for certain people on the assumption that there is continuity in their personalities causing them to respond predictably. In fact the more we know of people the more

we can predict their reactions to a wide range of imaginary and actual circumstances. The psychologist merely tries to codify and interpret the basic knowledge that anyone has who lives in close proximity to others.

If free will is defined as a manifestation of will in the absence of causal circumstances then such manifestations are morally non-responsible, and a free will so defined is nothing more than a linguistic contrivance that gives the temporary illusion of avoiding the snares of the determinist and erecting an alternative plausible position in which a worthwhile definition of free will can be given a place. The free will advocate cannot succeed by this ruse. The basic contradiction in his position can be summarised in the statement—*he wants people to have control over their actions without the people being involved in the causal circumstances that such control would necessarily demand.* When this contradiction is fully understood it is clearly seen that it is inescapable.

## THE PHANTOM IN OUR MIDST

H. RICH

THERE ARE many features of the society we live in for which there is little or no justification other than that we carry on where our predecessors left off. This is usually accompanied by a tendency to look back to see how we arrived in our present situation in order to rationalise it, instead of paying more attention to looking ahead to where we want to be. Even the knowledge obtained in this way is often not used to learn a lesson but to lull us into a false sense of rectitude. Organised religion is a backward-looking feature of this kind with rather insidious characteristics.

The power of thought enables man to consider how he should behave instead of acting merely in accordance with desires generated by emotional stimuli, as is the case with lower forms of life. The brain and the mind, being the latest development in evolution, whether planned or accidental, are generally regarded as the most superior instruments with which life is known to be endowed. There may arrive a time when all other action-directing faculties will be subject to the dictates of the intellect, but we all know how reason and emotion often conflict and that reason does not always prevail. Beliefs disseminated by religion, however, come within a category of their own in this respect because the concepts accompanying them are unrelated to actual knowledge or experience, but yet are capable of evoking our most primitive emotions, like a phantom within us raking over the dregs of what it would be best to leave behind and forget. Although belief requires the ascent of the mind, this phantom destroys or intercepts the capacity to reason in the vital mind-located function of deciding what kind of propositions we should accept or reject.

Left free to use his own imagination, individual man might well form some idea of a supernatural agency who or which is responsible for the existence of the universe. Any such concept, however, would be recognised as being hypothetical or fanciful and would not lead to behaviour which was in accord with its reality. Only when a concept of this kind is the result of seductive indoctrination accompanied by the threats of the consequences of disbelief can the term "belief" be applied. When the mind gives its assent in this sense, it has been obtained under coercion. Sociologists and anthropologists have proved beyond any shadow of doubt that the kind of beliefs generally held

about supernatural forces are created within social groups by tradition and education. The removal of these influences would make it impossible for any particular individual to hold the kind of beliefs and perform the practices pertinent to organised religion. No innate personal characteristic is present which is a self-determining factor in deciding which of the religious systems or their denominations one should accept, each with a different idea of the rites and ceremonies necessary to please God, and each, throughout its history, resorting to ungodly tactics in the course of persuading all the others that its own is the correct method.

One of the main purposes of organised religion is to show that the God it presents is an actual God and that there is a way of contacting him. Since communion does not take place in the way one would expect of a God capable of conducting communication, the Church sets itself up as God's agent or intermediary by providing the means of such communication. What it does not explain, however, is why the services of the Church should be required at all, as God, according to its own religious teaching, has no difficulty in speaking person-to-person when he has anything to say. It must be quite clear even to the most gullible that although the existence of God for religious purposes has been preached for centuries, there has never been any valid proof of it. This does not necessarily mean that religion should be in a position to confront every doubter with God himself as visual evidence. What it does mean is that no alternative evidence which is credible has been adduced and that most of what has been submitted can be shown to be self-contradictory or incompatible with the existence of the kind of God described. Over the course of the years the Bible itself, the foundation stone of the Christian religion, has been exposed as being a compilation of writings by many authors at different times, altered interpolated and corrupted in the course of being transcribed and translated. In spite of this the Church must still insist that the whole work is "divine revelation", because this is what was said "in the beginning". We have only the word of the Church for this proposition as nowhere in the Bible does it state that God wrote, inspired or dictated it and nowhere is the identity of the respective authors or the

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source of their information disclosed. As the fallacies and discrepancies contained in the Bible became more and more glaring and as God, by definition, is infallible, scholars and theologians set to work to find a different meaning to the text than the one originally attributed to it. The Church knows full well that, wherever it was applicable, the literal meaning was held to be true before the spread of knowledge rendered it absurd. For instance, there can be no doubt that the main themes contained in the New Testament were intended to apply to the generation then living, such as the "second coming" and the end of the world. Yet we are told that the prophecies which predicted these imminent events two thousand years ago still apply to us today and to our descendants *ad infinitum* as long as somebody is prepared to repeat the story.

The theory of a trinity goes back much further than the New Testament. It can be found in many an ancient myth and fable. One possibility is that its origin lies in the simplest family unit known to human nature—father, mother and son (or daughter), the mother sometimes being superseded by another figure because of sexual or sinful implications. The arrival on earth of one of the Trinity, the Son and Saviour, set Christianity on its path. This member of the Trinity is said to be co-equal in power with the other two members God the Father and the Holy Ghost. What was he doing during the previous tens of thousands of years of human existence? Was there nobody worthy of saving up to two thousand years ago? If the Trinity is eternal, as alleged, what was the purpose, function or role of the Saviour before the creation, when there was nobody to save from anything anywhere? Did the Son and Saviour remain a member of the Trinity during the pregnancy of his human mother, Mary, and the babyhood of her son Jesus? Subtle sophistry cannot dispose of these and many other incongruities which confront the mind when propositions of this nature are presented to it.

However much institutions, priests, clergy, theologians, etc., claim that they have been "called" to the ministry, the fact remains that they all came into contact with other disseminators before the call arrived. No such "call" to serve has ever been received by anybody not experiencing contact of this kind. No South Sea Islander or African native is known to have received a call to believe in Christianity before the infiltration of missionaries. Special arrangements must be made by the Church to cater for all those poor dead souls who were unfortunate enough to be missed. Contact with believers is an essential prerequisite for belief. Simply reading the book of words might make an intellectual appeal to regard it as partly history, partly legend and wholly (as distinct from holy) a literary masterpiece. It would not reasonably convince anybody that belief in the existence of the kind of God there described or that making supplication to him or offering sacrifices, would have any desired effect (a few trial runs would quickly establish this), or that eating him would enhance the chances of more favourable treatment in this or any other world. The services of somebody versed in the methods of introducing the phantom and who is recognised and esteemed as learned in doing so, are indispensable for the purpose of obtaining belief in matters of this nature. Faith in the truth of the tale told arises initially out of confidence placed in the teller, who can only vouch for it because he himself was at some time or another in exactly the same position. So we could be back generation after generation tracing this process to times and conditions completely different

from our own. Is it not preposterous for us to believe that it is in our interests to adapt our thinking to a mental climate created through ignorance of most of what we now know?

The institutions propagating organised religion are themselves guilty of blasphemy—blasphemy against the human conscience by introducing concepts which are an affront to the intelligence. No all-powerful, all-knowing God as described by them would be prepared to be thwarted in purpose by the vagaries of the very creatures he himself made. No God capable of achieving anything he desired would set about doing so by deliberately making it more difficult for himself. No God worthy of the name would permit conditions which necessitated punishment by him for something which would require so little, if any, effort on his part to avoid. It is complete and utter nonsense to suggest that any such God saw in advance the evil which man would do but did nothing to prevent it because he had given free-will to do good or evil. Man himself must come to terms with himself by making full use of the knowledge available to him. Any moral repercussions to his conscience must be instilled through the working of an efficient society which is itself concerned with the application of principles founded on justice for humanity. As long as society fails in its duty it will continue to sanction and support a distraction leading to a phantom realm for which it can disclaim responsibility.

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## UNIMPORTANT

IN RECENT MONTHS Pope Paul has made a number of statements in which he has with varying degrees of intensity condemned what can best be described as the growing revolutionary element within the Roman Catholic church. These have culminated in a speech made at his pre-Easter audience which took place on April 2, when he said in what *The Times* Rome correspondent described as extraordinarily strong words, "The Lord is sorely trying us". He listed a number of factors which were causing his church to suffer—the defection and the scandal of certain priests and religious laymen who were "crucifying" the church; the oppressive lack of legitimate liberty in many countries of the world; many Catholics were abandoning the loyalty which the tradition of centuries demanded of them, and which pastoral efforts full of understanding and love should obtain from them; and so on.

That the Pope is prepared to wash his greasy skull-caps in public in this way is indicative of his alarm at the galloping deterioration of his church's hold over individuals. It also seems likely that the Pope quite rightly realises that his importance in world affairs is now so small that what he says will not be widely reported outside the Catholic press at which it is aimed.

## BOOK REVIEW

PETER CROMMELIN

QUESTION 2: January 1969 (Pemberton 7s 6d).

*Question* is successor to the *Rationalist Annual*, originally published as the *Agnostic Annual*. The series in its eighty-sixth year of publication is edited by Mr Hector Hawton. Although the various contributors express their own opinions, it may be assumed by the reader that these opinions are not in violent conflict with those held by the editor.

Though perhaps not intended as a major contribution to humanist literature, it does make a good meal of readable material for the intellectual nourishment of those not tied to a purely conventional response to the questions of the day.

I have been unable to detect any thread of positive continuity that might bind the various writers into a unified whole. Indeed two of the authors seem rather to contradict one another. Mr Kai Nielson in "Language and the Concept of God" seems to suggest that "God-Talk" or theology in the contemporary world must of its very nature become "incoherent". In contrast to this Mr H. J. Blackham seems to hold the opinion that Faith and Reason are not violently hostile to one another, so that the only rational alternative to religious belief is a somewhat "uncomfortable" Agnosticism. My own opinion is that Atheism is more logical than Agnosticism. The great darkness of the Unknown that surrounds all human knowledge and experience provides no justification for the conclusion that the Unknown may perhaps contain an Unknown God. The foundation of Atheism is not simply the lack of evidence that God exists, but rather the enormous amount of evidence that points to the conclusion that whatever there may be in the universe, there is certainly no God. Even those who are strongest in Christian Faith are completely baffled by what they call "the Problem of Evil" which to an Atheist is no problem but only a challenge. Certainly no Atheist will acknowledge, e.g. that killing is a bad thing because some God has said "Thou shalt not kill". Yet both Atheist and Christian and others may be able to agree that killing is a bad thing and be willing to work together for a reduction of killing in the world. In this sense anyhow I do agree with Mr Blackham that there should be constant dialogue between Atheists and Religionists, and one of the advantages of Humanism is that it facilitates the concealment of Atheism without encouraging any false professions of Religion.

Apart from poverty and religion the main obstacles to the rapid growth and development of Humanism are to be found in the various nationalisms and racialisms that create hostile divisions within the human species. In this connection Mr Angus Calder points out the dangers and inconsistencies of insular patriotism in a strong article bearing the title "A Refusal to Back Britain". Britain depends far more on the rest of the world than the rest of the world depends upon Britain.

Other matters discussed in *Question* are birth control, Karl Marx, and the Literary Censorship in England. In all such matters one question leads to another and so on, apparently *ad infinitum*.

The last but not the least of the essays comprising this collection, is a very gracious tribute from the American Professor Walter L. Arnstein to the memory of Charles Bradlaugh who is honoured both as Freethinker and as Statesman. Certainly the Parliament of England never possessed a member with higher ideals of what democracy could be and ought to be. But according to Arnstein "one of the most significant of Bradlaugh's achievements was the foundation, the development and the preservation of the National Secular Society" . . . "That Bradlaugh succeeded in leading so sizeable a freethought organisation is certainly a tribute not only to his oratorical ability but to notable skills as an administrator, as parliamentarian, as statesman".

Finally a word of praise to the publishers and printers of *Question*. Altogether very good value for money at 7/6.

## LETTERS

### Paine's First Friendly Biographer

IN HIS interesting report (March 8) of the Thomas Paine birthday dinner, at Lewes, Christopher Brunel refers to Thomas Clio Rickman as "Paine's first friendly biographer". Without seeking to minimise Rickman's valuable support of Paine, may I say that I have a *Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Paine* dated 1819—the same year as Rickman's biography—which also is friendly, written by W. T. Sherwin and published by Richard Carlile.

The opening sentence of the preface says, "The principal motive which has induced me to undertake the life of Mr Paine is the injustice which has been heaped upon his memory by those who knew nothing either of the man or his principles".

No doubt Mr Brunel is aware of Sherwin's "Paine", and as the book was apparently published on May 1, 1819, it is possible that Rickman beat Sherwin by a short head, hence Mr Brunel's claim that Rickman was the first friendly biographer. It would be interesting to know.

F. J. CORINA.

### Three Fingers

THE SUGGESTION of a phallic nature of the three raised fingers in the Christian benediction was argued by Mr J. Humphrey (February 15) but there is reason to believe this practice is not a pagan carry-over. There is a hereditary disposition especially in some men of Anglo-Saxon descent to develop in the latter half of life a contraction of the palmar connective tissue on the little-finger side of the hand resulting in the ring and little fingers being pulled in against the palm. Thus Dupuytren's contracture typically affects those who do not labour with their hands.

Here's what the surgeon, Ronald Furlong, has to say about this in the November 1968 issue of *The Practitioner*:

"The alternative name for this condition is 'manus apostolicus'. The posture of the right hand assumed by the Pontiff in the act of blessing, is shown in figure 1. Manus apostolicus is not seen portrayed in the iconography of Byzantium or in Western portrayal until the 10th century. It is safe to assume that some high ecclesiastic suffered from this disease of the right hand, and this was noticed during the act of benediction. Probably the local sycophants seized on this deformity as the representation of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost and thus a virtue was made out of necessity. Possibly an Anglo-Saxon or an Angevin had reached a high position in the church by the 10th century."

D. M. CHAPMAN.

(Continued overleaf)

## LETTERS (Continued)

## Naive?

IN ANSWER TO Mr C. G. Martin (March 29), may I first of all make a general plea for the abandonment of the supercilious cliché "So-and-so has some homework to do . . ." which has been so over-used by people who are inordinately proud of having read a book, and who assume in their excitement that everyone else is therefore ignorant and naive.

I am glad to hear Mr Martin has read Polanyi, though I feel that if he was going to correct my review of Ninian Smart's book, he would have done well to glance at the latter as well. As it is, his remarks may be based on incomplete comprehension of the points made.

I criticised the Smart theory that the Bible must be true because God inspired it, and God must exist because the Bible says so. It may be "naive" of me to call this a circular argument, but nevertheless it is one. Mr Martin wants me to refrain from saying so because the same criticism might be levelled at me. (The argument, he says, "is liable to kill the user".) I would like some examples of this.

I do not understand Mr Martin's second point. When I said it would be useful to the young to know the psychological bases of faith, I did not mean or imply that faith is 'untrue' because it has psychological bases. Mr Martin's debunking of this argument—which I did not use—by applying it to science is therefore irrelevant. Would he give a fuller explanation of what he is talking about here—preferably in syllogistic form? MAURICE HILL.

## Furtive as the Foxes they Hunt

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that no speaker was forthcoming to speak in favour of blood sports at the meeting arranged by the National Secular Society. The sadists require all the odds to be on their side before they take a chance.

The bloodsport technique of twisting the truth in favour of killing for fun is breaking down and becoming quite farcical. Here are some of the devices used in defence of the continuing hunting of British otters, admitted to be declining in numbers drastically.

The Mammal Society hopes that, after a period of *freedom from interference*, otter numbers may increase again to its normal population. So hunting in a large area of Britain's rivers is to continue as before. In other areas the otters are to be hunted but not killed. In yet other areas they are to be "drawn with otter-hounds but not hunted". In others yet again, otterhunts are to amalgamate *in order not to kill bitch otters*. Only in a relatively small area in Yorkshire is otter hunting to be suspended—for three years.

Could I persuade you to offer a prize for the most interesting solution of how these tactics will leave the otter undisturbed and in the mood to breed without fear of interference? In particular, can any of your readers be found to explain how two hunts in amalgamation will be more able to avoid killing bitch otters than one hunt would be? GWENDOLEN BARTER.

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## Economic Expansion?

MR G. L. SIMONS' "China's Industrial Advance", shocks me, not because the facts are incorrect (they are, unhappily, only too correct) but because the interpretation and enthusiasm brought to these facts are worthy of a gang-government politician or economist, rather than the author of "Humani Victi".

All "economic expansion", whether achieved by capitalism or communism, is leading mankind straight to extinction, as I have tried to show by a series of articles from 1953 to 1969, because, on a planet of finite size, if each individual human life strives to become richer (as it has done since the dawn of humanity) then total human numbers *must decrease*. If Mr Simons contends that I am wrong, would he please refer to "Effective Birth Control—the New Atomic Bomb" (8.2.69) which recapitulates various predictions made in previous articles, and which have been subsequently confirmed by facts, ten years later.

A century ago, Japanese midwives practised infanticide to rid the country of superfluous children, and Japan, by then, had enjoyed a dozen centuries of peace. Industrial "expansion" and "morality" subsequently changed this, and, by 1940, Japan had participated in two major wars in which death and mutilation in battle had been substituted for infanticide. "Progress"?

In short, all "economic expansion" (whether brought about by capitalists or communists) is *war*—as the present clash by the two "expansions", Russia and China, even now testifies. Furthermore, the establishment of 700 million people under one label, "China", will lead ineluctably to the breeding of a further 1,400 million in little more than a generation. What will happen then?

I agree entirely with Mr Simons' indignation re pre-war China, where Chinese, dead from starvation, were picked up any morning by the road sweepers of Canton. But the remedy is to *prevent* such unfortunates being born, not to place them in a position to later engender even greater misery. R. READER.

## The b . . . . y Archers!

MR DAVID TRIBE, President of the National Secular Society, (March 15) referred to the manner in which the BBC Radio programme *The Archers* is misused to promote bloodsports. I completely agree with him.

I would add that, from time to time, opponents of hunting are accused of talking "rubbish", but never, of course, are allowed to explain the "rubbish", yet on two occasions the Master of the Heythrop Hunt has been invited to the Archers to give his views *unopposed* by anyone also from outside the programme who has seen hunting.

It is interesting to note that this same person, Captain Ronnie Wallace, would only agree to appear on another Midland programme, *In the Country*, if supported by a member of *The Shooting Times*, so that between them they could have two *answers to every one of mine*.

It would seem that bloodsportsmen are only sportsmen when, either in the hunting field or elsewhere, they are taking part in a very unequal contest! VERA SHEPPARD.

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