

BMA DIEHARDS ANSWERED BY VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA SOCIETY

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society recently published what they modestly describe as "a rejoinder to the British Medical Authority's report *The Problem of Euthanasia*". Fortunately the VES maintains the highest standard of debate without wrapping up its arguments in meaningless waffle, and its "rejoinder" is, in fact, a forceful and clearly presented refutation of the BMA report. The VES was founded in 1936 and its declared objects include the creation of a public opinion "favourable to the view that an adult person, suffering from a severe illness for which no relief is known, should be entitled by law to the mercy of a painless death if, and only if, that is his express wish". The Society seeks to promote legislation to this effect. Although every reforming organisation expects to have to combat ignorance, prejudice and hostility, the VES even today attracts extraordinary virulence and distortion of its aims. Although the Society's founders included churchmen and doctors who were profoundly disturbed by the prolonged suffering and distress which many patients experienced, its aims have always been strongly opposed by the churches and professional medical bodies.

Fundamental Issues Ignored

The British Medical Association panel which was set up to consider the question of euthanasia, was bound by a resolution passed by their Representative Body in 1969: "That this meeting in affirming the fundamental objects of the medical profession as the relief of suffering and the preservation of life, strongly supports the Council's view on the condemnation of euthanasia and instructs the Council to give this view full publicity". The Voluntary Euthanasia Society states that as the panel was bound by this resolution, and it was their task to find arguments in its favour, this meant that nobody who disagreed could have served on it. Their conclusions were decided in principle before the panel ever met; they had to fill in the details.

There was no minority report; something which might have been expected in such a contentious matter if there had been real open-mindedness. There was no bibliography; and it does not appear from the text that the panel spent any time in reading the large amount of literature now available on the subject. There has been no consideration of fundamental issues. Death is taken to be an unmitigated evil. Similarly, life is taken to be, in all circumstances, something good and desirable, even when it is the vegetative existence of the mindless patient in a psychogeriatric ward.

Misunderstandings

Finally, there is an implicit, but absolute denial of the patient's right of self-determination. It is always for the doctor to say how long the patient is to be kept alive, even when he is longing to die. There is further evidence of this attitude in reference to suicide.

It is stated in the BMA document that many of the arguments about euthanasia rest on misunderstandings. The VES retorts: "What 'misunderstandings' there may

be in the public mind have largely been created by the misrepresentation of opponents who would deny freedom of choice to the individual. Allegations are frequently made that the Society aims 'to do away with old and handicapped people, with deformed children and mental defectives', but these could never honestly be made by anyone who has read the Society's literature or any of the Voluntary Euthanasia Bills presented to Parliament". Voluntary euthanasia involves patients and (as the BMA report fails to emphasise) doctors who were willing to become involved.

Dying Patients

The BMA report contends that dying patients "seldom ask to die and rarely to be killed". The VES replies that as the majority of deaths are peaceful it is unlikely that such a request would be made in these circumstances. But voluntary euthanasia is concerned with that unfortunate minority whose suffering cannot be relieved. Patients would often refrain from making such a request because, as the law now stands, they would not dare ask their doctor—an authoritative, respected and even feared figure—for something illegal. However if the legal option of voluntary euthanasia were open, more people would feel free to make their wishes known.

The VES says it is difficult to imagine what evidence the BMA panel has for the statement that patients who know they are dying still welcome any prolongation of life. "It must be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to know what is going on in the mind of dying patients, even for those who look after them. Some may wish to lay down the burden of life and others may wish to cling to it: everything would depend on individual circumstances and attitudes. It is very questionable whether a dying patient who has endured prolonged suffering and distress would

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welcome the prolongation of life, but if he did, the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia would not affect him in any way. He simply would not ask for it.

"It is presumptuous for the BMA panel to say that dying persons would not wish to determine their end. Many of us give directions about what is to be done with our bodies after death. Most educated, intelligent people would very much welcome the opportunity of giving directions about the management of their last days if they were given the chance. Here, as elsewhere in the Report, we see the prevailing medical belief that the patient's body is under the doctor's sole control subject only to a veto, e.g. refusal of an operation, but to no other direction."

The Doctors and Euthanasia

Though agreeing that the majority of deaths are peaceful, the VES realistically adds that a minority are not. In some cases the doctor has to choose between the preservation of life and the relief of suffering. If the patient's life is preserved he will suffer: if his suffering is relieved he will die. The BMA report refers several times to the responsibility resting on doctors, and argues that euthanasia would be an intolerable addition to such responsibilities. The VES replies that doctors are constantly taking life-and-death decisions. "They are trained and educated to carry such responsibilities and do so courageously. . . . Doctors are very far from being the tender plants which the Report so sentimentally supposes."

The VES claims, and it is freely admitted in medical circles, that some doctors perform euthanasia. It is also widely accepted by the public and is one of the main reasons for the trust which patients have in their doctors. That trust is based on the belief that when inevitable death is accompanied by intolerable pain and distress, the doctor will "bring about" a peaceful end.

However, as the VES states: "Doctors who take this humane and courageous action are placing themselves at risk with the law, and many must be inhibited from doing so for this reason. Surely this is a cogent argument for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia which would put no obligation on any doctor but would afford him legal protection?"

Changing Public Opinion

There is a great deal of sentimentality about death in all sections of the population, and organisations like the Voluntary Euthanasia Society have a major battle to fight in order to change public opinion and attitudes. It is likely that the final showdown will be between the reformers and the churches, so supporters of voluntary euthanasia may be encouraged by this excerpt from an article which appeared in the Roman Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, two years ago: "If we can now see that the early advocates of birth control were not necessarily libertarians intent on destruction of the family, of morals, and of human values generally, we ought to be able to recognise the possibility, at least, that those of our contemporaries who are concerned to discuss all aspects of 'death control' are not necessarily a group of potential murderers intent on the further diminishment of man. In fact their writings and public utterances

mostly show them to be sincere, responsible and sensitive people, whose concern is primarily to emphasise the quality of human life and to rediscover, in a society which has mostly come to regard death with a kind of horror and has tried therefore to ignore it, some measure of dignity in the process of dying".

Details of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society may be obtained from 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8.

FAMILY PLANNING CONFERENCE

The largest national family planning conference ever held anywhere in the world is being organised by the Family Planning Association and will take place at the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 20, 21 and 22 July. The theme is *New Frontiers of Birth Control*. The object of the Conference is to examine the problems of unwanted pregnancy, over-burdened families and illegitimacy that confront the country and the Association, in a way that will be helpful to those who deal with them.

Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Services, has agreed to make an address and receive questions from the auditorium, and Sir George Godber, the Government's Chief Medical Officer will speak at the official dinner. To mark the progress which family planning has made in Great Britain since Marie Stopes opened the first clinic 50 years ago, the FPA has for the first time invited representatives of local Health, Education and Hospital Authorities to participate in its National Conference.

A film show, pop group and open forum with a panel of experts will be among the special events held on the evenings of 21 and 22 July to attract members of the public and particularly young people. Tickets for these events will be free and available from a number of youth organisations, or on application from the Conference Office. During the daytime session an exhibition of display stands will show the various aspects of the FPA's work including the history of the family planning movement in Britain.

Copies of the conference programme are obtainable from the conference Office, Family Planning Association, 27 Mortimer Street, London, W1A 4QW. Closing date for registrations is 18 June.

SEX EDUCATION — THE ERRONEOUS ZONE

MAURICE HILL and
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CAN SCIENCE DISPROVE GOD?

PHILIP HINCHLIFF

Throughout the history of religion, the onus has normally been on the unbeliever to justify his unbelief. This has certainly been the case in Christian civilisation, in which arguments attempting to prove the existence of God from natural reason have enjoyed a long and venerable life, and are far from dead yet. It was held for centuries that the unbeliever was a misguided, even vicious, individual who constituted a dangerous threat to society. This being so, it is remarkable that the active believer is now in a small minority in most western countries, and moreover that for many people the whole concept of "God" has become increasingly incredible. It is now the *believer* who has to make out some sort of case for his belief.

The reasons for this phenomena are of course complex, and I don't want to delve into the sociology of religion too deeply in a short article. But undoubtedly for most people the apparent incredibility of Christianity can be attributed to their general, if vague, belief that modern science, Freudian psychology, Biblical criticism and perhaps the linguistic philosophy currently in vogue have somehow disposed of God altogether. I am not suggesting that this disbelief is necessarily very articulate; but it very often springs from these roots, and in particular the notion that "science" and religion are somehow incompatible. This, of course, was the view held fervently by the great Victorian rationalists, who crusaded for the triumph of reason and scientific method over the confused and illegitimate religious beliefs (as they saw it) of Christianity. As Christianity derives essentially from the mysticism of Paul and the philosophy of Aristotle, it was hardly surprising that Christian cosmology had to give way, eventually, to the onslaught of science from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards. Nor was it surprising that this process should be interpreted, on both sides, as demonstrating a fundamental chasm between science and religion, especially as the freedom of thought required for scientific progress inevitably clashed with the needs of religious authority. But from our vantage point of the twentieth century, we can see, I think, that this great controversy was almost entirely mistaken. I want to argue that, by their very nature, Christianity (and other monotheistic religions) cannot be refuted by science. This is not a conclusion that necessarily gives comfort to Christians, since it raises some awkward philosophical problems about the logical status of Christian belief.

Explanations of Religion

Naturalistic explanations of religion generally fall into the category of psychology, but there are at least two others which deserve mention on account of their allegedly scientific status:

(a) The sociological theory of religion, which attempts to show that religious belief is essentially related to social structure, and draws correlations between the form of belief and religious practice and the type of society giving rise to that belief.

(b) The Marxist theory, which holds that religion (like other elements of the "superstructure") is determined by the economic relations prevailing in society. Marxist critics such as Kautsky have tried to show that Christianity was

originally a religion of the poor and dispossessed of first-century Palestine, and was an instrument by which they tried to obtain social justice.

So far as this theory of religion is concerned, I would state (dogmatically) that as Marxism is quite simply false its "explanation" of religion, as a special case of its general theory of the superstructure, is false also. But a more helpful criticism, perhaps, and one which is relevant to the sociological theory advanced by Durkheim and others, is that this type of explanation does not deal with the psychological factors which compel one man to accept God whilst his neighbour does not. A *general* theory associating religious belief and the particular social or economic features of a society cannot satisfactorily deal with *individual* cases, and can therefore be only a partial explanation at best. Is it more illuminating to turn, therefore, to the Freudian theory of religion which is the only one specifically attempting to outline the psychological factors involved?

Freud and Religion

In his *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud was very careful to distinguish between "illusion", defined as a belief arising out of wish-fulfilment but not necessarily false, and "delusion", which was plainly false. Christianity came under the heading of "illusion", as so defined. In the Freudian explanation, God becomes a father-figure having distinct affinities with the totem-god of primitive tribes and belief in him becomes a question of inability to escape from the childish need for authority and direction. But submission to this autocratic father-image inspires feelings of hostility and resentment on the part of the believer. This internal tension is resolved by Christianity, which purges the resulting guilt feelings in the murder of the son (Jesus). By this sacrifice, the father-god is appeased and the believer's aggression satisfactorily reconciled with his basic need to submit to the father.

Even granting the plausibility of this thesis, it is clear, however, that the *origins* of a belief have no connection with the *reasons* for that belief. To argue from the alleged psychological origins of Christianity to its falsity (or, for that matter, to its truth) is absurd. By the same token, one might as well conclude that since atheism derives from a compulsive psychological need to reject the authority of the father, it is therefore false! Freud himself was careful to say that the question of the *truth* of Christianity was logically independent of its psychological origins. For Freud, religion was false *on other grounds*; he could thus devote himself to explaining why it was that people clung on to an apparently irrational belief. As an approach to the question of truth, however, Freudian explanations of religion do not have any kind of intellectual respectability.

What, then, of "modern science"? Scientific theories of the nature of the universe and the development of life were regarded by traditional Christianity, when they first appeared, as a direct assault on the faith. And undoubtedly the main reason for the decline in popularity of the old "argument from design" is that our present knowledge of evolution and the cosmos in general make the concept of an all-intelligent and benevolent "designer" much less

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High St., London, SE1. Telephone 01-407 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). For information or catalogue send 5p stamp to Kit Mout, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

EVENTS

Humanist Holidays. Summer Centre in the Lake District is now full. Youth Camp being planned for 24 July until 1 August in Salop. Details: Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey (telephone 642 8796).

Humanist Housing Association, Blackham House, 35 Worple Road, London, SW19 (near Wimbledon station), Sunday, 27 June, 3 p.m. Garden Party. *Freethinker* readers welcome.

London Young Humanists, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8, Sunday, 6 June, 7.30 p.m. Your Questions on the Occult Answered by a Witch.

Nottingham and Notts Humanist Group. Adult Education Centre, 14 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, Friday, 11 June, 7.30 p.m. A Speaker from the Family Planning Association.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Sunday, 6 June, 11 a.m. Martin Page: "W. J. Fox of South Place".

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NEWS

DAVID TRIBE STANDS DOWN

Members of the National Secular Society, who have been receiving the agenda for the forthcoming annual general meeting, will be surprised to learn that David Tribe has not been nominated for the presidency. Mr Tribe, who has held the position since 1963, recently informed his colleagues on the Executive Committee that increasing professional commitments made it impossible for him to continue as president. His request not to be nominated was regretfully accepted.

The Executive Committee paid a tribute to the president in which they said: "David Tribe brought to the National Secular Society a strong, colourful personality, and a shrewd intelligence. During his presidency the Society concentrated on the social and practical implications of secularism and freethought, and demonstrated their relevance to the contemporary world. An impressive number of reforms which he and the NSS promoted have been enshrined in recent legislation but, needless to say, many of them have remained too advanced and too radical for the political Establishment. At the same time the NSS has become much more widely known, and respect for its pioneering achievements has grown.

"Much of the credit for this must go to David Tribe who has proved himself to be a challenging polemic, vigorous debater and prolific writer. His *100 Years of Freethought* contains much valuable material not readily available elsewhere, and his *Religion and Ethics in Schools* and *The Cost of Church Schools* (both published by the NSS) lucidly and pungently expound secularist arguments which polite society, inside and outside the churches, prefer to ignore.

"Mr Tribe is not seeking re-election entirely for personal reasons. His professional commitments as a writer have now made it impossible for him to continue to devote to the NSS as much time as he would wish. Relations between Mr Tribe and the Executive Committee have been consistently cordial and harmonious; and we wish him every success in his literary career.

"The Society's opponents can rest assured that its vital work will be pursued with undiminished devotion and determination. The Executive Committee and the membership will see to that. The humanist movement may be going through a transitional phase, but a resilient organisation like the National Secular Society has not weathered the storm for over a century for nothing."

The real worth and significance of David Tribe's leadership of the NSS will not be immediately recognised, but when the history of the British freethought movement in the twentieth century is written his name will be prominent with those who have made an outstanding contribution to its development and influence. He became president of the NSS at an extremely difficult period in the Society's history. After many years of internal squabbles it had become insular and backward looking; it was ill-equipped for the battles in which it was to become involved during the 1960s.

S AND NOTES

The major battle has, of course, centred on the question of religion in schools, and it was the NSS which launched the new campaign against RI in July, 1964. Despite initial indifference by the Press, and hostility from opponents of the NSS—inside and outside the movement—the campaign got off the ground, and a subject, which until that time had scarcely been mentioned outside specialised educational circles, became a national talking point. David Tribe wrote dozens of articles and his name frequently appeared in the correspondence columns of the educational and religious Press. His pamphlet *Religion and Ethics in Schools* became, and remains, a formidable weapon in the armoury of those parents, teachers and pupils who are fighting to end Christianity's privileged position in the nation's schools.

During this time the NSS did not concentrate on just one particular issue. Submissions were made to Government and other bodies on a wide range of subjects including adoption, Church and State, broadcasting, population and Sunday observance. David Tribe was largely responsible for drafting these documents, and thoroughness, professionalism and expertise became the hallmark of NSS submissions and Press statements.

David Tribe's departure from the presidential chair will be deeply regretted by members and friends of the NSS who recognise his splendid contribution to the Society's work and advancement. Although he has never been popular with those in the movement who are always ready to compromise with opponents before the first shot has been fired, David Tribe enjoys the respect and support of people who value clear thinking, plain speaking and a respect for principles.

THE BHA AND BROADCASTING

In a memorandum submitted last week to the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Television Authority, the British Humanist Association said that in this age of rapid social change, broadcasting has a special duty to perform to keep us in touch with proposed and actual changes, to present the alternatives fairly so that we may make an informed choice, and to reflect fully the changes in values and life style of contemporary society. Attention is drawn to the surveys which have shown there has been over the past decade "a steady and continuing decline in church attendance and religious belief.

"A recent survey conducted for ITA by Opinion Research Centre showed that in the six years since 1964 the percentage of Britons denying membership of any church had risen from six per cent to 22 per cent. The same survey showed 17 per cent of the population to be atheist or agnostic in belief, whilst a further massive 30 per cent were not at all sure of their belief. One factor common to all recent surveys is that religious belief falls sharply amongst younger age groups. Whatever the merits or demerits of religious education and religious broadcasting, it is patently failing to convert the young."

In this new situation the BHA asks for a substantial proportion of the present religious broadcasting output to

be available for programmes giving consideration "to ethical systems of belief other than Christian beliefs". In this way the younger generation will have a choice, and those who have abandoned traditional religion will have an opportunity of finding an acceptable moral code by which to live.

The BHA states that the present BBC Religious Broadcasting Department disseminates through 1,300 hours of broadcasting time annually "a Christian view of morality and of the world. During the period January to June 1969, 6½ per cent of programme production in ITV studios was devoted to religion—a total of nine hours a week or 468 hours a year.

"As has been found with religious education in schools, the propagation of Christianity in this way can lead only in the minds of the young to its ultimate rejection. Surely it is better that alternative ethical systems should be presented, so that people can make their own decisions. Experience shows that a heavily biased presentation serves only to alienate the public from the serious consideration of values."

In the same section of the report the BHA is at great pains to emphasise that "anti-Christianity is not the same as humanism". The churches will be pleasantly surprised to hear the news! But the reason for this breath of sweet reason soon becomes clear. After calling for the replacement of "the present unrepresentative Central Reform Advisory Committee" and the formation of a new body representing "all shades of belief and non-belief", the BHA suggests that "such a body might well be called the Central Social Morality Advisory Council". It goes on to mention that the present Social Morality Council has in its ranks the Bishop of Durham, the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster and the inevitable Lord Ritchie-Calder.

The BHA asks that the present panel of religious advisers "be replaced by a body more representative of today's multi-belief society, a body which must inevitably include humanist representatives". This, it apparently thinks, would lead to "the complete restructuring of CRAC and religious broadcasting". And then the question is posed: "Who is to present the humanist view?" Who indeed? "In the United Kingdom the British Humanist Association . . . may be numerically small but represents with its Advisory Council, Humanist Parliamentary Group and local groups a very substantial and influential body of opinion throughout the UK. . . . We ask that the BHA be consulted to suggest members of the new Central Social Morality Advisory Council and that all editors and producers be made aware of the BHA's willingness to help".

The BHA certainly represents a body of opinion in the country, but it cannot honestly claim proprietorial rights to the Humanist Parliamentary Group (of which it is a joint sponsor with the National Secular Society) or local humanist groups (which are largely independent or affiliated to a number of organisations including the BHA).

Official and other bodies should bear in mind that the British Humanist Association does not represent the sum total of organised humanism in Britain. There are other organisations with a far longer history of campaigning for reforms and promoting non-Christian ethics. And the BHA should know that participation in organisations like the Social Morality Council, where they are outnumbered and outwitted, will result in compromise and retreat when they should be striking hard.

BOOKS

PROPER STATIONS: CLASS IN VICTORIAN

FICTION by Richard Faber. Faber and Faber, £2.50

This is a book that should never have been written. I'm sorry to have to make that statement. Richard Faber has done his homework, tracked down all the references to class in half a dozen Victorian novelists, and he writes pleasantly. It is perhaps not his fault that he has fallen a victim to the current fallacy that sociological fact may be deduced from fiction and that what a writer puts into the mouths of his inventions are his own views. But it is a fallacy, spawned by the documentary fictions of N. Mailer and N. Dunne and if applicable at all only to a present, and I hope passing, fashion when people are confused about the nature and purpose of art.

Currently it leads to the denigration of whole subspecies of fiction, particularly science, thriller, spy, as not somehow real, certainly not serious. A critical tenet which dismisses two-thirds of contemporary literary output not by the individual merit of works but by class is as imaginatively dangerous as the Victorian tendency to dismiss two-thirds of the population on the same principle. Retrospectively it means missing the wood for the trees, the structure for the detail. It causes Richard Faber to write of the author of *Vanity Fair*, the creator of *Becky Sharpe*, "Even in the ardour of his youth Thackeray was scarcely a revolutionary".

So deeply has the concept of the "real" bitten that the "women novelists" have "their realism . . . limited by their experience" and it is the men who fill their books with "the vigour of the real world". Charlotte Bronte in particular reduces "the value of her social witness" by her "exceptionally limited experience". There seems to be some suggestion behind all this that one kind of life is more "real" than another, that childbirth is less "real" than business, teaching than commerce, Lowood Institution than Dotheboys Hall. Charlotte Bronte, whatever her faults as a novelist, had taught abroad, mixed with the lower classes in her father's parish, had a brother who lived at home in the last stages of alcoholism and opium addiction, nursed and buried two sisters, conducted business with her publishers and died in pregnancy, enough experience one would have thought for thirty-nine years.

The value of a novelist is not in his "social witness"; for this we read diaries, history, autobiography, Henry Mayhew or Flora Thomson. Even then we are aware of the bias of the writer in selection and presentation. In the writing of fiction the social background is simply part of the author's idiom, his image system. This makes it unreliable as a basis for assessing the attitudes of an era to any question. Furthermore what Richard Faber calls the "classic" novel was constructed, on analogy with a Shakespeare play, of rounded characters, each with his own viewpoint; interacting upon each other. To decide at any specific moment that here the author is speaking with his own voice is to produce critical commentary by pinstick.

The world that a novelist creates is a projection of himself: subject to the rules of structure, self-consistent and fabricated, powered by energy from the unconscious. Its external and objective trappings work to make it a credible world but it has nothing to do with, and need have nothing to do with, history.

Because the novelist has himself an historical existence his images will usually be drawn from contemporary stock and for the Victorian novelist this was class oriented. An

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image however is only a symbol, the surface expression of a deeper concern, and this Richard Faber seems unaware of. To deny that all the writers he deals with were imaginatively involved, almost, as with Trollope, to obsession, in class relationships would be to fly in the face of the evidence the study has gathered. Here the writers do, I think, reflect their age but they also reflect its literary conventions.

The subject which couldn't be discussed in the drawing room, or on the page intended for drawing room reading, was sex. Nevertheless it remained a matter of concern for all readers. Under cover of the vast network of social relations, the placing of a character on the social scale, the discussion of whether he or she was a gentleman or lady, was the unspoken question about the suitability of the character as a sexual object. Thackeray brings this into the open in some of his non-fictional writing for *Punch*, including a revealing piece which I'm most grateful to Richard Faber for bringing to my notice: *Waiting at the Station*.

"Some eight-and-thirty women are sitting in the large hall of the station, with bundles, baskets and light baggage, waiting for the steamer, and the orders to embark." They are going by the bounty of the Female Emigration Scheme to Australia. Thackeray's reaction to them is angry and entirely honest: "Awful, awful poor man's country". "We never speak a word to the servant who waits on us for twenty years; we condescend to employ a tradesman, keeping him at a proper distance—we laugh at his young men, if they dance, jig, and amuse themselves like their betters, and call them counter-jumpers, snobs, and what not; of his workmen we know nothing, how pitilessly they are ground down, how they live and die, here close by us at the backs of our houses". What angers him most however is that the gulf between the classes is so impassable that union between the reader, "an educated Londoner", and one of the "homely bevy of women" would be "absurd and impossible". This is what class in the Victorian novel is about.

"The woman you love must have pretty soft fingers that you may hold in yours: must speak her language properly, and at least when you offer her your heart, must return hers with its 'h' in the right place, as she whispers that it is yours, or you will have none of it." Here is the novelist's basic recipe for a Victorian heroine. Trollope puts this into fictional form in *The Three Clerks*. In *Lady Anna* he tried to reverse the accepted pattern by having the heroine renounce her noble lover and marry the tailor to whom she was betrothed. "But everybody found fault with me for marrying her to the tailor."

There were two common situations in which the sexual-social barrier was crossed: prostitution and male homosexuality, both of them extra marital, neither acceptable novel material. A sensitive male who was not, or not quite, a gentleman, Smike or Sidney Carlton, might in Dickens be allowed to adore the heroine and die for love; Estella could marry Pip when it was discovered that she was the child of a murderer and therefore equal to a boy from the smithy but both to be heroic had to be educated out of their class.

To be ungentle was to be more animal. Thackeray's advice on choosing a wife from one's own station describes the "wife inferior in degree" as "healthy, lively jolly . . .

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with red cheeks, bright eyes, and high spirits" or "a handsome tawdry, flaunting, watering-place belle . . . tremendous in brazen ornaments and cheap finery". Such a creature was fascinating but taboo, her pull was in her heightened sexuality. His equivalent male is "brave, clever, tall, slim, dark and sentimental-looking"; the romantic hero, passionate as Mr Rochester, Heathcliff, Young Werther or Mellors. Neither of them has the education, the breeding for admission to the tribe which has made its own rules and keeps the rest of the population in emotional subjection or exclusion as if they were a different and slave race.

What was the basis of this tribalism, this territorial exclusiveness and sexual appropriation which formed the novelists' image material? An economist might argue that the whole refined construct was simply to cover the naked jungle law of poor and rich; that it was cause and effect. These seem to me on the contrary to be coterminous. Exploitation of one class by another was justifiable if they were two different species who couldn't mate and this accounts for the recurrent image of "breeding". But the laws within the tribe where marriages were regulated under a paternal eye were equally pervasive, the father forgoing his *droit de seigneur* in exchange for social or financial benefit while often enjoying it among his female employees or the thousands of prostitutes. The myth that nice women didn't enjoy sex kept them still emotionally belonging to the head of the family, pseudo virgins even when they were mothers.

The working class on the other hand provided an anti-image from which the gentle could see themselves shinningly reflected and a barrier of sexual taboo which disguised the incest barrier so strong in a familial society. They became for the upper classes children in their dependence and animals in their lack of cultural refinement, their world so one of "wonder and horror", Thackeray writes, "that readers of romances own they never read anything like to it". It wasn't the subject for fiction but legislation. Not until the twentieth century did it become acceptable romance material for the drawing room with the Lawrentian cult of working class virility.

MAUREEN DUFFY

HUMANISM AND MORAL THEORY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL INQUIRY

by Reuben Osborn. Pemberton, £1.50.

This is the second edition of a book which, when it first appeared in 1959, was praised by Russell, Bronowski and many leading papers. It is not hard to see why. Most books on ethics seem to be works on theology or philosophy ("moral theology" or "moral philosophy") or simply extended bibliographies of earlier writings on ethics. Today many Anglo-Saxon ethics texts are really studies in linguistics and not always very good ones, for philosophers do not necessarily have a feel for language and the thought behind it. Reuben Osborn has dared to make a fresh start. He does include what is now an obligatory "discussion about the meaning and definition of ethical terms", where he has nothing particularly new to say, but concentrates on "an examination of the psychological and social factors that seem to me to be relevant for a humanist theory of ethics". Though this is derived largely from the work of Freud and Piaget it is assembled in an imaginative

way and the author gives sources that are usually taken for granted in his accounts of "wolf-boys" or children ostensibly reared by animals. He is, I am sure, right to censure "the almost total refusal of writers on ethics to take into account psychological knowledge concerning the activities of unconscious processes" and point out that "the selection of those aspects of ethical problems appearing of primary importance to any writer may have a close relation to his own intuitive approach". Above all, he is to be congratulated on the pellucid prose in which he unfolds his arguments. In ethics more perhaps than in any other discipline, many have enjoyed a reputation for profundity who should have incurred a denunciation for obscurity.

For all that, I cannot feel that Mr Osborn succeeds in his central aim of furnishing "an objective theory of ethics". He believes that "if men were wholly rational, then social relations would be wholly expressive of the co-operative, other-regarding aspects of their psychologies. They would, that is to say, be wholly good". These psychologies are, in his view, pretty universal, not just in broad theory but in the "relatively widespread agreement as to what things and actions to describe as good, right, and so on". It follows that criminals or members of aggressive communities have simply failed to think rationally. That is why they have not achieved goodness.

I have written at considerable length on this question elsewhere and cannot conveniently summarise my conclusions in a short review. Suffice it to say that I believe this thesis, plausibly presented as it is, to be a pious fiction of the humanist movement, though some humanist anthropologists hotly dispute the universality of moral codes. In the first place, I am always a little anxious over any blueprint for a "humanist ethic" or a "humanist theory of ethics". The great bulk of mankind does not accept humanism or show much sign of doing so. Neither does it accept rationalism. What then is it to do? It may be argued that these terms are not meant ideologically but practically. Even so, I cannot myself observe any glib division of men into those who are rational and those who are not. Mr Osborn cites a burglar as an example of an "irrational man". But if he is a good buglar, he does not expect to be caught or believes the takings to outweigh the penalties if he is, lives mainly in the company of burglars and values their good opinion more than that of other people, it seems hard to describe him as "irrational". The author agrees that he might be intelligent but is not rational because not good. But that amounts to saying that he is not good because he is not good. Others who share this belief in the moral aspect of rationalism seem to equate it with intellectualism; but this requires a demonstration that intellectuals are morally better than other people and moral philosophers best of all. This I have not myself observed. And the same applies to those who call themselves "humanists". We may all agree that a "realist stress on the immediacy of our knowledge of the external world" is important, but whether it leads to a "humanist ethic" or any other sort of ethic is doubtful. It may be that rational thought will dispose of "wanton cruelty" but the great bulk of what I would call cruelty in the world is not wanton but is based on self-interest or the highest of motives. I do not believe that anything can be done to eliminate self-interest, though it can be broadened, so I consider the highest contribution the humanist movement can make to morality (i.e. what people do, as distinct from what they think) is to undermine those "lofty motives" that derive from superstition.

DAVID TRIBE

CAN SCIENCE DISPROVE GOD?

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plausible. But not necessarily *impossible*—as is witnessed in the writings of Jesuit scientists, such as Teilhard de Chardin, who see no difficulty in maintaining their concept of God in face of the vastness and seeming purposelessness of the universe and the chaotic, random processes of evolution. Challenged on this point, the theist would reply that however adequate the scientist's explanation of the origin and development of life (and it is far from adequate yet), it does not, and cannot, answer the question of why there should be any life at all—and why there should be intelligent life at that.

This last point brings me to my main contention. The assertion "God exists" appears to be a normal empirical assertion, similar in form and logical status to "tables and chairs exist". It would therefore seem appropriate to make similar kinds of observation to test the truth or falsity of "God exists" as we might to test "chairs exist". One specific instance of such a procedure would be to test the truth of "God loves his creatures" by observing examples of God's love in action. If no counter-examples were found, showing that God did not after all love his creatures, the truth of the assertion would be demonstrated. It is, however, a well-known criticism of Christianity that its notion of a benevolent deity is contradicted by the existence of evil. Does this show, then, that Christianity is false?

The answer is that it doesn't necessarily show anything of the kind, but that a price has to be paid for this immunity from disproof. Christians normally cite the existence of "free will" to explain the evil in the world, or say that God's love is "inscrutable" and not to be compared with human love. More generally, they do not specify any possible empirical situation which would be incompatible with the love of God; that is, "God loves us" is quite consistent with Hiroshima and Auschwitz and indeed any enormity one cares to mention. The philosophical point, though, is that what appeared to be a normal straightforward empirical assertion is nothing of the kind. It is not possible to specify the required empirical observations which would bear out, or not bear out, the proposition. Similar remarks apply to the whole range of existential propositions about God.

Symbolism

The problem arises, therefore, that it is quite unclear just what sort of proposition is being put forward. To my mind, the major challenge facing Christianity is to define exactly what is being said, in the case of "God loves us" and similar typically religious propositions. It may well be that a perfectly valid defence of religious language can be developed stressing the so-called "existential"—or inner—meaning to the believer and removing it from the realm of cognitive discourse. That is, "God exists" and the rest would not be interpreted as genuinely factual or informative propositions, and so much of the traditional arguments and counter-arguments would be come irrelevant. Yet the price paid for this removal of religion from the normal everyday world, where evidence is demanded of a belief before it is accepted, is a heavy one. Christianity would then become an esoteric cult speaking a minority language

regarded as totally arbitrary by the unbeliever. Communication with the outside world, already difficult, would become almost impossible. Some such problem is acknowledged in books like *Honest to God*, which try to cope with the increasing lack of meaning in religious language by developing a new symbolism—which, unfortunately, begs as many questions as before.

I don't think "science" can disprove "religion" in any way, as they deal with different realms of human experience. Whether anything, in the long run, is to be gained by renouncing the methods of science is another question entirely, and one which Christianity has yet to answer satisfactorily. Particularly in the case of New Testament criticism, the scholarly scientific approach has undermined traditional belief by showing that perfectly possible alternative explanations for a specific religious phenomenon—say the resurrection—exist. This does not dispose of religion, but it does make it increasingly arbitrary. Perhaps we are back to faith after all!

LETTERS**Status**

I don't suppose David Tribe meant to be a prig in the 15 May issue, but . . . well, let me quote him: "He (the *Freethinker* editor) has also worked extremely hard in finding a galaxy of distinguished contributors—people of a status who frankly, would not have contributed in the days of Foote or of his worthy successor, Chapman Cohen . . .".

How long has status, whatever that may mean, been important in the *Freethought* world? What status is necessary other than the quality of sound freethinking? And if some people today do attach importance to status never let it be forgotten that it was the valiant work of non-status people, many of them brilliant writers and sound thinkers even without rows of medals, in Foote's and Cohen's days, that made it safe for today's status people (and who are they, by the way?) to climb on the present bandwagon.

There should be no room in the *Freethought* movement for a caste system.

F. J. CORINA.

Sex and the Old Testament

Your report on the House of Lords debate porn failed to point out that there are some secular humanists who are not overjoyed by the present developments in the field of porn. Having recently paid a business trip to the Netherlands, I was a little shocked to see displayed in the window of a sex shop in the small village of Gemert a picture of two lesbians enjoying *cunnilingus*; no doubt pleasurable, but a little difficult to explain to young children. Perhaps all enlightened humanists should be trying it? Finding one's sexual role must be difficult for all young people. To confuse the issue may eventually lead most to a greater sense of satisfaction, but might it not be achieved at the expense of much else of which life is made up. Or is life, for humanists, made up solely of sex and the repetition of well-worn expressions of prejudice?

Speaking of the latter, your reference to Lord Platt's hobby-horse of knocking the Old Testament brings me to mine—that of defending it. Your knowledge of the book must be greater than mine since I cannot readily call to mind the perversions of which you write. Cruden's *Concordance* is of no help in this matter. Lord Platt has failed to answer, and no doubt you and your readers will fail also to explain, why it is that those who are exposed to the Old Testament to the exclusion of the New are found to commit proportionally less crimes of violence and to be found in smaller proportions in borstals and goals. Perhaps after all, you should have used the example of the so-called Old Testament to support your view that literature does not corrupt or encourage emulation. But that would have called for a stance of scientific objectivity only valued by secular humanists when pointing out that their opponents do not possess it.

GERALD SAMUEL.