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THE CURSE OF RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION

GILL BOYD*

In a survey published in the November 1971 issue of *Humanist News* 90 per cent of members replying "closely associated humanism with opposition to religion in schools". Out of seventy questions, this was the only one to achieve this high consensus of opinion. The impression which I get, however, in talking to humanist and agnostic friends, is that Christianity is on the way out, and that RI in schools is harmless. Whilst I would agree that blind belief in a religion in the adult population is dying out, I cannot, for the following reasons, accept that the indoctrination is harmless.

Fatalistic Pawns

Firstly I suspect that if children are taught at a very impressionable age that there is a god who is *really* in charge of the world, and will look after us, they will tend to keep this philosophy in their subconscious minds in later life—even if they reject the trappings of Christianity. This could lead to a fatalistic outlook on life, and maybe strengthen the feeling (which many people have) of being mere pawns in someone else's game.

Secondly many children find the idea of an all-seeing God very frightening. Taken literally, as children would take it, it is a terrible intrusion on a child's private life.

Thirdly children from agnostic homes face the possibility of a division of loyalty between school and home at the very beginning of their schooldays.

Specific Examples

Here are some instances showing the deleterious effects of Christian dogmas and teachings on the child-mind. Our eldest child already knew the story of evolution before he went to school, and was exceedingly bewildered when he came home after being told the story of Adam and Eve—spare rib and all!—as the *true* story of how man began. I explained to him that some people believed the story of Adam and Eve, but had to admit that his father and I did not, nor did most of our relatives and friends. I asked him to try to listen to the stories as if they were Greek legends and not to try to believe them. He was a very articulate and logical child and had asked a lot of "awkward" questions at school in his attempt to understand what he was being told. After a few more weeks, he insisted that he would not go to RI as it made him doubt if his teacher was telling the truth about other subjects as well. After three letters to the Head, I managed to get him exempted—and he was very relieved.

The next year his younger brother started school. He was a dreamy child and imaginative, and consequently when he heard about Genesis, the Ascension, Heaven and Hell, etc., *swallowed the lot!* I put down his sudden nervousness, fear of the dark, obsessions about clouds and tall trees, etc., to normal childhood fears—until his draw-

ings gave me the clue to his disturbances. In explaining his drawings to me, it all came out. The thought of all those dead bodies up there in the sky terrified him. The Ascension made the worst impression. He was also completely bewildered by the concept of "god is everywhere and can see you wherever you are". He was scared of hell-fire, because knowing he was quite naughty sometimes he thought there might be a possibility that he himself might end up there. I immediately had him exempted from RI and decided that our two younger children should be likewise exempted when they *started* school.

As a result of these two experiences I decided to do some research on this subject. I found in our small village these reactions to RI teaching: one small girl asked her father if he was a Christian. On being told "No" she burst into tears and said, "But you've got to be one, Daddy—you'll go to hell and be all burnt up if you don't". Another child, a boy, had told his mother that "only Christians know the right things to do". Also that "if a baby dies before he's christened he'll go to hell".

I was escorting a little girl home the day after Winston Churchill's funeral and noticed her looking apprehensively at the sky. She was in a mighty hurry to get home. On being asked the reason, she told me that she thought she had seen Churchill's coffin on a cloud. Further, she "knew that he'd gone up to join Jesus".

Opting Out of R.I.

The parents of these children had been amongst those who had assured me that RI was harmless; and still, though unbelievers themselves, allowed their children to be subjected to these ideas at school. I feel very strongly that RI is not harmless, and that we should keep up the campaign to remove RI from the curriculum. I would urge other parents to find out from their children their reactions to this indoctrination and to have the courage to withdraw them from it. I may say that our children have not suffered in any way from having been withdrawn—in fact some of their friends envy them.

* Republished, with permission, from the Newsletter of the Merseyside Humanist Group.

DR HINCKS AND THE CORK EDITION OF PAINE'S AGE OF REASON

NIGEL H. SINNOTT¹

By the middle of the 1790s all Ireland was in a political ferment which had been sparked off as a result of the success of the French Revolution abroad, and at home, by the formation by Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798) and others, at the end of 1791, of the Society of United Irishmen, which "at its foundation . . . stood broadly on the principles of Paine's *Rights of man* (first published 1792 [—in fact Part I was published in 1791—N.S.]) which work, Tone notes with glee, at once became the 'Koran' of Belfast".² The Society flourished, particularly in Dublin and Belfast, until it was suppressed (at least officially) in 1794. The following year, 1795, marked the reaction to Irish Jacobinism with the formation of the Orange Order, and was also the occasion of Tone's leaving Ireland in the hope of obtaining help from the French for an armed uprising against the Dublin Castle authorities.

An Eminent Divine

In the same year, in the city of Cork, an interesting tract was published. It was entitled *Letters addressed to the inhabitants of Cork, occasioned by the circulation of a work, entitled, The Age of Reason, &c., in that city.* (Cork: printed and sold by J. Haly, King's Arms, Exchange, 1795.) The pamphlet, or small book, was a defence of orthodox (Protestant) Christianity, and we now know the author to have been Thomas Dix Hincks, LL.D., an eminent Presbyterian Divine of the day. I do not intend here to discuss the details of Dr Hincks, theological arguments, save to say that, to an inexperienced eye, they appear to be typical of scholarly defences of religion in that period. What is interesting is that Dr Hincks should have felt it necessary to go to print at all, and it is clear on reading the preamble to the letters that *The Age of Reason* was not merely "circulated" in Cork, but published there. I quote:

A work has lately been circulated amongst you with much industry, and, if I have been rightly informed, with considerable success . . . Had this work been permitted to take the usual course, and only one or two copies of it reached this part of the Kingdom, I should not have thought of troubling you with any remarks, but have trusted to the answers which have been or will be published in other places, and to the many excellent works which have been written in support of the evidences of Revelation. But when some persons, with a zeal which I cannot think laudable, and which perhaps deserves reprehension, have rendered it by their exertions a *local* publication, and have caused its dispersion amongst those, who from their situation in life, are unable of themselves to see the false reasoning it contains, it is incumbent on those, whose education and course of study have led them to investigate the subject, to endeavour to assist their brethren, and prevent them if possible from forsaking the clear and pleasant streams of Religion, for the muddy and bitter waters of infidelity (p. 5).

I have been unable to trace any surviving copies of this Cork edition of *The Age of Reason*, but its circulation must have been quite wide enough to worry the devout Dr Hincks, and, indeed, his *Letters* ran to a second edition in the following year, retitled, *Letters originally addressed to the inhabitants of Cork, in defense of Revealed Religion, occasioned by the circulation of Mr Paine's Age of Reason in that city.* [By T.D.H.] *Second edition . . . with additions, &c.* (Cork, 1796).³

Despite Dr Hincks and the Government spy network, however, the illegal United Irishmen continued to spread and flourish. In 1797 we read how a number of Cork

militiamen were sentenced to death and executed for taking the United Irishmen's oath, but only after a local Scottish regiment had refused to carry out the sentence, and a more "loyal" one had been procured for the purpose.⁴ In this same year General Lake "dragooned" Ulster to disarm the people and to terrorise the Northern Jacobins into obedience, though this failed to prevent the great risings in Ulster and Leinster in 1798, and the unsuccessful French landing in Bantry Bay later in the same year. In that year, too, Dr Hincks had another tract published in Cork, which was entitled, aptly enough, *On dwelling together in unity, a sermon* (on Ps. 133) *preached . . . on . . . the first of July 1798.*⁵

Thomas Dix Hincks was born in Dublin in 1767, the son of a customs officer, Edward Hincks, who died in 1772. He was educated both in England and in Dublin, intended to read medicine, but decided instead to take Orders. He went to Trinity College, Dublin (? 1784), and Hackney New College (1788). His ministry in Cork lasted from 1790 to 1815, during which time he was ordained (1792), became a salaried officer of the Royal Cork Institute, lectured on chemistry and natural philosophy, ran his own school (1791-1803) and taught at Fermoy Academy, Co. Cork (1815-1821). In 1821 he left the province of Munster for Ulster, where he taught classics in Belfast Academical Institution. He died in Belfast in 1857, and was buried in Killyleagh, Co. Down. A memorial window was subsequently erected to him in Belfast's First Presbyterian Church.

Versatility of Hincks and His Sons

Hincks was a varied and adaptable writer; in addition to the works already mentioned he published *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1831, 1843), edited the *Munster Agricultural Journal* and several school textbooks. Of his theology, Alexander Gordon says this was "Arian, but he avoided polemics, and was on intimate terms with men of all religious parties."⁶ Hincks was awarded his LL.D. by Glasgow University in 1834. In 1791, the year after he came to Cork, he married Anne Boulton (d. 1835), who bore him seven children, of whom five survived him. Of these, two sons achieved particular distinction: Edward Hincks (1792-1866) was a distinguished orientalist, and made major contributions to the decipherment of cuneiform script. Another son, Sir Francis Hincks (1807-1885) was at various times of his life Premier of Canada (1851), Governor of Barbadoes and the Windward Islands (1855), and Governor of British Guiana (1862). In 1844 he launched a liberal newspaper in Canada, the *Montreal Pilot*, to promote, amongst other causes, "the secularisation of clergy reserves".⁷ When Premier, however, his tardiness in carrying this measure through resulted in the religious Gavuzzi Riot of 1853. Sir Francis eventually published a book entitled *Religious Endowments in Canada* in London, in 1869.

To return, finally, to Thomas Paine. There can be no doubt that his ideas in the 1790s (and later) had profound effects upon political thinking among Irish radicals, just as they did among the revolutionaries of France, the United States, and Britain. Both he and Wolfe Tone met in Paris in March 1797 and during the period of

"dragooning" of Ulster and the '98 Rising, a copy of Paine's *Rights of Man* was virtually a death-warrant if found in an Irishman's pockets.⁸ It is interesting to see the spread of Jacobin ideas in the 1790s from Dublin and Belfast to Cork, where they were ruthlessly suppressed in 1798, and remained more or less dormant until the Tithe War in the 1830s. During the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) the county was a major theatre in the fighting, and has ever since earned itself the nickname of "Rebel Cork".

NOTES:

¹ Originally published 1971, under the title "Dr Hincks and *The Age of Reason in Cork*" in the *Bulletin of the Thomas Paine Society*, 4 (2): pp. 30-32.

² Jackson, T. A. & Greaves, C. D. 1971. *Ireland Her Own*. London: p. 119.

³ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Printed Books to 1955*. I have not examined this version.

⁴ Jackson & Greaves. *loc. cit.* p. 160.

⁵ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Printed Books to 1955*.

⁶ Gordon, A. 1882. "Hincks, Thomas Dix." *Dict. Natl. Biography* 9: p. 892.

⁷ Moriarty, G. P. 1882. "Hincks, Francis." *Dict. Natl. Biography* 9: p. 890.

⁸ Equally interesting are unconfirmed, but reliable, accounts of a Gaelic edition of the *Rights of Man* which circulated in the Scottish Highlands in the 1790s. If any collector of Paineana can run down a copy of either of the Gaelic *Rights of Man*, or the Cork edition of *The Age of Reason*, I would be very pleased to hear of it.

THE BALLOT ACT OF 1872

ERIC GLASGOW

Secret voting is now so generally accepted as a necessary part of the British democratic process that one can readily fail to realise that, as a statutory provision, it has only just become a hundred years old. As a means of overcoming bribery and corruption, in both Parliamentary and municipal elections, it had been advocated by radicals as early as the turn of the eighteenth century, and it was prominent amongst the celebrated "Six Points" of the Chartist programme of 1837. Nevertheless, its passage to the statute book was one of the most uncontested and assured of all the achievements of Gladstone's first Ministry of 1868 to 1874. A Select Committee reported in its favour, and in 1871 W. E. Forster (1818-86) introduced a Bill to implement that recommendation: it was to be complementary and parallel to his famous Education Act of 1870. The Bill of 1871 passed the Commons, but it was rejected by the House of Lords, not on any matter of principle (for even then it was scarcely possible to quarrel with that), but on the grounds that it was brought before them too late in the session. However, it was re-introduced in the next session, and this time it did become law, on 18 July 1872. Even so, the House of Commons was involved in a brief but sharp encounter with the Upper Chamber before it was able to set aside the latter's curtailing amendment which would have made secret voting optional, instead of compulsory: thus far did the entrenched opposition go, to the implication that, at times of public elections, the electorate could not always be trusted to behave as perfect gentlemen.

Work of George Grote

The arguments in favour of the principle of secret voting may be found officially summarised in the *Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Parliamentary and Municipal Elections*, 1869 and 1870. These have also been very effectively marshalled by Justin McCarthy in his once-popular and influential *History of Our Own Times* (Vol. 4: p. 206), but, in fact, there was little that could be said in support of the Ballot Act which had not been fully suggested, long before, by the tireless George Grote (1794-1871), historian and MP for the City of London (1832-41). He introduced four resolutions (1833, 1835, 1838, and 1839) and two bills (1836 and 1837) in favour of the Ballot, but that was salutary thinking, too far in advance of his age. Its impact was theoretical, rather than practical; although it did help to fix the idea of the Ballot as an almost sufficient symbol of the British system of Parliamentary government.

Instead, of course, it had to be left to the zenith of the reforms of Gladstonian Liberalism before the Ballot Act became an established part of the machinery of British

democracy. It is needless to defend its stipulations today, a full century later: in addition to removing suspicions of bribery and corruption in elections for public office, it reduced disorder and tumult at such times, thus promoting the desirable atmosphere of peace and calm. So the Ballot Act of 1872 was a necessary supplement to the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. Its effects became especially noticeable in Ireland, where its requirements tended to direct the sundry grievances of the Irish into the Parliamentary methods of the Irish "Home Rule" Party.

The principle of "vote by ballot" was later extended to other elections, such as those for School Boards, Guardians of the Poor, County, District and Parish Councils. Originally, the Act of 1872 was of temporary duration only; but it was made permanent by the Representation of the People Act, 1918. So the Ballot Act of a century ago laid down valuable and durable guide-lines, not only for British democracy, but also for the political systems of many other countries, subsequently modelled on the British one. Its exact terms may be found in *Statutes of the Realm*, 35 and 36 *Vict. c. 33*. They institute the use of the "ballot paper", on which the voter was secretly to mark his vote, then fold it up so as to conceal his vote, and "place it in a closed box in the presence of the officer presiding at the polling station". The Act also laid down the procedures for disputed or equal results: the final decision always came from the Returning Officer.

Counting of Heads

No doubt today, in 1972, the provisions of the Ballot Act of 1872 have become familiar, and even trite, because of their long usage. I have often thought that the mere recording of crosses on slips of paper is not a very reliable guide to political competence or wisdom: this counting of heads does not indicate what is in them, and strange political outcomes are the inevitable results. Nevertheless, imperfect as the democratic process evidently is, it is surely impossible to suggest any acceptable modern alternative as a means of selecting those who, in any country, must be entrusted with the responsibilities of power; and certainly the arrangements made by the Ballot Act of 1872 have ensured much fairer and more orderly British conditions than those which often accompanied the elections before that date. Picturesque as they may seem in retrospect, the rowdy features of the Parliamentary election at Eatanswill in the *Pickwick Papers* (1836) of Charles Dickens can have neither place nor validity in the accepted procedures of the democratic system, in our own country, or in any other modern State.

NEWS

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

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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.

Freethought books and pamphlets (new). Send for list to G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd., 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1.

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

Humanist Holidays. Details of future activities from Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey. Telephone: 01-642 8796.

EVENTS

Ashurstwood Abbey Secular Humanism Centre (founded by Jean Straker), between East Grinstead and Forest Row, Sussex. Telephone: Forest Row 2589. Meeting every Sunday, 3 p.m.

Leicester Secular Society, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Sunday, 27 February, 6.30 p.m.: "Any Questions? —Council Affairs".

National Secular Society, The Clarence, Whitehall, London SW1. Friday, 3 March, 8 p.m.: debate on "Corporal Punishment in Schools".

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 27 February. 11 a.m.: Dr John Lewis, "Wittgenstein". 3 p.m. George Jaeger, "Understanding China". Tuesday, 29 February, 7 p.m.: Michael Lines, "Relations Between Humanism and Religion".

Thomas Paine Society, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London SW1. Saturday, 26 February, 3 p.m.: general meeting.

Worthing Humanist Group, Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing. Sunday, 27 February, 5.30 p.m.: Albie Sachs, "The Evil of Apartheid".

ANCIENT LIGHTS

"Lead, kindly light/Amid th'encircling gloom;/ Lead thou me on . . ." (Cardinal Newman).

The electricity shortage, and its corollary, the romantic flicker of candlelight, have not gone altogether unappreciated in some of the older sections of the humanist movement. However, despite the splendid opportunity afforded by the current crisis, we regret that the editor of this paper has been unable to persuade the powers-that-be of the evident desirability of restoring antimacassars and gas lighting in the offices of *The Freethinker*.

I suppose we old-fashioned rationalists have to face our reverses and disappointments, in the absence of electric heating as well, with a stiff, blue upper lip!

COLD COMFORT FOR CHRISTIAN PRESSURE GROUP

Following recent revelations about "overwhelming support" for Christian teaching and broadcasting, and "opposition to unrestricted divorce, contraceptives for school children, euthanasia and unrestricted abortion", Mr William McLroy, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, has issued the following statement:

One does not have to be a prophet new inspired to forecast that the result of a Parliamentary poll organised by the Order of Christian Unity will be used to bamboozle the public and browbeat MPs in future. With the decline of religious belief in Britain, Christian pressure groups have increasingly used statistics to confuse rather than enlighten, so we can expect to hear claims that 85 per cent of the Commons and Lords support religious broadcasting and television, 84 per cent are in favour of teaching Christianity in State schools, and 70 per cent are opposed to voluntary euthanasia.

These figures will be comforting to the more simple-minded supporters of the festival of half-light who will regard them as evidence that Christian morality is in the ascendant, and distorted by the more unscrupulous religionists when social and law reforms are discussed at Westminster. But in fact the response to the survey by members of both Houses was quite contemptuous. Only 182 (22.8 per cent) of the Lords, and 177 (28.2 per cent) of the Commons participated in the survey.

Undaunted, the Order of Christian Unity is to step up its campaign to ensure that "Christian education is taught effectively by qualified teachers" in State schools. No doubt they intend that such indoctrination will be paid for by the community despite a dramatic decline in Sunday School attendance which indicates that neither children nor their parents are particularly interested in Christian superstition. And outbursts of sectarian hatred in Scotland and Northern Ireland illustrate only too clearly that subsidising Christianity is a social disaster as well as a financial millstone.

The Order of Christian Unity wants "living Christianity" to be broadcast and televised instead of, as their spokesman put it, "something sugary on Sunday". An increasing number of people would claim that the religion which is served up on radio and television, and in the churches,

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may have a sugary coating, but this is only to disguise the fact that Christianity is still the poisonous concoction it has always been.

RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN INDIA

Readers who follow Indian affairs will be interested in two new titles which have been imported by the Freethinker Bookshop. They are *The Reform of Muslim Personal Law in India*, by Asaf A. A. Fyzee, a 40-page pamphlet written by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jammu and Kashmir, and a former Indian Ambassador to Egypt; and *Challenges to Secularism*, by A. B. Shah, President of the Indian Secular Society. The latter is a 184-page book which "seeks to examine some of the challenges that Hindu as well as Moslem obscurantism poses to secularism in India".

The Reform of Moslem Personal Law in India (15p plus 3p postage) and *Challenges to Secularism* (£1.25 plus 5p postage) are now obtainable from G. W. Foote and Co. Ltd., 103 Borough High Street, London SE1 1NL.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

"Last week an inquest was held in Camden Town on the body of a newly-born male child . . . Death had been caused by suffocation. The coroner remarked that within the last few years over one hundred thousand murdered children had been found in the metropolis. What a blessing it is that we are not as bad as the heathen Chinese, who are reported to kill a certain proportion of their female children! It is nothing but the influence of the blessed Gospel that keeps us so moral."

[From *The National Reformer*, 25 February 1872.]

Meanwhile, in this year of grace 1972, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children announces that "Over 100,000 babies died last year as a result of the Abortion Act" and plans a protest rally (main speakers: Leo Abse and Malcolm Muggeridge) on 30 April against the present law. When will they ever learn?

WHO SAID THIS ?

"There are large numbers of people in Scotland who can thank God they were divorced because their marriages never had a chance from the beginning."

"Family planning is essential in modern society. It's a matter for the private conscience."

Answer: Father Anthony Ross, an honorary chaplain of the Edinburgh universities. According to the *Scottish Daily Express*, Fr. Ross has also been in trouble with his superiors "for his contention that there should be schools integration at secondary level".

FREE GIFTS FOR NEW MEMBERS

Not to be outdone by its rivals, the Assembly of Bloomsbury Heretics is offering a wide range of free gifts to new members. People joining the Assembly for the first time may choose between (a) a pirated reproduction of school-kids' *Oz*; (b) a pass for a month's admission to performances of Professor Borman Mohl's frank, controversial sex-education film, *Detumescence* (still showing nightly at

Humanist House); or (c) an introduction to the Social Morality Subcommittee's encounter group.

We are unable to confirm or deny reports that the editor of the people's revolutionary atheist daily, *The Episcopophagist*, is giving new subscribers a free, 13-volume treatise on urban guerilla warfare.

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR DRIVERS

Thou shalt hold only the steering wheel; Thou shalt not make unto thee a god of thy horse-power; Thou shalt not take the centre line in vain; Remember the driver behind to help him pass thee; Honour thy father and thy mother and all other passengers; Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not commit inebriated driving; Thou shalt not steal thy neighbour's eyes with thy headlights, nor his ears with thy horn nor his enjoyment with thy litter; Thou shalt not bear false witness with thy signals; Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's right of way.

[From the magazine of St. Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore.]

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND GOES TO WAR

"There is a war on", said the Rev. David Levison, announcing the Church of Scotland Moral Welfare Committee's spring offensive against smut, "Even at the risk of being called prudens and spoilsports the Church must take a firm stand on this matter. It is the struggle between good and evil".

The first phase of this war has been the drafting by the Kirk of a petition calling for a tightening up of the obscenity laws. It is to be followed up by "Moral Welfare Sunday", on 27 February, when congregations will be asked to sign the petition on the dotted line.

Our Military Correspondent writes:

There has already been a considerable response by local humanists to the call to arms issued by Miss Fiona MacDrumnaid ("The Boadicea of the Braes"). Commandant-General of the Scottish Libertarian Volunteers. "It is sheer hypocrisy", she writes in her manifesto, "for the Church to talk about 'ending commercial exploitation of sex' on the grounds that it 'only serves to dehumanise man and devalue human sexuality': Christian prudery has been doing just that for two thousand years". Already teams of Shetland ponies are picking their way to Miss MacDrumnaid's snowswept redoubt in the Lammermuir Hills—laden with contraceptive pills for making into grapeshot.

THE WARNING

Champion of Liberty!
Beware
Of the trendies by your shield!
Soldier of Freedom!
Your torch burning low,
And your eyelids
Heavy with stardust
In the dawning watch:
Beware!

Beware of the gilded horse
On psychedelic wheels,
Within the walls!

L.G.B.

BOOKS

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS.

(Inter-European Commission on Church and School, Canterbury, 1970.)

Edited by Geoffrey Parrinder. Harrap, 85p.

We often wonder why it is so difficult to get the British Government (or any Government) to move on the question of the religious provisions of the 1944 Education Act. Apart from the fact that governments only come alive when a question is politically expedient, there is another factor to be considered. That is, the extent to which they are influenced by international movements which favour religion. The Roman Catholic Church after all is such a movement, and the religious of all denominations know how to band together for mutual strength when the time calls for it. In the immediate post-war period organisations and institutes were founded to promote religious education in north-west Europe. They seek "the maintenance and furtherance of all forms of religious education as an indispensable part of human education, in all schools of Europe". They hold regular conferences in different centres, and study various methods of achieving their aims. The political establishment in any one country is strengthened by this sort of international bonding. The lesson for humanists and freethinkers is clear.

One of the methods by which they seek to strengthen the teaching of religion is through the study of what is often called Comparative Religion. But it is difficult to see what the term means to certain writers in this book. Johan Bouman, Professor in the History of Religions and Theology of Religions at Ruhr University, says that all the non-Christian religions are false: "Christ shows no interest in the pagan religions of his day. Their gods are false gods", and, "No more than the Biblical writers can we in our day open a theoretical dialogue with religion in general".

How can someone who regards all other religions as a "one way traffic to Christ" teach what is generally understood as comparative religion? When a person is so convinced of the absolute rightness of his own doctrine, he is in no position to give a fair assessment of those of other people. But is that not a danger with all RI teachers? Each religion teaches that itself is the only correct one. This is the way to Ulsterism.

To be fair, however, not all the writers in this book take the same attitude. Geoffrey Parrinder, Professor of the Comparative Study of Religion at the University of London, admits the intolerance and attitudes of racial superiority that have characterised Christianity: "There is a good deal of imperialism, even of military language, in missions, propaganda, hymns, and dogmatic claims". There has been much misrepresentation of other religions. He might have added much cruelty, persecution and slaughter in the name of Christianity. He thinks that the compulsory act of worship is a mistake, and that teaching about religions is desirable, could the right teachers but be found.

Sten Rodhe, Chairman of the Swedish Union of Teachers of Religion, assures us that the subject has shown considerable evolution in that country. Whereas it used to consist of the memorising of the catechism, it is now concerned with teaching about religions and has lost its old privileged position. In spite of the fact, however, that the students

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are consulted, and that many of them have shown hostility to the subject, this chairman still seems to think that it should be compulsorily taught to all pupils at all levels.

Democracy demands that pupils should have more free choice in the subjects they study. Instead of comparative religion I should prefer to see *comparative ideas* offered to pupils. This would give opportunity for far wider study, and would put religion in its true historical perspective.

MERLE TOLFREE

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF IRRELIGION

By Colin Campbell. Macmillan, £3.50.

The study of religion has been an important subject for sociologists since the foundation of the subject, but irreligion has curiously been neglected. Similarly historians have long been accustomed to writing about the institutions and development of religion, but have missed out until recently the pervasive and important phenomenon of irreligion. So this book is to be welcomed as an attempt to identify irreligion as a subject of study in its own right, and to provide a theoretical framework for such a study. Dr Campbell's work is also to be welcomed for his clear presentation and general lucidity. Though the sociological sections in particular are tightly argued, there is no descent into mere jargon, and the interested layman should have no difficulty handling the concepts which are used in the argument. The only drawback is the price.

The book is written in two moods: the historical and the sociological. In the former, Dr Campbell gives a brief history of various irreligious movements in Britain and North America, including Secularism, Positivism, the Ethical Movement, the RPA, and Humanism, making available to the general reader for perhaps the first time some of the more recent research done in this field. Readers of David Tribe's *100 Years of Freethought* may recognise some of the material, though they will find Dr Campbell gives much else, as well as a new way of looking at the subject.

The sociological parts cover four chapters, divided around the historical section. In the first he defends in a convincing manner the need for a sociology of irreligion. He then goes on to seek a definition of irreligion, and after rejecting several possibilities concludes that it is best given as "a relationship of hostility or indifference towards religion". Though on the face of it this is rather obvious, the careful way in which Dr Campbell examines a number of possible cases of irreligion in a number of contexts makes the journey worthwhile. This whole chapter is in fact a justification of the thesis set out in the previous one—that a sociology of irreligion is necessary. The conceptual tools it provides sharpen the reader's critical faculties and make him aware, for example, of what it means to use such contemporary labels as "Christian agnostic".

After the historical interlude, Dr Campbell then turns to the subject of irreligion and society, in particular irreligion and morality, irreligion and politics, and the function of irreligion in society. Here he concludes that whilst irreligion seems to have had no undermining effect on social morality, it has been destructive of individual ascetic

REVIEWS

morality, the latter being to some extent dependent on religious sanctions whilst the former is subject to more powerful social sanctions. This seems reasonable, but one would have liked at least some mention of the argument, most recently expounded by Lord Devlin in his essay *The Enforcement of Morals*, in which he argues that there is no real distinction between individual and social morality. The final chapter takes up again the theme of the function of religion and carries the war into the camp of orthodox functionalist sociologists of religion. They are castigated for their theological presuppositions, which state only those issues which theology regards as ultimate, and then show that religion alone provides answers to ultimate questions. Though irreligion might in some sense be a cultural substitute for religion, it is not necessarily so, because freethinkers may not require of life the same things as religious people. New perspectives pose different problems, needing different solutions, and so irreligion and religion are not inevitably interchangeable concepts. So the case is finally clinched for a sociology of irreligion, and with the publication of this book the subject comes of age. Freethinkers may not agree with everything which is said in the work, but they cannot fail to be prompted by it to look at freethought in a new and generally helpful light.

EDWARD ROYLE

PAMPHLET

THE UNIVERSITIES: PRESSURES AND PROSPECTS

(Young Fabian Pamphlet No. 28). By Colin Crouch and Stephen Mennell. Fabian Society, 45p.

What a pleasant surprise to receive a publication written by two sociologists and yet almost entirely free from the otiose prolixity so sadly characteristic of that field of study!

This Young Fabian pamphlet, moreover, is not only written in a sinewy style with remarkably little adipose tissue: it is also closely and carefully argued. And, to their great credit, the authors have refused to refrain from expressing their views simply because some of them will be unwelcome to the more "with it".

Thus, although I disagree with some of the conclusions of this pamphlet, and consider it in places to be lacking in logic, I would urge everyone concerned with higher education to read it carefully and to make their own judgements on it only after serious cogitation. Its 48 pages have more meat in them than some tracts of thrice the length.

The pamphlet claims not to be a plan for higher education, but simply "to assert the value of certain elements in the British university tradition". These are, essentially, "a concern for achievement as judged by purely academic standards", a "tradition of partial withdrawal from . . . the everyday world . . . in order to preserve the autonomy of these academic criteria". The authors are aware that "many socialists . . . will claim that both elements are in some sense reactionary, and will thus condemn us immediately"; but they refuse to be intimidated by the prospect. More strength to the elbow of such doughty writers! We have far too few such today.

Nevertheless, I think that Crouch and Mennell have set themselves an impossible task. It simply is not possible in the 1970s to consider the problems of the universities realistically except in the context of higher education as a whole. It was therefore inevitable that they should fail to make a really convincing case for their thesis. I say this sadly, for I share their concern for the values they defend; and I deeply regret that their failure to view them in a wider perspective necessarily vitiates much of their argument.

The authors do, it is true, spare some considerable space for discussion of the relationship between the universities and the polytechnics. This must be regarded as a triumph for the polytechnic publicity machine, which (to those who are familiar with the whole field of non-university higher education) is far too reminiscent of high-pressure detergent advertising. Who would image, from the discussion in this pamphlet, that the polytechnics are very much a Johnny-come-lately on their side of the binary line?

Quite the best established and largest component of the "public sector" are the colleges of education; and yet these the authors totally ignore except for a very brief passing reference. This is the fatal flaw in their vision, and it prohibits them from reaching any proper conclusion. It is as if two obviously clear thinkers had set out to defend the traditional values of coal as a fuel, making a good deal of careful comparison with nuclear energy—but quite forgetting to consider the claims of gas.

Still, the work of clear thinkers, who are also clear writers, is never completely wasted. Here, for example, are a few well-phrased points pregnant with possibilities of cogitation (I quote them without any implication of agreement with all the authors' conclusions). "Radical equalisation of opportunity in British education is likely to make the system more meritocratic rather than less". "Higher education has long since passed the period when its total cost was so small that no nasty choices had to be made." "Most of the 'profit' on investment in higher education is garnered by the individual in the shape of higher earnings." "Merely to sloganise about 'higher education for all' is naive and unhelpful." "The revolutionary students . . . seek a political engagement of the university, forgetting that the price of the university's freedom is its abstention from adopting a political role." "Under the cloak of a concern for standards and so forth, there is often concealed a less defensible case for keeping a range of material privileges . . . The dissolution of the monasteries seems less of an outrage if the monks can be shown to be more concerned about their silver plate than their devotions."

To summarise. Where they are concerned in diagnosis of the universities, Crouch and Mennell are in some respects admirable. They know the patient well—his ancestry, early days, years of vigour, and present ills. If he alone had claim on the health service, their suggestions for treatment would also be good, and the prognosis might be a fairly early recovery. The authors, not so blinkered as some of their fellow-practitioners in the groves of academe, and much more knowledgeable and acute than most of the more vociferous among them, make a brave effort at realism by considering the needs of the newly emerging polytechnics. But, since they are almost totally oblivious to the traditions, characteristics, scale and importance of the much larger college of education sector, their diagnostic skills have been almost entirely misdirected.

Perhaps they will write again for us, after they have corrected this enormous lacuna in their knowledge of England's higher education system.

CYRIL BIBBY

LETTERS

Christianity and Credulity

John L. Broome remarks, "All myth theories of the origins of Christianity, including that of Professor Wells, seem to demand a greater degree of credulity than Christianity itself".

Professor Wells' theory is not a myth theory and the Professor's critics do themselves and him a disservice by making the confusion.
C. J. G. MACY.

What is a Humanist?

Iain McGregor suggests that, though we know what a *humorist* is, we do not know what a *humanist* is. What, he asks, does a humanist eat and drink? And how does he vote? But humorists are no more homogeneous in such irrelevant matters than humanists are.

A humanist is one whose primary concern is this world and the people in it—unlike most religious adherents who put God in his heaven before people on earth, and, equally, unlike governments and financiers, who put the gross national product before either people or the earth.

This humanist concern is expressed in a two-word slogan being used by the British Humanist Association for a campaign to be launched in April: "People First".
BARBARA SMOKER.

With reference to the letter headed, "What is a Humanist" (*The Freethinker*, 5 February), I would submit as my definition: A humanist is one who puts human beings first.
B. HINDE.

Following Iain McGregor's letter in your issue of 5 February, here is my attempt at a concise definition of a humanist:

"A person who believes that there is no supernatural being or divine law; that all rules and codes of conduct have been evolved by humans themselves out of their experience; that the historical future of this planet is in the hands of the human species; and that 'good' and 'evil' are human evaluations of benefit or harm to human individuals, human societies, or the human race."
A. A. H. DOUGLAS.

A friend of mine (who would wish to remain anonymous) once came out with the following definition: "A humanist is a god who believes in man against all the evidence".
L. G. BEELZEBUB.

Freethought, Militancy and Dogmatism

Denis Cobell (*The Freethinker*, 12 February) tries to equate militancy with dogmatism. To my mind they are opposites.

To be militant is to be willing to engage in argument, discussion, debate, and to express one's views openly. Whereas to the dogmatist all argument and questioning is taboo.

The only "dogmatic atheists" one is likely to meet are not in the least militant; they usually call themselves "agnostics".
BRIAN KHAN.

"Resignations over Moral Education"

You say "not a few of us have had the nasty unkind feeling that moral 'education' was untrustworthy". These feelings are indeed nasty, unkind and unworthy. I suggest you look a little closer into the history of the Farmington Trust than *The Times'* piece you are presumably quoting from was able to take you, before you make a judgement on its activities.
CHRISTOPHER MACY.

Soviet and Israeli Jews

The Editor's reply to Mr Pat Sloan's letter, "Jews in the USSR", does not in my opinion take into account the class relations the Soviet Union has with other states. Despite diplomatic and trade relationships with capitalist countries it has always been the aim of the latter since 1917 to smash the Soviet state and reintroduce capitalism.

Had it not been for United States and British imperialism, which kicked millions of Arabs out of Palestine to make way for millions of European Jews, there would not now be the present conflict between the Arab states and Israel.

Let me conclude by saying that, on the whole, the Soviet Jews are far better treated than the native born element in Israel by the Israeli government: the oriental Jew born in Palestine is considered a second class citizen by his superior European brothers.
J. H. MORTEN.

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