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OUR PAGAN CHRISTMAS

—NEW N.S.S. PAMPHLET BY R. J. CONDON

NIGEL SINNOTT

For many years rationalists have pointed out that Christianity—in common with several other ideologies—shows a remarkable habit of taking over earlier, or contemporary, ideas and customs (often after trying to suppress them), claiming them for its own, and eventually purporting to have invented them. For example, at one time or another most of us have heard it said that the concept of the trinity (Three in One, and One in Three) is “unique” to Christianity, but in fact a brief examination of the Celtic pantheon, to name only one, will show a galaxy of gods with three faces, three names and three attributes. Similar claims are made for the Easter and Christmas stories, but, as R. J. Condon has shown in a series of interesting articles in *The Freethinker* in recent years, they are just as bogus.

Outstanding

Many readers of Mr. Condon’s articles have hoped for some time that he would present his ideas on Christian mythology in a handy, permanent form; this he has done in a booklet entitled *Our Pagan Christmas*. His discussion of the origins of, and the pagan parallels with, the Christmas story will not disappoint them. The publishers, the National Secular Society, have achieved quite a reputation in the past ten years for producing lively, reasonably priced pamphlets on topics of the day: this latest one certainly ranks as outstanding.

For freethinkers, the festive season is a mixed blessing of merrymaking, socializing, rest and family reunions on the one hand, and on the other of bogus “Christmas offers”, postal delays and a deluge of Christian propaganda. In almost the same breath, Christians are wont to express surprise that the atheist joins in the parties and jollifications, yet they also denounce what they see as the waning of interest in the purely Christian aspects of the holiday. In Mr. Condon’s pamphlet we now have a ready counterblast to both points for, as he says—

It is doubtful if those Christians who annually bemoan the festive season as “pagan” realise the extent to which they are right. For in celebrating Christmas we continue a practice of our remote ancestors, who had done much the same thing every year at the winter solstice for many centuries before the coming of Christianity.

In the first part of his booklet, Mr. Condon deals with the Christian nativity stories and their parallels, showing that in many early cultures 25 December was celebrated, in various guises, as the time when the sun, after reaching its lowest point in the sky in the depth of winter, began to rise higher again, thus heralding the promise of spring and a re-birth of life. In the Roman calendar, 25 December was the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun; to the Mithraists it was observed as the anniversary of the virgin birth of their Persian sun-god; and in Egypt it marked the birth of Horus to the virgin Isis. In fact a prototype of the entire nativity story—annunciation, conception, birth and adoration—is known from Egyptian mythology and is illustrated on a wall of the pre-Christian Temple of Amen at Luxor (a picture of this appears in the booklet).

The author also deals with the stories of the Three Kings, the stable, crib and the star of Bethlehem, and shows that

they can quite reasonably be traced to zodiacal and pagan origins. The massacre of the innocents has its equivalent in several “myths of the dangerous child”. Spring, who is a threat to the old tyrant, Winter. And similarly the flight into Egypt of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to escape the wrath of Herod (who was an historical king) bears a remarkable resemblance to the earlier story of the flight into the marshes of Seb, Isis and Horus to escape the evil serpent, Herrut. As Mr. Condon concedes:

While it would be an over-simplified answer to the historicity question to assert that the Holy Family are little more than copies, names and all, of characters derived from a single pagan source, it could well be that the earlier mythological system played a greater part in their shaping than is generally supposed.

The second part of the pamphlet is devoted to more general Christmas customs, nearly all of which can be shown to symbolize the rebirth of the sun, either in the form of a blazing pudding or of the old-fashioned round boar’s head with its bristles (“rays”), or in the form of lights or young trees and greenery. And there is also the Yule log, representing dead winter, which is burned to symbolize its passing. Finally, the booklet contains, as an appendix, a succinct extract from Charles Bradlaugh’s essay, “Who Was Jesus Christ?”, and there is a splendid foreword by Barbara Smoker who does greater justice to Mr. Condon’s text than this review. She rightly points out that “Christianity’s take-over of our pagan mid-winter festival . . . is an expression of the privileged position of institutionalized Christianity that prevails in the western world . . . [and] plays its part in reinforcing that position of privilege.”

Mr. Condon has shown that he possesses the rare gift of being able to write a popular, readable account of a rather complex subject without misleading over-simplification. *Our Pagan Christmas* has both propaganda and secularist “nuisance” value, yet at the same time has a clarity and sufficient depth to whet the appetite of any serious student of the mythological theories of Christian origins. It is a splendid literary sortie against the doctrine of an historical Jesus, and, as Miss Smoker reminds us, “it is on this bogus doctrine that an immeasurable amount of rigid authoritarianism, social injustice, and human misery has depended for almost two thousand years.”

(Continued on page 172)

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PROSECUTION OF LAST TANGO IN PARIS FAILS

A private prosecution against the distributors of the film *Last Tango in Paris* failed recently when an Old Bailey judge ruled that there was no case to answer. The prosecution—the first involving a film shown in a licensed cinema under the Obscene Publications Act—was initiated by Edward Shackleton, a retired Salvation Army officer and a prominent member of the Nationwide Festival of Light. Mr. Shackleton had campaigned previously to have the Martin Cole film *Growing Up* banned.

John Trevelyan, former Secretary to the British Board of Film Censors, said that the result of the *Last Tango* case was "very satisfactory". He added: "The Obscenity laws are in a mess and there seemed a chance that the Act would be interpreted by the Court in a way that would be to the public disadvantage. But this has not happened. I see no reason why adults should not now be allowed to choose for themselves what films they should see. I would continue to protect children and young people by intelligent censorship."

The price of justice

Eric Smith, Joint Honorary Secretary of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society, told *The Freethinker* he was delighted that this test case had failed, and equally delighted that this resulted from the judge's acceptance of the defence counsel's interpretation of the Obscene Publications Act, 1959. "But", said Mr. Smith, "I was appalled that the defendants' application for costs was refused when it had been shown that there was no case to answer, and I am very concerned that the prosecution costs will be paid out of public funds when, clearly, it was the defence who did their homework properly."

"I saw *Last Tango in Paris* for the second time shortly before the case opened and was even more impressed by the film's warning that if we treat our fellow human beings with contempt then we should not be surprised if that contempt, at the very least, rebounds on us—witness the fate of Paul, as played by Marlon Brando. The so-called pornographic scenes are essential to the unequivocal

depiction of Paul's degrading treatment of the girl. I regard the film's message as being very positive, urging us to be more caring. And I consider the prosecution of the film's distributors as impertinent, paternalistic and authoritarian."

A spokesman for the National Co-ordinating Committee Against Censorship welcomed the outcome of the case, but regretted that it had hinged on a point of law and that the jury were not allowed an opportunity to acquit on the facts. He said: "I am confident—as the recent acquittal of John Lindsay in the 'blue films' case demonstrated—that the public are tired of being told by self-appointed moral nannies what they may not look at."

Political Censorship

Marion Boyars, Joint Managing Director of the firm that was prosecuted for publishing *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, said she deplored that the case of *Last Tango* was thrown out of Court on purely technical and legally obscure grounds. She told *The Freethinker*: "A film or a book or any work or art that has been treated seriously by responsible critics and shown in respectable media should not be assailed in any court of law by moralist watchdogs and fuddy-duddies who, on their own admission, have no knowledge of, nor interest in the arts. The use of the admittedly inadequate obscenity laws for political and sensationalist purposes strikes me as socially dangerous and financially wasteful. The laws should be amended to make such unwarranted interference impossible. The 1959 Obscenity Act states in its preamble specifically that this law is designed to protect society from pornography. Society also needs protecting from those who are bent, through sheer ignorance and lack of sensibility, on the destruction of art."

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, agreed that some films are sickening; *The Sound of Music*, for example. "But I wouldn't want to ban even that", she said. "One of the most ardent campaigners against sexual 'obscenity' was Adolf Hitler. Whenever laws have been introduced to repress freedom of expression on grounds of taste, such laws have always been used sooner or later for political ends for selective prosecutions."

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

London, Saturday 22 March 1975

Speakers: Dora Russell, Phyllis Graham,
Michael Duane, G. N. Deodhekar,
Barbara Smoker

(Continued from front page)

Both in Britain, and in the English-speaking countries overseas, this pamphlet will without doubt have a wide, and especially seasonal, sale for as long as it remains in print. I for one intend to see to it this year that Father Christmas (*née* Wotan) places a copy in the stocking of each of my more obviously Christian or "apologetic-agnostic" friends and relatives. I also devoutly pray that when he has digested his quota of rum-and-raisin flavoured solar symbol, Mr. Condon will be persuaded to write a second pamphlet, this time on "The Tallest Story Ever Told", Easter. Copies of *Our Pagan Christmas*, by R. J. Condon, may be obtained (price 20p, plus 5p postage) from G. W. Foote & Company, 698 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

CHURCH HAND-OUT ON THE NOD

THE EDITOR

In August *The Freethinker* reported the Government's lamentable decision to increase the capital grant to voluntary aided church schools from 80 to 85 per cent. The Education Bill incorporating this provision came up for its second reading in the House of Commons on 15 November. Such humanists as were aware of the fact will have been saddened that this measure could slip through almost on the nod on a Friday afternoon, with only one M.P. questioning the wisdom of this further prop to sectarian education in England and Wales. What successive governments fail to realize is that the Education Act 1944—although a wretched Act in the way it entrenched church schools in the State education system—contains provisions for the situation where the Churches find themselves unable to meet the financial requirements of the so-called dual system. (And their inability only reflects their adherents' unwillingness to pay for the privilege.) The 1944 Act provided that church schools could have all their expenses met if they handed over a controlling interest on the school's governing body to the local education authority. Consequently, it has always been open for the Churches themselves to reduce their financial commitment by transferring numbers of their schools to this latter "controlled" category.

Confidence trick

Similarly it has been open to any government to insist that, in return for additional financial assistance from the State, the Churches should increasingly cede control of these schools to the State. This would surely have been seen as fair by the electorate, enshrining as it would the two traditional adages about the payer of the piper calling the tune, and cutting one's coat to fit the cloth. Instead, we have witnessed the dreary spectacle of each administration extending the financial benefits of "voluntary aided" status without requiring any comparable sacrifice on the part of the Churches. It is worth reminding ourselves that the 1944 Act involved the State in meeting 50 per cent of the capital costs of existing schools. With this Bill it has now reached the situation where 85 per cent of the capital cost of all (including new) schools is met. In fact, the situation is even worse than that, as all church schools have their running expenses (staff, etc.) met, so that the whole situation has become a mockery. The 1944 Act provided that there should be two categories of church school, the difference depending on the extent of the Churches' financial contribution. We have now reached the situation where there are still two categories of church school, over one of which the Churches have virtually total control, but for both categories the Churches receive almost all the cost from the State (100 per cent in the case of controlled schools; about 99 per cent in the case of voluntary aided schools—see David Tribe's *The Cost of Church Schools*). In introducing the Bill the Secretary of State, Mr. Prentice, quoted a letter from the Anglican Bishop of Blackburn, that "The dual system would cease to be a partnership if Church people did not contribute a proper share of the finances involved". Freethinkers will agree that they do not so contribute, and that the system is not a partnership, but a confidence trick.

Most speakers in the debate were under the impression that the system is working well, that the arguments about church schools have been removed from the political scene. The Under Secretary of State, Mr. Armstrong, hoped that this was due to increasing tolerance, and not to apathy and indifference. The latter is unfortunately the

case. In the past it was the differences between the religious sects that made church schools a political issue; now a secular electorate is utterly unaware of the issues involved. As Mr. Christopher Price, the one M.P. to speak against the measure, pointed out, the passage in 1944 of such an Act as the present one would have been unthinkable. In fact, then there was a determination to prevent the spread of the "denominational virus". In 1974 speakers in the debate—if indeed it can be called such—almost fell over one another to make it clear that when this was called a durable settlement it was not intended to be a final settlement. One Catholic M.P., Mr. Mahon, went so far as to say that he was going to add Mr. Prentice to his calendar of saints!

One argument that found favour with a number of speakers was the view that having paid their rates and taxes Christians were entitled to have whatever system of education they liked paid for by the State. The same Mr. Mahon asked why Catholics should be only 85 per cent citizens. This argument is so absurd, and it is typical of the uncritical nature of the debate that it went unchallenged. One imagines these same M.P.s would not apply the same argument in favour of any other minority group that sought to establish a niche in the State education system at public expense. For instance, a group of atheists could maintain that "in conscience"—Mr. St. John-Stevas's phrase—they could not send their children to State schools where the teaching of religion is compulsory.

The position of church schools in relation to comprehensive reorganization also came up for discussion. Mr. St. John-Stevas objected to a government circular that stated:

In the case of voluntary aided schools the governors cannot expect to continue to receive the substantial financial aid which their schools enjoy through being maintained by the local education authority, if they are not prepared to co-operate with that authority in setting the general educational character of the school and its place in a local comprehensive system.

This statement contains one of our main general objections to church schools. Unfortunately, the Government can only see its validity in terms of comprehensive reorganization. As Mr. Price put it, "Schools can live totally off the public purse but remain completely unamenable to public policy in doing so". The irony of the Government's position was brought out fully by Mr. Armstrong, who commended the Churches for their record in implementing comprehensive systems, and so getting rid of "the artificial, unfair and divisive system that is perpetuated as long as we continue to label and segregate our children". It is the traditional Labour Party blind spot: they can see that selective schools segregate and are divisive, but they do not seem to care that church schools do the same.

There were some misgivings expressed on the educational situation in Northern Ireland, but no relevance was seen to our own situation. Mr. St. John-Stevas believed

that the case for entirely separate schools is weakened by the circumstances there. I hope that renewed efforts will be made to get a form of education in common between children of different faiths there. . . . Until we get the basis of education right in Northern Ireland, we shall never have a basis for a lasting peace in that unhappy Province.

Apparently (as with proportional representation), what is good enough for Northern Ireland need not apply in England and Wales. Indeed, the educational situation there is unlikely to be resolved if the views of the one Ulster M.P.

(Continued on page 180)

THE POPE AND GLASGOW POLLOK

JEAN ANDERSON

On 25 November 1974, the Vatican issued a Declaration on Procured Abortion. It contained nothing new and could not have been expected to do so, since the Roman Catholic Church is too politically as well as theologically committed on this issue now, to be able to change course so suddenly.

The Declaration rejects freedom of conscience on the grounds that "one can never claim freedom of opinion as a pretext for attacking the rights of others". The "other" being the foetus, which is thus accorded equal status with the adult mother, without further ado. For those of the faithful who hesitate to swallow this enormity in one gulp, Authority is wheeled in:

It [the Holy See] hopes that all the faithful, including those who might have been unsettled by the controversies and new opinions, will understand that it is not a question of opposing one opinion to another, but of transmitting to the faithful a constant teaching of the supreme Magisterium, which teaches moral norms in the light of the faith. It is therefore clear that this Declaration necessarily entails a grave obligation for Christian consciences.

Any Catholic women who may have felt the liberating force of the new feminism are smartly slapped down:

The movement for the emancipation of women, in so far as it seeks essentially to free them from all unjust discrimination, is on perfectly sound ground... But one cannot change nature. Nor can one exempt women, any more than men, from what nature demands of them.

What "nature" (i.e. the Vatican) demands of them, it appears, is that once they are pregnant, whether by rape, incest or simple error, they continue with the pregnancy to the bitter end, elevated by "awareness of the grandeur of the task of co-operating with the Creator in the transmission of life, which gives new members to society and new children to the Church".

The Pope also spares a thought for the woman who finds that she is carrying a gravely deformed foetus. Abortion cannot be the answer here either: "Happy are those who mourn; they shall be comforted". So chin up and keep your eyes on the Next World: "From this viewpoint there is no absolute misfortune here below".

French Vote

What is new about this Declaration is its slick timing. It was released the day before the great French abortion debate in the National Assembly. The Vatican had already suffered a humiliating defeat over the Italian divorce referendum. It was determined not to lose again. But it did, by 284 votes to 189. Even last minute revelations about the French President's private life could not save the Church. The new French abortion law could work out more liberal than the British one. As 35,000 French women came to London for abortion in 1973, this is just as well. During the debate, Mme. Simone Weil, the French Minister of Health, estimated that 300,000 women had abortions in France each year "outside the law". This is more than double the British figure for legal abortion.

Mr. James White M.P.

It is ironical that just as the rest of the civilized world is following the example of the 1967 Abortion Act, Mr. James White M.P. has allowed himself to be talked into trying to wreck it.

Mr. White is a Glasgow car dealer, who became M.P.

for the Pollok division of Glasgow in 1970 when he scraped in with a majority of 600 votes. Mr. White is a Scottish Labour M.P., and the Labour Party in Scotland is in deep trouble at the moment, and threatened by the Scottish Nationalist Party. Mr. White needs to secure Pollok's large Catholic vote. But he is not a Catholic himself and must not give the appearance of being a Catholic stooge or the Presbyterians will take fright. Fortunately the Catholics are understanding. They know the Abortion Act cannot be dismembered at once. It must be done by easy stages. They are prepared to wait. They have no other choice:

In recent weeks Catholics in many parishes in Glasgow have been encouraged to write to Mr. White to persuade him to make reform of the 1967 Act the subject of his Private Member's Bill. The provisions of the Bill do not of course go the whole way with the hopes of the Church. Total repeal remains the ultimate goal for a great many Catholics and other Christians. (*Scottish Catholic Observer* 22 November 1974).

Mr. White's Bill has not been published at time of writing. He may be persuaded to moderate it when he gets to know a little about his subject. His initial statements suggested he was going to fly in the face of the Lane Report and seek a twenty week limit, which Lane rejected. He was also quoted as saying that he thought doctors ought not to be allowed to try to assess the effects of social factors on the health of their patients.

Facts for Mr. White

There are certain facts that Mr. White needs to know, however much these may distress the Catholic lobby:

- (1) The President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Sir Stanley Clayton, has stated that most members of his Council "welcomed the recommendations of the Lane report as a whole". (*British Medical Journal*, 1974, 3, 358.)
- (2) One in five consultant gynaecologists now believes in abortion at the request of the patient. Two in three consultant gynaecologists think specialist abortion units should be established (only 49 per cent did so in 1969). (*Consultant Gynaecologists and Birth Control* by Marjorie Waite. Birth Control Trust, 1974.)
- (3) "Three family doctors in four approve of abortion on social grounds." (Gallup Poll discussed in *The Times* 28 November.)
- (4) Deaths following abortion have fallen from more than 50 each year before the Abortion Act to a provisional figure of only 12 in 1973. (*Registrar General's Quarterly Report* No. 502.) What price the "sanctity of life" now? Before Mr. White rises to his feet in the House on 7 February, he had better make sure he has thought up an answer to that one.

At a time when the Labour Party is seeking to appeal to women voters with its anti-discrimination legislation, this Bill demonstrates the contempt for women that some older and more reactionary Labour members still feel. It is up to freethinkers, and above all, up to women voters, to show that their lobby is as powerful as the Roman Catholic one. You have till 1 February to write to your M.P. and tell him what you think of Mr. White and all his works. Don't wait until then. WRITE NOW. The health and welfare of British women is at stake.

LAST WORDS ON "LAST TANGO"

DAVID GODIN

"The fact that the act [sodomy] was performed by a famous actor [Marlon Brando] makes it altogether more evil." Thus Mr. Edward Shackleton was quoted in the *Sunday Times* after his unsuccessful private prosecution of the film, *Last Tango in Paris*. It is comforting for those who are not famous, but who nevertheless indulge in sodomy, to learn that their sojourn in the brimstone of Hell will (presumably) be of shorter duration than that which will have to be endured by Hollywood lovelies and luminaries of the Silvery Screen.

Whilst one is consoled that judges are not yet quite prepared to indulge all the excesses of the Festival of Light and its dotty supporters, we have seen enough kindly comment from the Establishment to show that their efforts are regarded as laudable and noble. In the case of *Last Tango in Paris*, the division of costs (United Artists will have to hand over £10,000 of the profits from this lucrative production, the success of which in my opinion was solely due to Festival publicity), has shown the extreme flexibility of "justice" in these heady and somewhat hysterical times. Since so few people seem to go to the cinema these days, it is incredible how many of our nation's ills can be attributed to the "moral pollution" it creates, and such irrational arguments give one pause to wonder how long it will be before we are assured that all our worries emanate from the fibre-sapping productions from "the Jews of Hollywood and the entire Jewish Film Industry Worldwide".

We have yet to see the outcome of the trial of *More About the Language of Love* (another pantomime scheduled to open soon at The Old Bailey Picture Palace), but one expects a tit (if I may use that word) for that outcome just as the "victory" for *Lady Chatterly* had to be paid for by the prohibition of the far more worthy *Fanny Hill*. Mercifully, juries have not yet been depraved and corrupted by the subversive Festival of Light propaganda that floods the country like a tide of filth, and one hopes they won't become so unless of course they too wish to win the approbation of their Heavenly Father, and a few extra Stars in their Crown like Sunday School merit awards. This Heavenly Father is an odious figment of their imaginations who evidently shares their middle-class anxieties and fears. Why did we not all heed the warning of the book *The Devil's Camera* over fifty years ago when *The Smiling Lieutenant* was passed by a negligent censorship board and showed glimpses of ladies' knickers and "other lingerie". This was obviously the thin edge of the sodomites' wedge.

One man's meat

Sodomy is rare in films (despite Mrs. Whitehouse's publicity efforts on behalf of *Blow-Out*, which seem to indicate that she thinks rear-entry intercourse and sodomy are synonymous), and one can sympathize with those who do find it distasteful. I find corpse-eating distasteful, but one has to tolerate one's non-vegetarian friends and love them without any discrimination against their vice. That most sane of writers, Brigid Brophy, made what is probably the definitive statement when she said "All censorship is political censorship". When we have fully absorbed the profound and simple truth of this, then our task becomes more urgent and more simplified. Because we as freethinkers and atheists are not superstitious, no amount of "filth and pornography" can threaten us.

Mr. Shackleton in his *Sunday Times* interview admits

that "I got into evil habits, led an immoral life and was addicted to impurity". In that dedication he is in great company, but it is sad that he seems to have profited so little from his sordid experiences. It was to such as him that his Lord said "Go, and sin no more", but obviously the message is lost on him, and as Jesus had to die to atone for Mr. Shackleton's self-confessed "sins", so we too, evidently, must help carry Mr. Shackleton's cross by thinking just as he does on matters of morals and mores, and being denied similar opportunities to come to the foot of the Cross by the short cut of feeling rotten after indulging our "addiction to impurity".

Defend our freedom

As one who has never been so addicted, I resent Mr. Shackleton's attempts to limit my experience of life by deciding what films I may or may not see, and especially so when his intellectual and humanistic compassion is so obviously less keenly evolved than my own.

The New Puritans have been gunning for Wardour Street for some time now (it is film distributors, not the British Board of Film Censors, who are "running scared"), and it is vital that we defend *all* films to be seen by 18 year olds and over, no matter what their qualities or lack of them. Liberal minded people tend to think progress is inviolate and can never be reversed—"you can't put back the hands of time"—but this very attitude is a weapon which works to the advantage of reactionaries, and their feverish efforts to achieve just that must be resisted wherever they manifest themselves. Freedom is too precious to squander through misunderstanding what it entails or is all about.

Mr. Godin is Secretary of the Campaign for the Abolition of Film Censorship for Adults (CAFCA).

ANNOUNCEMENT

This is the last issue of *The Freethinker* to be edited by Christopher Morey, who has occupied the editorial chair since October 1973, and devoted much of his spare time to the paper. During the period of his editorship Mr. Morey carried on as a full-time librarian and an increase in responsibility has made even greater demands on his time. There have been many problems to contend with (including a change of printers) during the last 15 months, but Christopher Morey has produced a paper of a high standard and of much interest. We regret that he has had to relinquish the post and feel certain that readers will join us in thanking him warmly for his services.

William McIlroy, who edited *The Freethinker* during 1970-71 (when it was a weekly publication) will resume the editorship in January. He will continue also to be General Secretary of the National Secular Society. Barbara Smoker, President, G. N. Deodhekar, Chairman, National Secular Society. G. W. Foote & Company.

FREETHINKER FUND

We express our gratitude to those readers who sent donations to the Fund during November. A total of £21.67 was contributed by the following:

R. J. Carter (79p), E. Drossos (£1), A. Foster (£2), E. M. Graham (84p), J. R. Hutton (£1.34), E. Henderson (£2.84), T. Myles-Hill (£2.84), N. C. Iles (£1), C. J. Monrad (£3), E. N. O'Muraile (£2), A. M. Parry (84p), E. Stupart (£2.68), W. G. Twigg (50p).

SECTARIAN EDUCATION CRITICISED AT LONDON MEETING

Church School and Ghetto School was the theme of a public meeting organized by the National Secular Society at Conway Hall, London, on 29 November, with Barbara Smoker, the Society's president, in the chair.

Patricia Knight, author of *The Case Against Church Schools*, told the audience that rather than decreasing in number, church schools were increasing and now comprise 33 per cent of all primary and 20 per cent of all secondary schools.

She continued: "Since 1944, the financial position of church schools has steadily improved, and the Labour Government, no doubt as a result of pressure from its Catholic supporters, is now proposing to increase the building grant from 80 to 85 per cent. It is argued that the churches are in financial difficulties due to inflation, but forgotten that the churches themselves are extremely wealthy and that their real contribution to the cost of church schools, when running costs are taken into consideration, is only 1½ per cent of the total.

"The Labour Government must be made to face the fact that church schools are incompatible with its declared aim of comprehensive education. How is segregation on the basis of religion any different from segregation on the basis of social class, race or sex? Yet the Labour controlled ILEA recently implemented 'comprehensive' reorganization in West London, which actually increased the proportion of church schools in that area; this was done in spite of opposition from a local pressure group. Many church schools at secondary level are single-sex schools and discriminate against girls, since girls-only schools often spend less on science and maths equipment. Church schools completely contradict the Government's declared policy of equal opportunity for women.

"In a period of proposals for education cuts, how can extra money for church schools be justified? The increased grant is likely to cost £1½ million extra each year at present day prices, and could easily cost more if the churches decide to take advantage of this favourable financial offer. This money should be spent on improvements in the education service instead."

The disaster of Muslim Schools

G. N. Deodhekar, who was born in India and has been a teacher in this country for many years, said that substantial immigration from Asia during the last two decades had changed the religious composition of British society. British society had been predominantly Christian, even if only nominally, with a small, but influential Jewish minority. "We have now all the religions of the Indian sub-continent, including Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist represented in this country.

"The proportion of Sikhs here is much larger than in India and the same is true of Muslims. It is important to note that there are Muslims who have had no connection with India, many of them having come from East Africa, Aden and Malaysia. And our entry into the E.E.C. may mean that we will have Muslims of French nationality living in Britain.

"It is now time for the question of denominational schools, as well as religious education in State schools, was reconsidered. Despite the disastrous religious conflicts in the Indian sub-continent, and the wars between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims resident in this country

live amicably together. It would be a tragic setback if we had segregation of children into Hindu and Muslim schools.

"The whole question of Muslim schools has arisen because some Muslim religious leaders object to co-education. There are British parents still prefer single-sex schools at the secondary level, and it may be some time before orthodox Muslims accept co-education. A few single-sex schools may be far less an evil than the establishment of more Muslim schools."

Margaret McIlroy, a remedial teacher in a North London school, said modern Muslim writers insist that Islam did not degrade the status of women nor insist on their seclusion. They claim that Mohammed improved considerably the position of women in his own time, and in the Middle Ages Muslim women enjoyed more favourable conditions than Christian women. "In view of this, it is absurd for Muslims in Britain to insist that the seclusion of women and segregated education of girls are part of their religion, with a right to respect in the name of religious tolerance.

"Separate schools for Muslim children would be a disaster. They would be schools for immigrants where English was taught as a foreign language, and girls particularly would grow up unfitted to play an equal part in our society. The very existence of such schools could stir up racial animosity. Muslims should come out into the community to which they are capable of making a great contribution."

"Brazen survivals"

Edward Blishen, author and educationalist, said that he could see no creditable argument for the existence of church schools. He said: "I don't know how such an argument can be constructed. Indeed, the continued existence of the church schools is very much as if we still had in the midst of modern industry matchgirls employed as such girls were employed at the end of the last century. The plain fact is that the church schools are astonishing and really, I think, brazen survivals.

"We have a society that in respect of personal beliefs is a pretty open society: we have an educational philosophy that is an open philosophy; we have a society in general whose mark is that it has achieved certain vital relaxations of doctrinal passions and partisanship. We have a society that men of religious passion from our past would not recognise as a Christian society at all. They would have to look pretty hard for aggressive religious fervour among us. We have a secular society which has learned to live in reasonable harmony with reasonable agreement on vital matters of government and law, without religious division and indeed for the most part without religious sanction. It is incredible that in such a society part of our educational system—many of our schools—should be essentially, and with secular aid, schools that exist to serve single and particular religious belief.

"Some time ago Stuart MacLure, editor of *The Times Educational Supplement* went to look at schools in Northern Ireland and came away with little doubt that 'a Roman Catholic school is a powerful agent for the propagation and defence of the faith' and the non-Catholic schools breeding grounds for evangelical Protestantism. Anyone who says 'Ah, but they're embedded in a society that has never been in a position to learn religious relax-

(Continued on page 182)

REVIEWS

BOOKS

WILKES "A FRIEND TO LIBERTY" by Audrey Williamson. George Allen and Unwin, £4.95.

John Wilkes (1725–97) is one of those larger-than-life characters who must be a joy to any popular biographer. His sexual appetite was such as to cause comment even in that age of mistresses, the eighteenth century, and he was constitutionally incapable of making his financial ends meet for long. Yet he had courage, and defied King, Ministers and House of Commons over the right to criticize the conduct of government (in his celebrated opposition paper, the *North Briton*) and in the famous Middlesex elections when he challenged his own exclusion from the House of Commons.

Miss Williamson has read widely and writes fluently, conveying to the reader some sense of the world in which Wilkes lived and loved. He appears as a man first, and as a fighter for liberty almost incidentally. Drawing on previous biographers she is therefore well-placed to give a new and convincing portrait of a man who was always more than a "Wilkeite"—that political abstraction which he himself outgrew.

The human-interest side to the Wilkes story is probably what interests the author most, and she devotes much attention to such episodes as that of the Medmenham monks in whose celebrated company the young Wilkes sowed acres of wild oats and made personal friendships with men who were to become his political opponents. Throughout the book we keep meeting non-political actors and actresses holding the centre of the stage—great Garrick himself, as well as a host of attractive women and tempting mistresses, rakes and rogues. In a pleasant, almost gossipy style well-suited to her subject matter, Miss Williamson colours in for the general reader the shades of a world in which politics could give way to ballet, and womanizing seemed more important than work for the fortunate few in society.

Wilkes was one of those few, and though a friend to liberty and hero of the common man, he was no egalitarian. Non-electors were kept from his grounds in Aylesbury by a plantation of trees when the younger Wilkes was first an M.P., and the older man showed his courage and his colours as a City magistrate when he fired on the Gordon rioters in 1780.

What the book lacks is a political dimension, and for this the reader will still want to turn to George Rudé's *Wilkes and Liberty* or I. R. Christie's *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform*. The latter, significantly, does not even find a corner in the bibliography. Miss Williamson's politics are crudely in the Whig tradition—George III is a potential despot and history is the unfolding of liberty and democracy; like the Whig historian she is afflicted with anachronisms. In this respect this book resembles her earlier one on Thomas Paine. Whilst some asides deepen our understanding of the age, others drag the reader into later times to observe an apparent parallel drawn between the subject and some other with which Miss Williamson happens to be acquainted. Paine is referred to on more occasions than strict relevance would require, George Bernard Shaw gets six references in the Index, and Gilbert and Sullivan find their way into the bibliography.

This addiction to irrelevant parallels is worsened by the absence of relevant ones. If the historian is to look for the man who subsequently fought for the freedom of the press to publish what were judged to be blasphemous, seditious or obscene libels, and who refought the battle on behalf of the right of a constituency to elect whomsoever it wished to Parliament, then that man was surely Charles Bradlaugh—but he does not get even a passing mention. The omission is a serious one.

The student of history will also lament the uneven and infrequent footnotes, and their lack of detail. This is, indeed, not a greatly useful book to the historian of eighteenth-century politics—which is a pity in view of the research effort which has apparently gone into it. It is good colour-supplement entertainment and a pleasant read, but nothing more.

EDWARD ROYLE

THE RIGHT TO DIE: A Rational Approach to Voluntary Euthanasia, by Charles Wilshaw. British Humanist Association, 25p.

Nearly every pronouncement of the self-appointed moralists at the present time makes reference, however inappropriately, to euthanasia. The thin end of every "moral" wedge, it would seem, leads to euthanasia. In particular, the antagonists of legalized abortion, who feel themselves cheated by the outcome of the deliberations of the Lane Committee which they themselves had demanded, seem determined to do all they can to ensure that the climate of opinion in this country never becomes such as to allow the legalization of voluntary euthanasia. Predictably the British Medical Association is opposed to its introduction, but as the statements of a retired surgeon recently showed, euthanasia is already practised on a limited scale at great personal and professional risk to doctors. These doctors are undoubtedly motivated by their vocation to a caring ministry, and do not allow this to be deflected by the dictates of religious dogma or professional conservatism. Mr. Wilshaw quotes an opinion poll of 1965 that found that 76.2 per cent of the doctors interviewed agreed with the statement that "Some medical men do in fact help their patients over the last hurdle in order to save them unnecessary suffering, even if that involves some curtailment of life". He goes on to point out that far from placing an intolerable burden on doctors, as is often claimed by opponents, it would relieve doctors of the shared distress of the terminal patient. Their decision would be purely clinical—"Can this patient be restored to a rational (meaningful, worthwhile) existence?" The decision whether or not to exercise the option of euthanasia would always be the patient's and the availability of that option is a necessary part of the liberty of the individual that "implies complete freedom of action insofar as it does not interfere with the moral and civil rights of others". But as usual a small group composed largely of religionists disregard this liberty and in an area, which, as in most of the issues they go on heat over, need never affect them personally, seek to impose their dogma on the rest of us.

Mr. Wilshaw begins his pamphlet by tracing attitudes to death and its hastening from the Greeks and Romans, who lacking our sophisticated medicine adopted an enlightened approach to the crude methods available to them. Christianity put paid to that, but interestingly Mr. Wilshaw points out that there have often been Christians like Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon who took a different view. He also quotes modern churchmen of all denominations who take a more rational

approach to the quality of death. Apparently Catholic doctors were authorized by the Pope in 1957 to give, if necessary to relieve pain, doses of drugs that would shorten life. This in fact is the policy followed in Catholic hospices (hospitals for terminal patients) where many of the most fervent opponents of voluntary euthanasia are to be found. As Mr. Wilshaw points out, they are never willing to admit that they are already practising euthanasia to a limited extent.

The pamphlet catalogues and answers the string of irrational arguments that are produced against euthanasia. To oppose the view that we must not "play God", he quotes the philosopher David Hume: "If our shortening lives interferes with Providence, medical services are already interfering by lengthening them". We are reminded of the nauseating arguments that are paraded regarding the spiritual value of pain to both patient and doctor—in the latter case in the best Christian tradition of "my salvation is more important than your well-being". Mr. Wilshaw rightly pours scorn on the view that legalized voluntary euthanasia will inexorably lead to gas chambers for all and sundry. He puts into perspective disquiet that might be felt about pressurization of patients, mistaken diagnosis and the discovery of new cures. He also outlines the practical procedures by which voluntary euthanasia can be implemented.

This pamphlet provides freethinkers with a most valuable introduction to a subject it is to be hoped will come to the fore again in the near future with a view to successful legislation. It is only sad to realize that nearly two millennia of Christian civilization have prevented us enjoying the basic human freedom expressed by Seneca in the first century A.D.:

If I can choose between a death of torture and one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I sail and the house which I inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I leave life. . . . I will not relinquish old age if it leaves my better part intact. But if it begins to shake my mind, if it leaves me not life but breath, I will depart from the putrid or the tottering edifice.

Having said that, it is important, although strictly outside the terms of reference of the pamphlet under consideration, for us as freethinkers to consider and propose measures to deal with the related issues of euthanasia for deformed babies and assisted suicide. Whatever may be the tactical considerations in securing voluntary-euthanasia legislation, these other issues must be faced in the interests of the individual, doctors and society.

CHRISTOPHER MOREY

R. J. CONDON

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(foreword by Barbara Smoker)

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THEATRE

KING RICHARD THE SECOND by William Shakespeare.
The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre.

In 1399 Henry Bolingbroke deposed his cousin, King Richard II, and became Henry IV. Historians disagree about the character of Henry, but they know a great deal about Richard. Shakespeare has made him a tragic, poetic figure, grandiloquent in his self-pity, who brings about his own downfall by his hubris. In the course of the play, Richard grows from an overweening skittish despot to a master of barbed submissiveness, majestic in defeat. Henry's "silent king" is a less clearly defined character than Richard. He is no less a king, though, and this play is not solely about Richard II: it is about "... the hollow crown".

In John Barton's production, Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco alternate as Richard and Bolingbroke. Both actors and audience gain new insight into the two cousins rôle-playing and -reversal. Because of their precarious, focal position, the rivals had to dissemble, and to rely heavily on an actor's sense of timing. This kind of doubling is new to *Richard II*. It is a valid exercise in that it frees us from "the definitive interpretation". It also frees us from the concept of the "absolute monarch".

The opening of the play is an Elizabethan masque. The cast walks onto the stage, two of the actors step forward, and the one who is to play Richard in that performance is chosen by the presenter of the masque. The random choice is solemnized by the ritual of coronation. Bolingbroke pays homage to the king, but his turn will come. Of the three kings crowned in Barton's production, only the third is absolute monarch—Death.

Barton achieves this by means of an ingenious and un-nerving stroke of theatre. Throughout the production, his striking visual images help us to sense the historical context of the play, its rhythms, its philosophy and its passions. John Napier's set is a bare acting area, enlivened occasionally by golden or painted drapes. At the front of the stage there is a bowl of earth. Overhead the sun is a gilded canopy, forming the hub of a wheel.

Naturalistic productions, rich in atmosphere, tend to absorb into themselves a play's impact. Formal ones, like Barton's, with its use of choral speaking, send the words rocking back at us long after we have left the theatre. The whole design of this production has a chessboard symmetry: Bolingbroke and his supporters retain their original brown and black doublets and hose, while Richard and his followers cover theirs with white cloaks. The triangular grouping of the characters in many of the scenes illustrates the play's balanced palindromic mode of speech.

There are few lapses into the over-literal and the predictable. The snowman or mocking king of snow melts on stage, and the messenger of death, having completed his sepulchral errand, turns to face us, revealing a death head. These are outnumbered, however, by the significant and justified, most notably in the prison scene.

With the exception of the two gardeners, we do not see the "man in the street" in this play, but a variety of people, products of their time and of all time, appear. Sebastian Shaw is excellent as the canny, humorous Duke of York, but the bustling comic relief from Hilda Braid as his Duchess is overdone. There is a very believable performance from Julian Barnes as the callow Hotspur. Janet Chappell's beautiful Queen wanders through her withered garden, her speech stilted (distractingly so), her gaze

stricken. The tune, *Lavender Blue*, seems to come from a faraway springtime, a lost childhood.

"... a prophet new inspired", Clement McCallin brings a noble rage to the dying John of Gaunt. He speaks the great threnody to "This England" as though he were just discovering the words to express his feelings for his country—the fierce pride and unabashed tenderness, the anger and concern that pound through him.

The contrasting life styles of the two kings' courts are evoked. Henry's court is sombre and businesslike, while Richard's is quaint and feudal, with fanfares and caparisoned horses. In these surroundings Pasco as Richard loves to "monarchize". He sits on his throne, bridling slightly, holding his sceptre with a light, foppish touch. In motion he is very much "the skipping king", his cape swirling about him. Bolingbroke's stout defiance makes his face crumple. The transition to the chastened man who admits, "For you have but mistook me all this while..." is beautifully and convincingly realized. When he is forced to leave his queen and she clings to him in disbelief, it seems impossible that they can be parted. With sudden harshness in his voice, Richard tears her away from himself. He enters the throne-room for his formal deposition like a man roused from sleep, and when he places the crown on his cousin's head, he does so blindly. Pasco's voice, pitched high, encompasses malicious laughter, stifled sobs, spitting fury at his disloyal subjects—and an ecstasy of pining.

Ian Richardson plays Bolingbroke with a bored, Kensington drawl; a detached sardonic man, biding his time. While Pasco's Richard matures, Richardson's Bolingbroke ages. The man, who at the outset had openly taunted Richard, returns a withdrawn man. He sits on the throne, not with the stillness of response, but with the stiffness of an embalmed corpse. The final image is of a man buffeted by unrest, in his court, in his immediate family and in himself.

We last see Pasco's Henry bent over his cousin's bier, caressing it with his hand, angry and grief-stricken. "I hate the murderer, love him murdered" is a great sob of pity. Pasco's Bolingbroke starts boyish and headstrong, a lot younger than Richard. It is very credible that this Bolingbroke would have had the facility Richard both derided and envied, "wooing poor craftsmen with a craft of smiles". Pasco is very much "the yielding water", governed in his rebellion against the king by Clement McCallin's lurking, insolent Northumberland. When Henry has first to mount the dais on which the throne stands, he turns sharply away, and, after the shattering disposition scene, Pasco bows his head, overcome. His eloquent eyes speak of doubt, of compassion for Richard. It is this compunction, rather than the onerousness of kingship, that makes Pasco a reluctant usurper. His emotional involvement with his cousin is both plausible and moving.

Richardson as the King gives a far more virile, intelligent performance than tradition has led us to expect. He grasps his sceptre firmly, almost roughly. His brisk, dismissing gestures reveal his impatience with court ceremonial. His is an ironic impatience, which he makes no effort to conceal, with his plummy little interjections. He rides, borne aloft in his litter, nodding his head, a jaunty, mocking doll. He trots out rhyming couplets as though they were doggerel, which in many cases they are. His voice swings up from the throatily imperious to a sly flippancy, deliberately exposing the shallowness of his authority. This Richard wants to rule, not reign, and as a statesman is disturbed by the warnings of York and Gaunt. He fears Bolingbroke, "our subjects' next degree of hope".

When he returns from Ireland and learns that Bolingbroke has won the people's support, it is as though a great sea of feeling washes through Richard. His gasping sounds like the sucking-out of the tide; weakened he sinks to the ground. His corrosive rage surges back as suddenly as it leaves him. His voice clings in a great howl to his "... my large kingdom", the long vowels singing out. In his confrontations with Bolingbroke, his voice is precise with crisply rolled r's. His smile is wintry. As his suffering increases, it becomes more and more tightly contained; when most threatened, he speaks most quietly, with an ominous control of voice and features. He tries to march briskly through the ritual abdication, then falters, and ends the scene crouching at Henry's feet, his voice subdued, his face gleaming with tears. This man of terrific energy has not weakened, simply come to terms with himself. He can no longer strike out at others. He is alone.

Pasco's Richard embraces martyrdom. Richardson's is too intelligent, too self-critical to hide behind an image that would soften harsh reality. When Richardson waits for death, we see at last the man he might have been.

VERA LUSTIG

GRAND MANOEUVRES by A. E. Ellis. The National Theatre.

The Dreyfus Affair split France into two, but probably not with the simplicity which the perspective of history tends to offer. A waste-paper basket in the office of Colonel Von Schartzkoppen provided the initial evidence which was transferred by a char-lady to the Statistical Office, a front for a group of military espionage "experts". The paper revealed the infamous schedule indicating that vital military information was being passed to the Germans; on slender evidence the handwriting was traced to Alfred Dreyfus, a conscientious officer, who happened to be a Jew. After his arrest, degradation, and imprisonment on Devil's Island in 1894, people came, rightly, to doubt his guilt. In 1898 Zola wrote his famous *J'Accuse* for *L'Aurore* in which he accused military and political leaders of complicity and cover-up. Major Henry, in charge of the Statistical Office, committed suicide and the campaign to vindicate Dreyfus, which had been mounting for several years, became a National issue. Dreyfus was eventually brought for retrial, but a second court-martial at Rennes again pronounced him guilty, though mitigating his sentence. Not until 1906 was he finally declared innocent.

Grand Manoeuvres, a new play by A. E. Ellis, retells the story with some clarity, establishing complex ploys and double-dealing effectively. For a satisfactory account of the facts of the affair it serves its purpose—but rather little more. I found myself wondering by the first interval where the play was leading to; the answer by the conclusion was still unclear. It is a very complex story to tell dramatically and has the disadvantage that the central figure, Alfred Dreyfus, does not seem to have been a character of remarkable interest. It occurred to me that a play about this fascinating case could either attempt to narrow its focus onto a few of the chief protagonists and show with some intensity the kind of personal conflicts to which involvement in public affairs led, or attempt to gauge the forces of conflict which the Affair released and the feel of the impact of the issues. But this play sadly failed to do either.

The issues which the Affair unleashed were of enormous consequence. The anti-Dreyfusards contained within them anti-semitism and detestation of an increasing

secularisation (a secularisation which Freethinkers who have followed the recent French debates on abortion may notice has been resisted to this day). Added to this the anti-Dreyfusards had an emotional loyalty to Catholicism, militarism and "la gloire"; but it is important to remember that Catholic or military Dreyfusards did exist. The play gave an indication of these forces and feelings but failed to give them any pointedness.

The play's style was extremely eclectic, taking as its keynote the political cartoon, which was given much impetus by the Affair. This might seem an ingenious approach, but the trouble is that cartoons are an instant encapsulation of an idea and once developed lose their incisiveness, as was seen in the realisation of the famous Caran d'Ache cartoon which shows a large family coming to blows on the mention of the Affair. This started with visual vigour but degenerated into puerile japes. This tendency to turn a serious point into an excuse for dramatic high-jinks was exhibited in a parliamentary debate of some fervour which disintegrated into throwing paper-darts and pillow fights. It may be valid to alienate (in Brecht's phrase) the audience from too strong an identification with individual personalities, but only if accompanied with a strongly established sense of underlying realities. And the constant double-takes and shifts of style in *Grand Manoeuvres* became wearing. The visual effects, the masks the drums and parading, the parody of melodrama, the drag disguise were all brilliantly executed effects, but I did not find assembled with sufficient coherence or concerted effect. The clowning of the Innkeeper and family's crude rejection of the Dreyfus family might be justified on the grounds of an example of a kind of low humour of the period, but I found it merely embarrassing.

The silence with which Dreyfus at the end responds to the clamorous "Dreyfus speaks" was presumably intended to be extremely moving, but I can only record that for me it was not. My sympathy had been forfeited by the lack of subtlety with which the easy targets of anti-semitism, military corruption and political chicanery were flayed. But I cannot deny the extensiveness of Mr Ellis's research, nor the imaginativeness of Michael Blakemore's direction, nor the skill and talent behind Ronald Curran, Mark Dignam, Paul Rogers and Ian McNaughton's performances (to mention only a few of a vast and accomplished cast). Since such a considerable array of ability and integrity have put such energy into the production, perhaps I should return to find out more clearly why such a potentially exciting play seemed to me to misfire; or to reconsider?

JIM HERRICK

(Continued from page 173)

who spoke in the debate prevail. Mr. James Molyneux stated:

We do not have a Roman Catholic system and a Protestant system [in Northern Ireland]. We have a State system and a Roman Catholic system. Whatever we may do about a merger in future, I do not feel that the Church influence should be removed until we can be absolutely sure that there will be a strong and continuing Christian influence in our schools, be they Protestant or Roman Catholic.

As I am sure Mr. Molyneux is fully aware, what led to the demands for denominational schools and to much of the acrimony that went with them, was, in most cases, not the fear that children would be taught no religion, but that they should be taught the religion of another denomination. It is this historical perspective which belies the proposal of Mr. van Straubenzee that in this country the Government should use financial pressure to get set up—horror of horrors—ecumenical Christian church schools.

HONEST TO MAN

Readers of *The Freethinker* will welcome the appearance of a new book by Margaret Knight. Mrs. Knight, readers will find, has provided the movement with a useful weapon. A chapter will be reprinted by kind permission in our next issue.

The chapter chosen is one on the Protestant Church, taken from section of the book entitled "Christianity Today". In this section Mrs. Knight meets the challenge of those who say that one must not look at Christianity as it was, but as it is. While accepting this, the author puts out a counter challenge to those for whom Christianity can have done no wrong. To this end she brings in a quotation from William Empson:

Many good people still believe that support for Christianity is a public duty, however absurd it feels, because other people [though not themselves] cannot be made good without it. A great deal of whitewashing still hides from them that, until there were enough influential and well-intentioned sceptics about, the Christians could not be prevented from behaving with monstrous wickedness. It remains a tribute to the stamina of European civilization that the religion could not corrupt us even more than it did, and by this time we seem pretty well inoculated against its more virulent forms. But it is not sensible to talk about Christianity so cosily as is now usual, ignoring its theoretical evil, ignoring its consequent use of rack, boot, thumbscrew and slow fire.

This is typical of the telling quotations that Mrs. Knight adduces to support her argument throughout the book. She goes on to quote Charles Bradlaugh, who said, "It is customary, in controversy, for those advocating the claims of Christianity to include all good done by men in nominally Christian countries as if such good were the result of Christianity, while they contend that the evil which exists prevails in spite of Christianity." Of course, says Mrs. Knight, the Church did many good things, but that was to be expected from the most powerful institution in Europe. But those who would dismiss Professor Empson's use of the phrase "rack, boot, thumbscrew and slow fire" should get hold of a copy of the book and read the chapter on the Roman Catholic Church, where they will read that the official Church view is that although it may be necessary from time to time to temporize with the secular power, as soon as it is practicable the Church should assume its proper role in public affairs, in which it will not tolerate error.

MARGARET KNIGHT

HONEST TO MAN

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Finally, to see the Government's absolutely misguided appreciation of this matter, it must be remembered in what circumstances this Bill is being promoted. Mr. Prentice began his speech by pointing out that "in the next few years the education system will be operating in conditions of severe stringency". If this is the case, why squander scant resources—the Bill will cost £1,500,000 per annum—on such a worthless cause as church schools. It is surely hard to understand how the Government arrived at its list of priorities when Mr. Prentice's own Under Secretary stated that the areas that have been given lower priority and have so been passed over in favour of church schools are nursery schools, maintenance grants for 16 to 18 year olds, and abolition of parental means tests.

LETTERS

Partial professions

I would like to use your columns to express concern at the activities of two of the oldest professions, law and medicine. The conventional wisdom has it that professional organizations exist to protect the interests of the clients, but more often than not the only time a profession is moved to act is to preserve the privileges and pecuniary interests of its members. This is clearly seen in the case of the medical and legal professions in their entrenched resistance to proposals to provide a comprehensive national service in these spheres.

The need for a comprehensive legal service is clear. The lives of everyone, whether landowner or claimant, are increasingly dominated by legislative enactments. It seems clear that a countervailing force is required to be freely available to help individuals cope with this situation. One might think that the legal profession would realize this, and press for such a system. Instead, they seem intent on preserving anachronistic distinctions, not merely between barristers and solicitors, but between Q.C.s and juniors. Their prosecution of self-interest is further seen in their preference for their profitable monopoly in conveyancing as against socially necessary but financially less rewarding criminal work. Most unsatisfactory of all is the staunch resistance of a significant part of the legal profession to the establishment of neighbourhood law centres. These tend to arise only in areas such as the inner-city residential areas where solicitors are unwilling to practise. Yet still these are opposed as an imagined threat to solicitors' livelihood.

It might be imagined that if a national service were instituted, the situation would be corrected. But if the experience of the National Health Service is anything to go by, this is not necessarily the case. The disparity in the availability of medical services between, say, Bootle and Orpington is quite staggering. Yet, just as when the N.H.S. was set up, it looks as if we are going to witness the doctors blackmailing the government. Without going in detail into the question of mixed private and N.H.S. practice by doctors and of pay beds in N.H.S. hospitals, it is surely obvious that in most other public services the existence of two levels of service, one free, the other charged, would be considered totally unacceptable.

Finally, I would like to counter a point that is often made in regard to medical staff and abortion. It is often automatically assumed—and I have seen it in these columns—that the wishes of medical staff who have conscientious objections to having anything to do with abortion should be honoured. While I can see the desirability of this in regard to existing staff, for new staff it is an absurdity. If the government has decided that in specified circumstances an abortion shall be available, it should surely be a condition of service that medical staff be required to implement the law. If this means that in future faithful Roman Catholics are unable to become gynaecologists, this is unfortunate, but their own choice. One would see no reason to provide a conscience clause to enable vegetarians to be employed in abattoirs; one would not dream of employing as a doctor a Jehovah's Witness on condition that he need not give blood transfusions. In both cases one would advise them to seek employment more suited to their scruples.

S. DILLON.

Whose absurdity?

I am a regular reader of *The Freethinker*, and hope to carry on for a long time to come. But as you say "the views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor"—nor, I may add, of the reader.

I cannot accept, without protest, the opinion expressed by Mr. Geoffrey Webster in his article "To Exist: Right or Duty?" that it is a "laughable" metaphysical absurdity to attribute our right or duty to exist to the Creator of the Universe. I do not worship any god, least of all that most pathetic "last of the gods" called Jesus Christ. But to me, a Creator seems to be logically inherent in the process of creation, and creation seems something very like a metaphysical necessity totally concomitant with the natural course of cosmic evolution.

I feel that Mr. Webster does not sufficiently or correctly estimate the *unique* value of personal existence, even its transitory form here on earth. I am on the side of a merciful euthanasia, but only because I hold the opinion that, properly administered, it would not in any way diminish the absolute and supreme value of life itself.

PETER CROMMELIN.

Humanist dogma

In commenting on my letter in the October issue of *The Freethinker*, Barbara Smoker misses the point that I was trying to make, that intolerance and dogma are becoming as prevalent amongst humanists as in the religions that we continually take to task for this very fault. This is evident in the letter of Mr. H. A. Gurney.

One does not have to believe or sympathize with a person or cause to examine their claims with an open mind, and to arrive at a conclusion by means of a reasonable examination of all the facts, however silly or illogical they may seem at the time; many great discoveries have been made by this process.

I specifically mentioned the occult and UFOs in my letter because these subjects are most likely to be ignored or dismissed out of hand by most freethinkers, and yet there is a growing number of scientists throughout the world including the U.S.S.R. willing to spend time and money investigating these subjects. It seems odd, therefore, that freethinkers should be reluctant to explore new avenues in our quest for knowledge. Or are humanists making a religion of their unbelief? I do not intend to do so.

Finally, I hope that Barbara Smoker is not being troubled by the fairies on her window-sill, for if they persist I would advise the services of a good psychologist, rather than an investigation by my humble self.

J. A. SUNTER.

Critical evaluation

In his May letter Judex tried to use the Communist smear, now in October issue he alleges "Scottish Fascism" against me; manifestly, such smears are the last resort of someone seen to be bankrupt of ideas. My April letter called only for a "little less" of Judex; this request he has distorted and escalated to the charge of my seeking the "suppression" of his "writings". The Judex ego apparently stands in gigantic awe of itself, however, for my part, I can see little of positive interest in his "writings"; how can I when—apart from what he is against—I know not what he stands for.

However, if my July letter has alerted *Freethinker* readers to a critical evaluation with regard to Judex's indiscriminate use of quotation marks then I am satisfied; let the Judex "writings" proceed if only that we may at last discover what Judex is for as opposed to what he is against.

Mr. I. S. Low should heed the actual phrases used in a letter if he expects to be taken seriously enough to warrant a reply; for example, I made no claim to being a "cosmopolitan". His other points likewise appear to me to be deliberate distortion of the comments made in my August letter.

R. MULHOLLAND.

Televised Sex?

What interesting implications are raised by a recent report commissioned from the Opinions Research Centre by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. We are informed that of those parents who in some measure control their children's TV viewing, 27 per cent do so because they argue "there is too much sex shown".

My quarrel is not with the curbing or otherwise of children's television, or parental dominance, but with the allegation that there is any "sex" shown at all. Of course, the phrase "too much sex shown" is very vague and imprecise, but the respondents' inferences are that a large portion of current television is unacceptable to children by virtue of its being "sexy".

I find myself trying to recall which programmes fit such a category; and after discounting the legs of the aspiring Miss Worlds; and the several well-developed bosoms in Frankie Howerd's *Up Pompeii*, as being unable to qualify for such an appellation, what is one left with? There has been a number of inoffensive bedroom scenes in certain drama productions, plus the beautiful but tragic *Casanova*. And the substitute paint-brush scene in the much-publicized Andy Warhol film, but what else?

One is reminded of Bertrand Russell's account of his correspondence from his New York accusers. The indictment would seem to be on the parents cited in the I.B.A. survey, for the sex is surely in the eyes of the condemners rather than in the televised fare. Surely the real travesty is that only 20 per cent cited violence as good ground for curtailment of what their children watched; and fewer still because of insipidness, mediocrity, passivity, insincerity in advertising, and the increasingly dominant image of profligate America.

There is every reason for parental control of their children's viewing, but sex should not top the list.

DAVID J. ROGERS.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 698 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL (telephone: 01-272 1266). Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the N.S.S.

Freethought books and pamphlets (new). Send for list to G. W. Foote & Company, 698 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

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.

Humanist Counselling Service, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG; telephone 01-937 2341 (for confidential advice on your personal problems—whatever they are).

London Secular Group (outdoor meetings). *Thursdays*, 12.30—2 p.m. at Tower Hill; *Sundays*, 3—7 p.m. at Marble Arch. (*The Freethinker* and other literature on sale.)

EVENTS

Brighton & Hove Humanist Group, Imperial Centre Hotel, First Avenue, Hove. Sunday 5 January, 5.30 p.m.: Speaker from the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science.

Croydon Humanist Society, Study Room, Central Library, Katharine Street, Croydon. Wednesday 15 January, 8 p.m.: PETER NORWOOD, "Education".

Eastbourne Humanist Group, Committee Room, Central Library, Grove Road, Eastbourne. Tuesday 14 January, 7.30 p.m.: A. E. MORRIS, "Views on Morality".

Humanist Holidays. Annual General Meeting and informal reunion at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Friday 10 January, 6.30 p.m. Members and friends welcome.

London Young Humanists, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8. Sunday 5 January, 7.30 p.m.: ANTHONY CHAPMAN, "Charities—Time for a New Start".

Nottingham and Notts Humanist Group, University Adult Centre, 14 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham. Friday 10 January, 7.30 p.m.: D. HARPER, "When Does Teaching Become Indoctrination".

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. *Sunday Meetings*, 11 a.m.: 5 January: JAMES ROBERTSON, "The Social Role of Money in the Non-Profit Economy"; 12 January: T. F. EVANS, "The Idea of a University". *Sunday Forums*, 3 p.m.: 29 December: DR. ALICK ELITHORN, "One Parent Families"; 12 January: ROBERT SHAEF, "Britain and the European Community". *Tuesday Discussions*, 7 p.m. (admission 10p): 7 January: DR. J. R. RAVETZ, "Freezing the Future"; 14 January: DAVID GERASSI, "Planning for Alternative Living".

Worthing Humanist Group. January 1975: New Year's Dinner. Details from Secretary: Mrs. Barlow, 50 Ferring Lane, Ferring, Sussex. Telephone: Worthing 46319.

(Continued from page 176)

ation and toleration', and implies that we need have no fear that in our society church schools will feed such feelings as have divided Northern Ireland has. I think, badly missed the point.

"The point is that any society that wishes to be harmonious and open must begin with an educational system uncommitted to particular beliefs. An open educational system is essential to an open society. A church school, however mildly it may conduct itself, belongs to some quite different aim pointing towards some quite different society."

PUBLICATIONS

TITLE	AUTHOR	Price	Post
Honest to Man	Margaret Knight	£3.75	22½p
The Jesus Hoax (Hard cover) (Breakaway edition)	Phyllis Graham	£3.95	22½p
The Dead Sea Scrolls Comparative Religion	John Allegro	£2.25	22½p
The Longford Threat to Freedom	A. C. Bouquet	55p	9p
Did Jesus Christ Exist?	Brigid Brophy	55p	11p
Materialism Restated	Chapman Cohen	10p	3½p
Thomas Paine	Chapman Cohen	5p	3½p
Morality Without God	Chapman Cohen	50p	13p
Our Pagan Christmas	Chapman Cohen	15p	3½p
Ten Non Commandments	R. J. Condon	5p	3½p
The Bible Handbook	Ronald Fletcher	20p	4p
	G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball	12½p	3½p
Bertrand Russell: A Life	H. Gottchalk	65p	11p
The Nun Who Lived Again	Phyllis Graham	25p	9p
The Humanist Revolution	Hector Hawton	5p	3½p
Controversy	Hector Hawton	50p	11p
The Little Red Schoolbook	Soren Hanson	60p	11p
Rome or Reason	R. G. Ingersoll	30p	7p
Humanist Anthology	Margaret Knight	10p	5p
Christianity: The Debit Account	Margaret Knight	60p	9p
The Case Against Church Schools	Margaret Knight	3p	3½p
The Secular Responsibility	Patricia Knight	20p	3½p
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