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SQUALID ATTACK ON 1967 ACT

An obscure London firm has just published what is described by its authors, Michael Litchfield and Susan Kentish, as an alternative to the Lane Report on the 1967 Abortion Act. It seems rather curious that two journalists who virtually boast in the introduction of their ignorance of the subject should undertake an investigation into such a complex topic "that had not infringed our respective worlds", and to which one of them "had not given . . . even a cursory glance". The lurid title of their report, "Babies for Burning", and the emotive phraseology, is bound to raise doubts as to the veracity of their assurance that they undertook the project with "no preconceived notions . . . dispassionately, in complete isolation and detachment".

Jean Anderson writes: Michael Litchfield is in the great tradition of *News of the World* journalism. For the benefit of freethinkers who are not regular voyeurs, it should be explained that this great pillar of the British press makes its money by regularly publishing titillating photographs. The text accompanying these illustrations is, however, more generally reminiscent of the style of Mrs Whitehouse, deploring the immorality and permissiveness rampant in Britain today (as if the *News of the World* could make its millions in any other climate). Mr Litchfield has chosen to make his money by writing a squalid little book about abortion. Now he is busy telling everyone how dreadfully shocked he is by the whole thing. Before they appeared in book form, his revelations were duly serialised in the pages of (surprise! surprise!) the *News of the World*.

The object of the book is to show that it is too easy to obtain a legal abortion since the Abortion Act was passed. This is to be deplored because it means that fewer women are now being compelled to have unwanted babies. All orthodox Catholics and other paid up members of the Compulsory Pregnancy Lobby know that having an unwanted baby, which you may subsequently neglect or ill-treat, is a sign of virtue. So virtuous, in fact, that it is necessary to extend this opportunity for virtue by force of law to the rest of the community.

This is where our friend James White, MP

(Labour, Glasgow Pollok), comes in. He has been captured by the CPL (see *The Freethinker*, December 1974) and has promised to bring in a Bill to restrict the Abortion Act. He is also an active trade unionist, a member of the Transport and General Workers' Union no less. Do the women members of T&GWU know what Mr White is up to? He is probably praying the news does not leak out that far. Not all women, after all, are prepared to support. Mr White's efforts at destroying their own freedom, however many stray Catholic votes this may bring in.

Mr Litchfield's second objective is to show not only that abortion is too easy to obtain, but also that those providing it are wicked and corrupt, including the non-profit pregnancy advisory services. This he demonstrates by persuading his accomplice and co-author, Susan Kentish, to visit pregnancy-testing agencies and gynaecologists, claiming to be pregnant. The pregnancy-testing agencies all confirmed her pregnancy. This proves they are crooks. The Abortion Law Reform Association sent around urine samples to all the agencies named in this book. In each and every case, the correct verdict, "not pregnant", was returned. Subsequently, an independent medical journalist carried out the same experiment with the same result. In the circumstances, it will not be surprising if sceptical persons may even suggest that the urine of a pregnant friend might have been utilised for the purpose of providing copy for the *News of the World*.

Catholic Front

Miss Kentish then trundled around doctors saying she had missed her period (which she had not), and that she had a positive test (as above). Since it is difficult to diagnose a very early pregnancy accurately, and since gynaecologists are not much used to dealing with systematic liars, she was, in some cases rather hesitantly, confirmed in her pregnancy. This shows, gentle reader, does it not, how corrupt pro-abortionists are, and how uncorrupt British journalists?

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Mohammed: His Critics and His Champions

AN INDIAN RATIONALIST

Bradford Muslims recently demonstrated in protest against a reference to the prophet Mohammed in a television programme. Such displays of Muslim religious fervour in other countries have inflamed passions which resulted in injuries and deaths. The writer, who has lived in Britain for many years, argues that Muslims who choose to opt into our society must be prepared to accept its tolerance and freedom to criticise and ridicule even its most revered institutions and personalities.

Last month, about 2,000 Muslims marched in protest through the centre of Bradford because, they claimed, the prophet Mohammed had been referred to as "a dirty old humbug" in an episode of a television programme based on the G. K. Chesterton character, Father Brown. Mohammed Darr, one of the organisers of the demonstration, said: "We have a sense of humour, but we do not like joking or being disrespectful about religion. It is a subject about which we are very sensitive."

On what was this accusation against Mohammed based? Presumably, it was on the fact that he restricted his followers to four wives whilst he had nine. Incredibly, many Muslims do not know that their prophet did have nine wives, much less the reasons for such a situation. I recall discussing this point two years ago with a few friends, one of whom was a Muslim Arab and a university graduate. He was very pained to hear me make this assertion about the prophet although he was very polite as he had complete faith in my integrity. My copy of the English translation of the Koran, by the Iraqi scholar N. J. Dawood, was produced and it had a footnote by the author confirming my point. My Muslim friend retaliated: "But only the Arabic Koran is authoritative. Dawood may be Shia or even Jewish and this may be a Shia or a Jewish version." My friend was a Sunni, who form the vast majority of the Muslims of the world as well as of the Indian sub-continent. Another friend, a Hindu and a serious student of Islam, promised to produce his copy of the prophet's biography in Urdu written by a Sunni Muslim scholar of impeccable orthodoxy. As the nine wives were confirmed by such an authority my Arab friend, much puzzled by this paradox, asked me for an explanation. I chided him: "Are you, a Muslim, not afraid to sit at the feet of an infidel?" "No", he replied, "as my ancestors accepted knowledge from Greek philosophers and Hindu mathematicians, I am prepared to sit at your pagan feet!" And so I offered him an explanation, which was quite simple.

An earlier prophet had claimed that he had a

revelation from God, preached it, and was crucified for the trouble he had caused. Mohammed, on the other hand, survived his isolation and found refuge in Medina, preached, organised his followers, fought, won and returned triumphantly to Mecca where he had to organise the life of the community and to establish a state. In the course of this struggle, he contracted some marriages to shelter the wives of fallen comrades and some to seal alliances with leading families or hostile tribes which had come to terms with him. The exception in his own case of having no more than four wives seems clearly in the interest of the new community and state that was being organised around him.

A Western sceptic may well ask whether the gratification provided by extra wives was purely incidental. This, of course, completely misjudges the period in history. Concubinage was an accepted custom in seventh-century Arabia and three of Mohammed's concubines are known to history by their names. Pre-Islamic Arabs practised female infanticide, presumably as a crude method of population control. This practice was stopped by Mohammed, but in such a social climate the buying of female slaves must have appeared as a tolerable practice and slavery could not have been expected to be abolished as early as the seventh century. In any case, Mohammed did not live in an age when sex was regarded as dirty and fortunately we seem to be passing from the era of Victorian prudery into an age of reason in sexual matters so that the term "dirty old man" is more often used as an affectionate jibe rather than as a censure.

Religious Fanaticism

Mohammed Darr, who organised the Bradford procession, stated that Muslims are "sensitive" in matters of religion. Unfortunately, the Muslims' sensitivity, particularly on any alleged disrespect towards their prophet, has had thoroughly irrational and deplorable consequences, resulting in injury and death to totally innocent people.

In 1927, Swami Shradhdhanand, a highly respected leader of the Punjab Hindus, was murdered by a Muslim in Delhi because a book he had written about Mohammed was considered by Muslims to be derogatory. He was guilty in Muslim eyes and even some non-Muslims might have considered his book to be unjust and provocative. The remedy would have been available in a court of law and certainly, in retrospect, most reasonable Muslims would agree that it was wrong for an individual Muslim to inflict the punishment of death in such circumstances. However, this was in pre-indepen-

(Continued on page 3)

The Freethinker: Appeal to our Friends

The new format of *The Freethinker* will not cut production costs but it will hold them at their present level for a time. Although the page size is slightly reduced the use of a smaller type point means that the amount of reading material will remain almost as before. We are extremely fortunate in having contributors who give their services free and printers who keep their charges at the lowest possible level.

The last year has been a difficult one for *The Freethinker* and indeed for all journals with a limited circulation. Rising costs and deteriorating postal services are only two of our problems. The main problem of falling circulation is one that we have not been able to overcome. That problem will be solved only when friends and local groups start to think seriously what they can do to build up the circulation of *The Freethinker*. Some readers already take extra copies to sell at meetings and display in newsagents' shops. But there are too few giving such practical support. A new leaflet is available and it will be particularly useful to those who wish to introduce the paper to potential readers. Supplies will be sent on request.

The Freethinker is heavily subsidised and contributions to the fund help to meet the annual, and increasing, deficit. Our thanks are extended to those who sent donations during December 1974. Anonymous, £2; Anonymous, £15; W. Armstrong, £1.84; J. Ancliffe, 55p; W. Atherton, 80p; Miss B. Brophy, £1.84; P. Barbour, £3.84; R. D. Burrell, 84p; S. Cash, 42p; A. C. F. Chambre, 44p; R. J. Condon, £15; F. Campbell, £1; J. H. Charles, £3; W. Donovan, £1; W. H. Goodall, 84p; R. Gerrard, 84p; A. C. Henry, 27p; Mrs E. M. Hay, £1.34; G. G. Hibbert, 34p; J. Hudson, 34p; E. Hewett, £1.34; Mrs N Henson, £5; E. J. Hughes, £1.84; Mr Hunter, £1.35; J. K. Hawkins, £1; Miss C. F. Jacot, 34p; H. Madoc-Jones, £1; Mrs P. Knight, 84p; W. G. Longley, £1; Mrs S. Lord, 84p; S. J. Mace, £1; S. Marletta, 24p; M. K. Norbury, 34p; E. A. Napper, £2.24; W. R. Price, £1; M. Potts, 84p; Mrs K. Pariente, £2; R. Reader, 17p; G. Raphael, 34p; J. Sykes, 84p; R. J. Sandilands, 84p; W. Southgate, £1; W. M. Shuttleworth, £3.08; P. Sloan, 84p; A. Turner, 10p; D. C. Taylor, £2; D. Wright, 75p; P. D. Ward, 78p; C. R. Wilshaw, £1.84; D. Wood, 84p. Total: £87.37.

Mohammed: His Critics and His Champions

and pre-partition days. But in the post-partition period a series of disturbing incidents have taken place, all of them related to the life of the prophet Mohammed.

In the 1950s a Bombay publishing house reprinted a book by an American author that contained a somewhat flippant assertion that the prophet died fully expecting to awake in a paradise full of beautiful damsels. When attention was called to this passage the book was withdrawn by the publisher (who happened to be K. M. Munchi, a senior leader of the Indian national movement). But this did not prevent Mr Munchi from being harassed by Muslim demonstrators wherever he went and innocent non-Muslims were attacked in a number of towns by the ignorant who were incited by the prophet's more unscrupulous and fanatical champions. The fact that their victims had not written the offending book, nor perhaps had even heard of it—many would be incapable of reading or writing in their own language—did not placate the religious fanatics.

Reverting to the irrational outbursts caused by allegedly disrespectful references to Mohammed one can record another incident in February 1969. Arnold Toynbee, the scholar and historian, wrote an article for inclusion in a symposium to commemorate the centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth. Referring to Gandhi, Ashoka, Buddha, Jesus and

Mohammed, Toynbee wrote: "Mohammed was successful politically and suffered spiritually from his success (at least so it seems even to a sympathetic non-Muslim student of Mohammed's life)." This was enough for the prophet's champions to start a riot in Calcutta which caused two deaths. Again these innocent victims had never heard of the article nor of its author. Kindness and gentleness have traditionally been ascribed to the prophet, so one wonders what he would think of his followers who inflict such suffering on innocent people. Luckily the Calcutta riot was quickly brought under control with the help of the more responsible and reasonable Muslim leaders.

Explosive Passions

It is true that the Bradford Muslims have organised only a procession. But they must know that they are stirring passions which can be explosive and totally immoral. It is time that intelligent Muslims realised that they have chosen to live in a society where Richard Burton, an actor, can deliver a vitriolic attack on a political leader of the stature of Churchill, where the Christian god can be ridiculed, and where an Anglican churchman can become a bishop even after publicly suggesting that Jesus Christ may have had homosexual inclinations. Above all they must realise that the life and work of Mohammed is not only a matter of faith and religion but also a matter of history and politics.

It is now 20 years since Margaret Knight gave two broadcasts on morality without religion. The storm of criticism and abuse that followed led Mrs Knight to look further into the nature of Christian morality and she came to the conclusion that it was not all it was claimed to be. Christians who are prepared to admit the wrongs and excesses committed by members of their faith usually say that such persons have departed from the true faith and morality of Christianity and have offended against Christianity no less than against man. In her new book, "Honest to Man", Margaret Knight argues that this is not so. The crimes of the churches and of members of the Christian faith do not represent departures from New Testament teaching; they are rather the result of carrying it to its logical conclusion. This extract from "Honest to Man" is published by kind permission of Elek/Pemberton.

The Protestant Church today is in a very different position from the Catholic. In the Catholic Church dogma and theology are still of central importance, but liberal Protestantism is now pushing them more and more to one side, so that today the Established Church in England is rapidly becoming little more than a combination of a social club and charity organisation society. In both these capacities it undoubtedly does much good; but the value of its good work must be set against the harm that it does to the cause of clear thought and intellectual integrity.

Today Protestant churchmen, other than fundamentalists, are in an impossible intellectual position. They have ceased to believe most of the things that they are required by the creeds to say they believe; but it is impossible to admit this in so many words, so they devise "symbolic" interpretations of the troublesome doctrines—interpretations that are usually about as convincing as the earlier "symbolic" interpretations of the Song of Solomon as a hymn to the perfections of the Church. Or they employ the device known as "re-thinking", which involves, roughly speaking, re-stating traditional doctrines in such a way that they cease to be obviously false by becoming meaningless. In practice the two techniques are often combined.

The best-known practitioner of these methods today is Dr John Robinson, author of *Honest to God*. But Dr Robinson, by dissolving the Christian God into something nebulous which he calls "depth", "ultimate reality" or "the ground of being", is felt by most Protestants to have gone too far, and his views have been disowned by many leading churchmen, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. So I will quote instead from the

highest official source in the Anglican Church—the report, published in 1938, of the Commission on Christian Doctrine appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. This report says:

Statements affirming particular facts may be found to have value as pictorial expressions of spiritual truths, even though the supposed facts themselves did not actually happen. In that case such statements may be called symbolically true. . . . It is not therefore of necessity illegitimate to accept and affirm particular clauses of the Creeds while understanding them in this symbolic sense.

One would naturally like to know which clauses of the Creeds may be "understood in this symbolic sense", but here the Report is not as specific as one could wish. However, it seems clear that the Ascension and the Last Judgment, at least, can be regarded as only symbolically true. The Ascension, of course, has long been a stumbling-block and one can sympathise with a recent *cri du coeur* in the *Expository Times*, "no festival of the church is so hard on the preacher as Ascensiontide". To the impartial reader it seems obvious that the Ascension is a legendary story, on a par with the similar story (reported, though sceptically, by Suetonius in *The Twelve Caesars*) that the soul of the deified Emperor Augustus was seen ascending into heaven from the flames of his funeral pyre. But to the modernist Christian the story of Augustus is pagan superstition, whereas the story of Jesus is "symbolic truth"—in other words a sort of allegory or parable designed to convey some truth (it is not quite clear what) that is too "spiritual" to be stated in ordinary language. Thus Bishop F. R. Barry, confronted in 1969 with the unenviable task of composing *The Times* Saturday sermon in Ascension Week, explained that the ascension story is—

. . . not a primitive essay in astrophysics, but the symbol of a creative intuition . . . into the abiding significance of Jesus and his place in the destiny of man. It might be called a pictorial presentation of the earliest creed, Jesus is Lord. . . . Creed and scripture are saying in their own language that here is something final and decisive, the truth and meaning of man's life and destiny—truth not in a theory but in a person—life in its ultimate quality, that is, God's life.

No amount of careful re-reading can extract much meaning from this passage, but it is clear at least that in the Bishop's opinion the ascension story was not meant to be taken literally. And about this there are two things to be said: first, that the account of the Ascension in Acts (1: 9-11) contains nothing whatever to suggest that it was not meant as a record of fact; and second, that if the writer of the description did indeed mean it to be understood as an allegory, he defeated his own object—for the story has been taken literally throughout almost the whole of the Christian era.

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Pope Paul has declared 1975 to be a Holy Year, an institution which dates back to 1300 AD and which recurs every 25 years. The present Holy Year is a time of fundamental crisis for the Roman Catholic Church and for the Papacy. There may be a new occupant of the Chair of Peter before the end of Holy Year. Pope Paul will bequeath to his successor even more problems than he inherited from Pope John XXIII.

"Holy Year" represents a recurring anniversary in the annals of the Roman Catholic Church. Its institution dates back to the ill-fated Pope, Boniface VIII (who was subsequently kidnapped by French invaders, an outrage commemorated by the poet Dante). It was on 23 February 1300 that Boniface established the first Holy Year. Since then it has been revived by successive Popes at recurring intervals—normally, nowadays, every 25 years.

The ostensible purpose of Holy Year is to bring pilgrims to Rome to pray *Ad Limina Apostolorum* ("at the Tombs of the Apostles"), in particular at the tomb of St Peter, the alleged founder of the Papacy. But the motives of the "infallible" Pope, the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the backroom boys of the Vatican who actually direct that venerable institution, are obviously mixed, and probably include Mammon at least equally with God.

The vast revenues that flow into Rome during each Holy Year must represent a major source of income for the near-bankrupt Italian state and thus act as an effective financial brake on any anti-clerical movement in Italy, and, in particular, upon any movement that seeks to break the Lateran Treaty of 1929, concluded between Pope Pius XI and Mussolini, which guarantees permanence of the Papacy upon Italian soil. For the Papacy (unlike its divine founder!) has long since learned how to accommodate itself simultaneously to the service of God and Mammon.

Holy Year, though instituted only in 1300 AD, actually represents an official continuation of the far older practice of pilgrimage to Rome—a custom dating back to when it was still predominantly a pagan city. According to a recent Catholic account, the first recorded pilgrimage to the tomb of St Peter was made by the Egyptian Bishop, Abercius of Hierapolis, in 210 AD. That was a century before Constantine and the official conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity.

However, the present Holy Year shows every indication of becoming a year of fundamental crisis—a year that could well decide the fortunes of both the Roman Catholic Church and of the Papacy within it. Indeed, it is by no means

impossible that the institution of the Holy Year itself may end in 1975. It is certainly possible—even, according to a well-informed contemporary source, probable—that this will be not only a Holy Year but also an election year for the Papacy. According to the Rome correspondent of the French paper *Paris Match*, the Synod of Bishops held at the Vatican last autumn, where he was an eye-witness, was heavily charged with pre-election excitement, not to mention intrigue. He even went on to add a list of Cardinals regarded as front-line candidates for the triple crown as soon as it falls from the weary and, no doubt, disillusioned head of its present bearer, whose condition is deteriorating.

The Vicar of Christ is, after all, in his late seventies, and his pontificate, if not particularly long, has been quite exceptionally arduous. His immediate predecessor, Pope John XXIII, had put an end to the rigid regime of the Counter-Reformation that had remained unaltered since the sixteenth century and, by launching the Ecumenical Movement, had bequeathed a veritable hornets' nest to his unfortunate successor. To start people talking is a comparatively easy task; to stop them talking, however—particularly after four centuries of almost total silence—as Pope Paul has made many unsuccessful efforts to do, is a far more difficult undertaking.

The Church's Dilemma

It is this situation that has confronted him throughout eleven arduous and troubled years. True, he seems to have made rather heavy weather of the job, but will his eventual successor be able to do any better? Upon this fundamental question may well depend the continued existence of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church. If the year 1975 is to be not only Holy Year but Election Year as well, it may yet prove to be the year of decision, of make or break, for the Church. The average duration of a papal reign during the twentieth century so far has been almost exactly twelve years. Pope Paul has already reigned for eleven-and-a-half years.

Who, and what, will succeed the present Pope? In this connection the "what" is much more important than merely "who". For today Catholicism is at the crossroads, in a dilemma that was predicted by Joseph McCabe (the ex-priest who became a trenchant critic of the Church) at the turn of the century. This dilemma is, fundamentally, that Rome must either compromise with our contemporary era of revolution in all spheres of human existence—social, scientific, political, economic and technological—or else dig in for a last-ditch stand and a final assault by the ecclesiastical old guard; an

assault which, under the present circumstances, is unlikely to prove more successful than that of Napoleon's old guard at Waterloo. This is the decisive choice that now confronts the Church of Rome, as indeed, Christianity in general, and it represents a problem of such complexity that, whoever the next Pope may be, he will require all his alleged infallibility to solve it.

The successive popes of the present century have varied in their attitudes to this ever-mounting crisis. Leo XIII (1878-1903), who was the ablest pope since the Counter-Reformation, and his lieutenant, later Benedict XV (1914-1922), both attempted to compromise, but with appropriate caution—for no pope, after all, can afford to appear too radical. This time-honoured axiom was ignored by John XXIII (1958-1963)—an old man trying to beat the clock. He reformed too fast and died too soon, leaving behind him ecclesiastical chaos, which his successor has ever since been striving, unsuccessfully, to disentangle. During his troubled reign he has played the role of an ecclesiastical Mr Facing-Both-Ways, trying to please everybody, but apparently pleasing nobody. The three Piuses (X, XI and XII), who together fill up the remainder of the century, were strict traditionalists, consistently opposing nearly every progressive movement in society.

The End of Imperialism

Who the next pope will be is certainly a matter of social significance. It is by no means certain that he will be an Italian, as all his predecessors have been since the Counter-Reformation, nor is it even certain that he will be white-skinned and of Western culture. At the recent Synod of Bishops, the voice of Negro Africa was heard, loud and insistent. It stated clearly that Catholicism is no longer a European export; that there must be no more white imperialism in ecclesiastical dress; no more gun-boat diplomacy blessed by the Church; no more white *gendarmes* in black cassocks. One successor of the Apostles even went so far as to predict that by the year 2000, with 200 million black African converts, the centre of the universal Church will be in Africa! After all, can we be sure that St Peter was a *bona fide* Aryan? Or even a white man at all? No doubt bishops of other continents and colours will be expressing broadly similar views. For Europe is no longer the centre of world affairs, and the ecclesiastical role of Rome in the coming age may become that of a link rather than a leader—a kind of universal clearing-house, an ecclesiastical Zurich.

Whatever the future of the Roman Catholic Church may prove to be, one prediction at least can be confidently made. The age of European Imperialism is now definitely over. It ends at the Vatican, where it began; for this age was officially inaugurated in 1493 by the Borgia Pope Alexander

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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VI, when he divided up the recently discovered continents to East and West between the Catholic Empires of Spain and Portugal. But the nineteenth century, the century *par excellence* of European Imperialism, is ended; in the Vatican now, as elsewhere.

Age of Revolution

However, the major problem remains, and will confront every succeeding pope, whatever the colour of his skin or his cultural background. If the Church of Rome is to continue at all, and still more if it is to continue to play a major role in world affairs, it will have to adapt itself to the new age. It is an age of revolution in the widest and most universal sense that far transcends any merely political upheaval. This central and decisive fact means that the present Holy Year—more, perhaps, than any of its predecessors—will be a year of momentous decision for the Roman Church. And, given its historical world position, this decision, whether to fight progress or to compromise with it—a decision that in any case will have to be made before long—is a major decision that will inevitably affect the entire world in the immediate future.

It is announced that the Children of God are moving their headquarters from London to France. A Member of Parliament has called for an enquiry into their activities.

Atheists for Peace

ALBERT BEALE

There are many unbelievers who are actively involved in the peace movement and the writer of this article regrets that there is no specific Humanist peace organisation. Albert Beale works as Co-ordinator of the newly-formed Campaign Against Arms Trade.

I have long been a convinced atheist and humanist, but in recent years have been active in the peace movement to the exclusion, almost, of any involvement in the humanist and secularist movement. I agree that in a country with an established Church it might seem odd that there is, for example, such a large trade in armaments; but it must be remembered that although such a trade might be contrary to a humanist ethic, it is contrary only to one particular strand of current Christianity. The Establishment religious (and the religious Establishment) might make noises about love and peace from time to time, but they are generally more true to Christianity's historical role of repression and warmongering.

The *raison d'être* of religious groups committed to specifically libertarian or pacifist philosophies—or committed to particular peace-movement campaigns (apart, of course, from wishing to spread their particular combination of ideas to the world in general) seems to be not so much to bring a religious influence to bear on the broader peace movement as to bring a politically radical influence to bear on their co-religionists. So what should be the attitude of a pacifist and an atheist like myself to such groups?

Christian Radicals

I find myself—through my involvement with non-sectarian peace-movement organisations—working side by side with their members on particular projects; indeed, it now seems, given the vagaries of the conspiracy laws and the Incitement to Disaffection Act, risking being sent to prison alongside them. I don't see too much of a problem here. Clearly there is a dichotomy between the traditional and radical wings of the Christian Church; and the fact that the traditionalists are able to make seemingly reasonable (in religious terms) criticisms of the radicals, and *vice versa*, shows merely that there are (as atheists know) inherent contradictions in Christianity itself.

It seems to me that, by allying myself with radical Christians, I am not only helping to bring about the changes in society I want to see but also (in the long term) helping to bring about an end to religion and all its evils—since the more radical forces within the Church, when they eventually

take their position to its logical conclusion, must surely find most aspects of religion itself untenable. (An analogy is with a pacifist supporting a call for trade-union rights inside the army—ultimately, a soldier's questioning of his all-obedient status must lead to a questioning of the essential nature of the armed forces.)

Of course it would be nice if the humanist movement was big enough to have produced a specific peace sub-group as various religious sects have done. But, meanwhile, I would at least like to see more avowed atheists in the peace movement. This would be good for many reasons: first, it would strengthen the peace movement (especially intellectually); secondly, it would help balance the movement so that broad-based pacifist campaigns would not have the effect of religious propaganda on the side; and, in the longer term, the contact would help radical Christians to see other implications of their radicalism.

● The address of CAAT is 5 Caledonian Road, London N1.

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Hugh Francis, QC, has been appointed by the Charity Commissioners to probe the activities of the fundamentalist Christian sect known as the Exclusive Brethren.

As we enter the last quarter of the twentieth century freethinkers can be moderately satisfied with the contribution that our movement has made to social welfare and to human happiness. And we can be reasonably confident that by the year 2000 we shall have achieved more of our aims that have not yet been realised. The Christian churches, despite all their advantages, are clearly failing to influence society, and religious leaders publicly refer to this post-Christian era (except when they are trying to justify demands for yet more state subsidies for their churches and institutions). Some fundamental Christian teachings have become an embarrassment and a millstone around the necks of the faithful. Church decrees on many social questions which would have been accepted almost without demur a couple of generations ago have been quietly jettisoned because of public opposition or indifference to them. The ecumenical movement, consisting of erstwhile ecclesiastical foes, is an alliance of the doomed.

Many liberal Christians would agree with the foregoing. It is indisputable that hundreds of churches have closed their doors or have been forced to merge with others to survive; the majority of British people never attend church except on family business; a substantial proportion of the population does not believe in a personal god or in immortality; the churches' views on a wide range of social questions are widely publicised but generally ignored. Consequently, the liberal Christian (and some unbelievers too) will suggest that because of the changed situation there is no necessity for a militant, anti-religious movement in Britain. We are all freethinkers now.

Anyone who denies that significant progress has been made is simply indulging in wilful pessimism. But extreme and unfounded optimism is equally unjustified and those who believe that all the battles have been won should consider several basic facts of life. Firstly, as realists we must accept Christianity's and the churches' remarkable powers of survival. Their virtually unchallenged authority, together with the privileges and colossal wealth they have accumulated over the centuries, will fortify them long after their message and teachings have become completely irrelevant to most people. Second, the churches have an amazing ability to extricate themselves from difficult and discreditable situations in which they have played a shameful role, and still successfully pose as the innocent and altruistic party. (The unstinting support of the Roman Catholic Church for Right-wing dictatorships in pre-war Europe and fostering of sectarian bitterness in Ireland are two examples. Pope Pius XII, who schemed to bring Hitler to power, was hailed as "the Pope of peace" when he died; already the Christian churches are disclaiming any

NEWS

responsibility for the atmosphere of hate and distrust that prevails in Northern Ireland.) Third, the churches will not readily accept defeat on social issues and often set up front organisations to sabotage hard-won reforms. Fourth, it is not the liberal minority inside the churches, but secular pressure and organisation that has forced a change of attitude on many social questions.

There are those humanists who are constantly agonising about the importance of being positive, open-minded and respectful of the views of our religious opponents. But what they usually mean by "being positive" is that we should be prepared always to compromise, abandon basic principles, or jump on any bandwagon that comes rolling along. Open-mindedness is often a euphemism for gullibility; an open mind is like an open dustbin—it can be easily filled with rubbish. It is the critical, enquiring and rational mind that should be cultivated. Freethinkers have played an historical role in the battle for the right to think and act in accordance with one's conscience—and that includes the right to be superstitious and irrational. But acceptance and defence of these rights does not oblige us to respect beliefs which we regard as intellectual rubbish.

Let us welcome the decline of religion in a spirit of realism. For all over the world the lives and careers of thousands of young people are still being ruined by the baleful influence of religious fanatics of the Christian and other faiths. The Roman Catholic Church is still imposing its views about contraception upon its own members and upon people of other religious faiths, and none, who happen to live in countries where the Church is still strong enough to browbeat the secular authorities. In Britain the churches have enormous and totally unjustified privileges, and religious instruction is the only subject which is compulsorily included in the school curriculum. The Nationwide Festival of Light and other censorious religious groups are a constant threat to literary and artistic freedom.

There is a vital and continuing need for the free-thought and humanist movement. And one of the main tasks of that movement is to expose and attack religious privilege and influence which is the cause of incalculable human misery and social harm.

AND NOTES

BRIGHTON HUMANISTS ON RADIO

On five mornings of the week, shortly before the eight o'clock news bulletin, thousands of bleary-eyed Britons choke over their Shreddies or groan into their teacups as the banal prattle of *Thought for the Day* drifts across the breakfast tables of the land. *Thought for the Day*—seldom has the word “thought” been more inaptly used—is Auntie BBC's contribution to the nation's moral welfare and it provides Christian propagandists with an opportunity to tell us how every problem from gout to galloping inflation can be solved by simply trusting in The One Above. So *Freethinker* readers will envy those listeners who live in the area served by BBC Radio Brighton whose imaginative director decided that for one week the local edition of the programme would be presented by the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. All praise to him and to the humanists who made the most of this opportunity to put their viewpoint.

I have read the scripts which Jane Goldsmith and George Vale used, and it is apparent that in the time allotted they expressed the humanist attitude sensibly and succinctly. This bonus is well deserved by the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, an enterprising body which has long recognised the importance of endeavouring to make their mark in the locality through the media. Their example should be emulated by groups all over the country. It is unlikely that humanists will be invited to participate in the national *Thought for the Day* programme—the ghost of Sir John Reith is still discernible in the morning mists of Portland Place—but the expanding network of local radio stations presents opportunities which should not be ignored.

A GOOD READ

It is pleasing to report on one ray of light that has penetrated the prevailing gloom. Christopher Evans' *Cults of Unreason* has been published by Panther as a paperback. The book's availability in a cheaper edition will add to the growing number who derive pleasure from reading about UFOs, black boxes, third eyes and the new quasi-religious

cults. In the pages of *Cults of Unreason* we encounter such “spiritual giants” as L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, George King, who was informed by “a booming voice” as he washed the dishes in his Maida Vale bed-sitter that he was to be the earthly representative of the Interplanetary Parliament, and Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, a Tibetan lama whose account of his career (including a fearsome brain operation, without anaesthesia, to open the inner “third eye”) became a best seller in twelve countries. (It later transpired that the mysterious guru from Tibet was one Cyril Henry Hoskins, a plumber's assistant from Plympton, Devon.)

Dr Evans delights his readers with curiosities like eye-witness accounts of a giant aircraft which flew over America in 1879 with members of the crew singing *Abide with Me*, the tape-recorded voice of Jesus Christ being played at a meeting in London's Caxton Hall, and a series of hoax letters purportedly written by Dr Walter Wumpe, Professor Huttle-Glank and Dr N. Ormuss which were published and seriously commented upon in the Aetherius Society's journal, *Cosmic Voice*. Christopher Evans gleefully makes minced meat of the new “religions” and their founders. But *Cults of Unreason* is much more than a hatchet job; it is a lucid and thoughtful commentary on man's capacity for self-deception and wishful thinking.

● See display advertisement on page 7

HYPOCRISY

The recent Commons vote on the death penalty certainly revealed the hypocrisy of some MPs who have constantly protested their respect for the sanctity of life as a reason for their unrelenting opposition to abortion law reform. Jill Knight, darling of the anti-abortion pressure groups, was at her shrillest and nastiest in support of capital punishment, and she was supported by a large segment of the anti-reformers including John Biggs-Davison, Sir Bernard Braine, John Cordle (Defender of the Christian Conscience of the Nation), Victor Goodhew and Patrick Wall. Two Ulster clergymen also voted in favour of the death penalty.

Those who supported the pro-hanging amendment included Sir Keith Joseph, an ardent admirer of Mary Whitehouse and guest speaker at the forthcoming annual convention of her National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. Mrs Whitehouse vociferously opposes violence on the television and cinema screen, but it is unlikely that the presence, as an honoured guest, of a Member of Parliament who voted for judicial violence of the most extreme and final nature will embarrass the founder and members of a Right-wing, Christian pressure group whose aim is to censor opinions which do not conform to their particular views.

A number of recent theological studies have made out a good case for the view that the fourth gospel was written about the end of the first century by an unknown author who was ignorant of the other three gospels now included in the canon, but who drew some of his material from sources which were at some points identical with (or at least very similar to) theirs. Outstanding among this recent scholarly work is the long commentary (published in 1972 in the *New Century Bible* series) by Barnabas Lindars, head of the Anglican Franciscan House in Cambridge and University Lecturer in Divinity there. The purpose of this present article is to show, mainly by reference to his work, how critical theologians today undertake their investigations in a scientific spirit and reach results to my mind (if not to theirs) incompatible with acceptance of canonical Christian literature as in any sense a revelation; and how their studies elucidate the way in which stories of Jesus told in the gospels, although not true, nevertheless came to be told.

First, the date of the fourth gospel. It makes no mention of Sadducees or Zealots (prominent in the first half of the first century), but names only the Pharisees as the Jewish leaders. This reflects the situation after the elimination of Sadducees and Zealots in the Jewish War with Rome, AD 66-73. Furthermore, in his chapter nine the evangelist betrays knowledge of the exclusion of Christians from the Synagogue, which is known from independent Jewish evidence to have occurred *circa* AD 85. Evidence external to the gospel also points to an origin at the end of the first or beginning of the second century. The lack of any references to it in the letters of Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch) and Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna) means that, if it existed *circa* AD 115, it was at any rate not yet widely diffused. But it certainly existed by AD 130, because that date has been assigned to a papyrus fragment of it found in the sands of Egypt.

Next, the authorship. That all four gospels were originally anonymous is clear from the fact that the earliest Christian writers who quote them do so without assigning them to a named author. Apart from the title "according to John" (which, like all the gospel titles, was therefore not part of the original manuscripts, but added by unknown hands before the end of the second century) the fourth gospel is anonymous from its prologue to its solemn conclusion at the end of chapter 20. Chapter 21, however (an appendix added later), identifies the author as "the beloved disciple". Now only the fourth gospel mentions such a person, and makes him figure in three incidents in earlier chapters—the last supper, the crucifixion and the empty tomb. The intention of chapter 21

in ascribing the whole gospel to this allegedly close friend of Jesus, is to represent it as the writing of an eye-witness. But this suggestion carries no conviction, not only because it is made only in an appended chapter, but also because all three incidents where the beloved disciple figures in the fourth gospel proper have parallels in the other three gospels where he plays no part. The inference is that, at these points, the fourth gospel drew on source material similar to that which underlies the other three, but reworked it so as to introduce this "beloved disciple". Again, who is this disciple? The fourth gospel does not say, but the second century Church naturally assumed that he must be one of the inner group of three who, according to the first three gospels, were Jesus' most privileged companions, namely Peter and James and John the sons of Zebedee. These three alone were present at the raising of Jairus' daughter (as related by Mark), at the Transfiguration (as related by Mark, Matthew and Luke) and at Gethsemane (as related by Mark and Matthew). Furthermore it was obvious that, of these three intimates, Peter cannot be the beloved disciple, as the two are mentioned as different persons in the fourth gospel; and James was, according to Acts, martyred early. So it seemed clear to the Fathers of the late second century that the beloved one could only be John. Unfortunately for this theory, the incidents which represent Peter, James and John as particularly close to Jesus occur only in the first three gospels. In the fourth (where alone the beloved disciple figures) there is no raising of Jairus' daughter, no Transfiguration, no Gethsemane agony—indeed no mention of the sons of Zebedee until that appendix (chapter 21). The fourth gospel, then, leaves the beloved one anonymous. The author of the appendix decided to represent this anonymous person as the author of the gospel, and the identification of him with John is the work of second century harmonists.

It is now clear to critical theologians that the fourth and the other gospels cannot be harmonised. In matters of detail they are frequently irreconcilable; and the fourth evangelist records only a small number of biographical incidents and makes them the basis of extended Jesuine discourses which have no counterpart in the other gospels. If he knew the work of the other three, then he wilfully deviated from their portrait of Jesus. It is with some relief that theologians have been able to show that he did not know them, and need not therefore be charged with this arbitrariness. But he knew some of their source material, for his gospel contains a few exact verbal links with stories which are told very differently in the other gospels. That he did not know the three others may be

partly due to the original purely local circulation of any given gospel within one particular Christian community. But as before long gospels did circulate more widely, it must be due in part to the fact that all four were written at much the same time. In other words, whereas the fourth gospel used to be regarded as a good deal later than the other three, the time interval between all four is now held to be quite small. Either, then, all are to be assigned to the end of the first century, or it must be held that the fourth gospel as we know it is a second, expanded edition of a work written some ten years earlier (in ignorance of the other three). Lindars does in fact give good evidence for this view. (To be concluded in the next issue)

The Protestant Church

The Last Judgment poses equally intractable problems. The Gospels represent Jesus as saying quite unambiguously that he would return to judge the earth within the lifetime of men then living, and that the disciples should live in daily expectation of this event. It was impossible to say that Jesus was mistaken, and a delicate matter to suggest that he changed his mind; so the Archbishops' Commission employed the technique described earlier by Newman as "guiding the Church through the channel of no-meaning, between the Scylla and Charybdis of Aye and No". They wrote:

In a literal sense, the *dénouement*, which in the New Testament age was expected, did not take place, though many scholars have urged . . . that there was a real Parousia of the glorified Lord in the coming of the Spirit. Traditional orthodoxy has tended nevertheless to take the scriptural imagery of the Last Things and the hoped-for Parousia or "coming" of Christ semi-literally, but to explain that the *time* of the coming has been postponed. . . . Inasmuch, however, as the moral urgency of the eschatological message . . . is to be found largely in the assertion of the immediate relation of human life, here and now, to its consummation in eternity . . . a truer perspective (it may be suggested) is to be secured by taking the *imagery* in a symbolical sense, but by continuing to affirm, with the New Testament, that "the time is at hand". The "time" is, in this sense, *always* at hand; and from this point of view the spiritual value of the eschatological drama is best grasped when it is understood, not as a quasi-literal description of a future event, but as a parable of the continuous and permanent relation of the perpetually imminent eternal order to the process of events in time.

It may be felt that this sort of thing, though it provides tempting opportunities for satire, cannot really be said to be morally harmful. But morality has more to do with clear thinking than perhaps is commonly realized. Lord Morley said "those who tamper with veracity, from whatever motive, are tampering with the vital force of human progress": and modern liberal theology is one long process of tampering with veracity.

● "Honest to Man" is reviewed on page 12

Christian Love in Virginia

Those worthy and genteel souls who, while holding no religious beliefs themselves, nevertheless shudder with distaste when secular humanists warn against the dangers and the baleful influence of religious superstition, would be well advised to take cognizance of what is happening in West Virginia. In this part of the United States, Christianity reigns supreme, and liberalism and enlightenment are as rare as holy water at the headquarters of the Protestant Truth Society. The area has been brought virtually to a standstill by fundamentalist Christians demonstrating the lengths to which they will go to prevent the advance of any knowledge not in accordance with their creed. Mobs of hymn-singing, scripture-quoting Christian fundamentalists have been on the rampage; and burnings, shootings and the dynamiting and blockading of roads have become daily occurrences. These outrages have been perpetrated in an attempt to prevent the introduction of school textbooks of which these Christians do not approve.

"Standing in God's Way"

One of their fundamentalist leaders is the Reverend Charles Quigley, director of an edifice known as the Cathedral of Prayer Baptist Church, Charlestown. He appealed recently to his fellow-Christians to join him in prayers for the deaths of three members of a local Board of Education. He proclaimed that those who mocked "dumb fundamentalists" would be struck down; adding, "It's not a matter of love or hate; it's a matter of anybody standing in God's way and trying to bring Christianity to a halt".

Every cloud is said to have a silver lining, and at least West Virginia is a long way from London, England. But it would be foolish for us to ignore the activities of religious fanatics on the other side of the Atlantic. A growing number of Christian sects of American origin have been setting up shop in Britain, and if we do not expose and combat their nonsense at the outset, considerable social harm may result. Unfortunately, the boundless credulity of the public and the generous attitude of the Charity Commissioners towards the Jesus industry makes this country a happy hunting-ground for religious shysters.

A "holy year" tout has been selling fake bricks from the "holy door" of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. There was no fixed price for the bricks, but another tout is selling non-existent "holy year awards" for 500 dollars each.

BOOKS

HONEST TO MAN by Margaret Knight. Elek/Pemberton, £3.75.

Le style, c'est la femme. And Margaret Knight is, above all, a communicator. If, as Bernard Shaw contended, "Effectiveness of assertion is the alpha and omega of style", she is a first-rate stylist.

Most of her readers will doubtless be convinced that she never gives a thought to any style at all—that the straightforward facts and commonsense arguments she expresses so lucidly, so logically, so simply, just flow from her subconscious, like doodles. There, however, is the art that conceals art. I know; for I have wrestled myself to put some of these very same lines of reasoning (for example, on the fallacy of the "no good without God" argument) into lucid, logical, simple prose, for my booklet for schools, *Humanism*. The lines of reasoning may be found in any number of philosophical writings—but usually entangled in prose so convoluted that for the average busy reader it might just as well be written in hieroglyphics. Remembering how far from simple I found the simplification process—first unravelling the argument, then knitting it up again in plain—I can appreciate the sheer simplicity of this book.

Margaret Knight is herself aware, as she intimates in a footnote, of the pitfall of oversimplification, but she is willing to risk even that rather than the quagmire of philosophers' prose.

Here, then, is a practical guide, as easy to follow as London Transport's diagrammatic maps of the underground system. (Just imagine trying to find your way from Lambeth North to Holloway Road with a monochrome underground map, drawn strictly to scale, the lines all curving and crossing like Hegelian lines of reasoning!)

There is, however, a serious disadvantage in such straightforward writing: while it saves the time and sanity of the reader, it takes longer to write. Hence, no doubt, the fact that this is only the third book we have had from Mrs Knight in 20 years.

It is nearly twelve years now since the publication of Dr John Robinson's *Honest to God*, from which this book derives its title. But it is still topical enough. It popularised the modern Christian double-think, and remains its most popular exposition—the recommended guide for those theological underground travellers anxious never to reach a rational destination, where they might be forced finally to surrender their Christian ticket.

The sub-title to *Honest to Man* is "Christian Ethics Re-examined", and its main thesis is ethical rather than theological: the thesis that the many crimes against humanity committed, incontestably,

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in the name of Christianity throughout its history, far from constituting (as is generally claimed) departures from the true Gospel message, are rather the result of taking it to its logical conclusion. So much for the fashionable view (held even by some non-Christians) that Christianity, however worthless its metaphysics may be, has a moral content that is worth preserving.

The book falls into three sections. In Part I, "Christian and Humanist Ethics", the evolution of man's social instincts is shown to be the foundation of his morality. The personality and teaching of the Gospel hero are then examined. In Part II, "Christianity in History", the 13 chapter headings range from "The Effects of Belief in Hell", through "Islam and the Crusades", "Witch Hunting", "The Persecution of the Jews" and "Gladiatorial Shows", to "The Position of Woman" and "Slavery". It adds up to an unanswerable indictment. Part III, "Christianity Today", comprises chapters on the RC and Protestant Churches and, finally, a chapter on "Education and the Churches". As to the question of retaining religious education for the sake of its morals, Mrs Knight points out that "there is surely something paradoxical in trying to promote truthfulness and other virtues among children by teaching them things that are not true". She makes a factual comparison of pre-Christian pagan with Christian morality, the former being clearly by far the superior, and concludes with the Miltonic plea, "Let truth and error grapple".

The religious press has been quick to condemn the book as unfairly selective—but the author forestalls them in her Preface: "I shall doubtless be told that it is one-sided, and this is of course undeniable—the book is one-sided in the sense in which a speech by prosecuting counsel is one-sided. But in view of the hundreds of books that are written each year from the standpoint of defending counsel, it seems reasonable that the other side should be heard."

Christian critics have also objected that the source material is out of date. Maybe some of the authorities cited have been superseded—after all, it is impossible for any of us to read everything published in so wide a field—but a glance through the eight pages of references (which, by the way, constitute a most useful documentation guide) reveals that many of them are of the 1960s, and several of the 1970s. Is the author expected to be precognitive too? Anyway, whatever happened to Christian immutability?

There was just *one* statement of fact that struck

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me as being on the point of becoming out of date—the statement that the building and maintenance grant to aided schools is now as high as 80 per cent: for the Bill raising it to 85 per cent has already got through its second reading in the Commons.

My own repeated reaction as I read the book was "I wish I had said that!" Resisting the temptation to quote extensively from it (especially as I understand that one complete chapter is to be reproduced in this issue), I would simply urge all *Freethinker* readers to get hold of a copy of the book, whether by purchase, loan, or theft (and, also to get it on the shelves of their local library). And I will content myself with quoting from it a single sentence, which, I think, strikes the keynote:

The religion of love was also the religion of hell-fire; and a sincere belief that sinners are tortured for ever must inevitably blunt the sensibilities and corrupt the morals of those who hold it.

BARBARA SMOKER

SECRET OF THE AGES: UFO's FROM INSIDE THE EARTH by Brinsley le Poer Trench. Souvenir Press, £2.60.

Why is the North Pole like a Polo brand mint? Because it has a hole in it! I like to be serious in book reviews, but there are limits, and Mr le Poer Trench has got right up my nose.

He starts with Atlantis, which (quoting no authority later than 1938) he places in its traditional location of the Atlantic, although modern scholars who accept the Atlantis passages from Plato place it in the Aegean Sea. Mr Trench peoples his Atlantis with giants, reptilian monsters and gods from outer space who built tunnel systems all over the world. Why is it that one doesn't read about these amazing archaeological discoveries except in the books of Erich von Daniken and his followers such as Mr Trench? Or is it rather that, as the blurb excitedly splutters, this book has hit upon the "most closely guarded international secret of the ages" which all the high-ups are frantically trying to keep from the masses? Following the great flood, the Atlanteans burrow into their tunnel systems permeating the hollow earth where their descendants live today in "fabulous cities"—an ironically apt choice of word—inside the planet. And should all this sound "incredible to us mundane surface dwellers"

—how did he guess?—then there is more, much more, to come. We now "fasten our seat belts" (all in breathless italics, the book is like that) for a "flight into the centre of the earth through the polar entrance!" Yes, folks, there's a Hole at the Pole, and Mr Trench has a satellite photograph to prove it too.

Unfortunately, his assembled satellite photographs don't prove what they're supposed to. ESSA-7's photograph of November 1968, showing a large black area at the North Pole, is Mr Trench's principal exhibit; yet the hole is much too large, and too perfectly shaped, to be anything other than a fault in the lens of the camera. And ESSA-3's photo of 1967 shows the Arctic Ocean all right, but no hole; whilst Mr Trench and the other hole-at-the-Pole "authorities" he assiduously cites are unable to agree whether the hole is 285 miles in diameter, or 50, or whether it is actually 1,500 miles in circumference. And I wonder how they know at all, since part of Mr Trench's case is that nobody, not even the American Strategic Air Command bombers which fly over the polar regions daily, knows just where the wretched place is.

But it is in the second half of the book that Mr Trench really takes off (or rather under) for his theory is that the hollow earth is the launching pad of Unidentified Flying Objects of all kinds. The old speculation was that UFOs came from outer space, and was always vulnerable to the argument that intelligent life outside the earth would have no very good reason to bother itself with this cosmic backwater; the new speculation is that the ufonauts (his barbarism, not mine) are Putting Us All Off the Track by the talk of extra-terrestrial origins, since the UFOs emerge from inside the earth to warn us against the perils of nuclear explosions. You may feel that if the intentions of the aliens were benevolent they needn't be so deceitful, or make such a bad job of convincing everybody that they exist and have "A Message for Us All". But brother, have I got bad news for you—the inner earthmen are abducting large numbers of people each year, secreting them in indoctrination centres underground, and brainwashing them before returning the unfortunates to the surface, where they are rapidly moving into top government and military circles as a kind of Fifth Column before the final takeover by the aliens. This will of course be in July 1999, the year of Nostradamus' famous prophecy of apocalypse; and then the anti-Christ will reign until Jesus himself returns in full glory, etc.

Well, there you are: a mishmash of speculation, fantasy unverified and unverifiable, quotations galore from books and articles from the exuberant pens of other cult members, totally uncritical attitudes to the source material (satellite photos and reports of flying saucers), and finally a weaving of a great straggly web of occult nonsenses of every

undisciplined kind. Now, to be fair to Mr Trench, there are indeed many strange phenomena in the Arctic regions, and in the universe generally, which do demand explanation; and it is no part of a freethinking stance to deny that abnormal and amazing things occur. We are finding out that the universe is a very peculiar place indeed, and there are many well-documented events in history for which no rational explanation has been found. Yet having an open mind is not the same as having an uncritical one. However, there may be at least one check on Mr Trench's extravaganzas: he thinks people who Know Too Much about flying saucers are spirited away by sinister Men in Black from the world beneath our feet. He had better watch out for potholes.

PHILIP HINCHLIFF

POOR MEN'S GUARDIANS by Stanley Harrison.
Lawrence & Wishart. £4 and £1.95.

Much as the trade union movement has reached a point of no return, the fight for a free press in this country precludes any reversal of its powers. But for those who would see in these powers a threat to the rights of the individual, this book serves as a useful corrective. The emphasis is not so much on the introduction of new material—the author himself calls it a survey rather than a history—as on the belief that the struggle against the “tax on knowledge” was synonymous with the gradual evolution of the democratic process. To convince readers of his premise, Stanley Harrison has chosen to review the major socio-political events of the last 110 years as they affected the battle against censorship. As he writes at the beginning of the book: “Politics are about power, and the press is about politics, and its story interlocks at every point with the political and social changes (of the period)”. Not only were the two struggles directed against the common oligarchical oppressor, but the participants were the same in many cases. It was a feature of the underground press that it did not confine itself to the single issue of the right to publish; it functioned as the most powerful organ of reform throughout the country's most turbulent years and instigated such radical movements as Chartism, trade unionism and parliamentary reform generally. Agitation for improved conditions in factories and revision of the Poor Law was launched in periodicals like the atheist John Thelwall's *Tribune* nearly 50 years before these measures were introduced in parliamentary debate. Four of the Chartists' six points were advocated as early as 1776 in Major John Cartwright's pamphlet *Take Your Choice*.

As long as radical pressmen insisted as their duty the exposure of what William Cobbett called the corruption of “the thing”, they were bound to be faced with the most strenuous opposition, and

their history through the first years is marked by frustrated heroism rather than an actual breakthrough. Nearly a century passed between the publication of John Wilkes' famous Number 45 of the *North Briton* and the repeal of the Stamp Acts. It was not enough even that the stamp duty on paper and newsprint was paid; the reporting of all but foreign news was likely to be interpreted as seditious and a breach of the peace. The Constitutional Society, whose members included the Duke of Wellington and over a hundred clergymen, attacked the radical press, for offering (even on the Sabbath), “direct incitements to violence and crime”. People connected with the papers at every level of production were subject to prosecution, and they repeatedly defied the law. In one year alone, 24 of Henry Hetherington's provincial retail agents were prosecuted, and one vendor of the *Poor Man's Guardian* is quoted, on hearing his conviction, as shouting from the dock: “I've nothing to thank you for; and whenever I come out I'll hawk them again. And, mind you, the first that I hawk shall be at your house.”

Mr Harrison's most vivid chapters are those dealing with these early struggles, and he devotes considerable space to Hetherington, John Cleave, Richard Carlile and other founding fathers, as well as a detailed account of the Chartist movement and the influence of Feargus O'Connor, northern Chartist leader and founder of the movement's most important paper, the *Northern Star*. He also makes the point that religious opposition to the radical press failed because its propaganda sold almost exclusively to middle-class homes, while the working class continued to bolster its own press. Thus, despite heavy penalties, the radical press survived, although these publications were often edited from within a prison cell and printed on calico to avoid stamp duty. The gradual acceptance of the working-class movement as a whole eventually resulted in the repeal of the Stamp Acts in 1855.

This marked the inception of what the author sees as the most difficult period for the democratic press. For with the great influx of specifically Socialist journals there also emerged the monolithic capitalist press, beginning with the *Daily Mail* in 1896. Mr Harrison devotes the last hundred pages to the struggle of Leftist papers to survive the dual onslaught of government and business. His account of the *Daily Herald's* prosecution for its pacifist stand after the First World War and the tie-in with the General Strike is illuminating and convincing. But the overall effect of this section is to isolate those readers who do not have an immediate interest in and a prior knowledge of the workings of the British Communist Party. In the process the author omits such important details as the prosecution of G. W. Foote, founder

(Continued on page 15)

LETTERS

"LAST TANGO IN PARIS"

Although I am sure it was not Jim Herrick's intention to produce a humorous review of the film *Last Tango in Paris* (Reviews, November 1974) I personally found his review extremely funny and unintentionally solemn.

First of all, a middle-aged man copulates with a young lady "against a wall". This is presumably one of those admirable impulsive acts that demonstrates we are not fettered and emotionally castrated by our dehumanising contemporary society. However, we are provided with the following profound information about this little genital dalliance; let us, accordingly, ponder over it. Mr Herrick writes: "It is an attempt to live a love affair with pristine existential purity: naked, unencumbered beings confronted with the inescapable reality of each other." Such a reverential description of a momentary orgasmic exhilaration is hilarious, but the review becomes even more guffaw-making. We are informed of the "notorious buggery scene", and Mr Herrick pontificates: "It is also valid since the penetration of the anus is analogous to the need to stir the hoarded turds of our past, which constipate our possibilities of clean relationships uncluttered by past-, self-, and media-created images." I had, poor fool that I am, always thought that heterosexual sodomy was merely an effective if somewhat unsavoury, method of contraception, but I now see how truly beautiful and inspiring this dainty little performance can be.

What I am really objecting to is that virtually reverential attitude towards human sexuality. After all, sexual activity is of limited duration and limited intensity, and this idea that there is something intrinsically "sacramental" about it is a little unconvincing. In a world where only about half the population ever eat regularly, it is about time that films of couples writhing and rolling about—which gets boring after the first five minutes—should be put in their proper perspective. It is through worshipping sex that we have a global overpopulation problem. If a couple wish to mate, if they are not venerally diseased, and they use contraceptives that is fine. But, for the non-existent God's sake, let us stop regarding the genital antics of our fellow men as something sacred!

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

EDUCATION

In Brigid Brophy's words (*The Freethinker*, November 1974), "The business of schools in education, and education is the only thing we are justified in making compulsory for children". Those words surely point to the basic issue of education. Harry Stopes-Roe's "good education" requires good educators. But just as educators have their different "stances for living", do they not have their stances for educating?

CHARLES BYASS

Poor Men's Guardians

and first editor of *The Freethinker*, in 1881, one of the last prosecutions for blasphemy in this country.

Despite these lapses, *Poor Men's Guardians* is a worth-while challenge for anyone who wants to investigate the subject at greater depth. Whether our answers are the same as those Mr Harrison suggests, his study is important enough to pose the questions and initiate the vital search.

JAMES MACDONALD

DEFEND ABORTION LAW REFORM

Now I have retired as General Secretary of the Abortion Law Reform Association, I would like, through your columns, to thank readers for their help and co-operation during my 13 years with ALRA. Their support has been invaluable, both in practical terms such as letter-writing to MPs and also in less tangible ways—like just knowing they were there and on my side.

Now it may interest them to know that I am working (in a part-time capacity) as Public Relations Officer to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service. This is the largest supplier of private abortions in Britain. If any readers would like to know more about this non-profit-making Registered Charity, I will be happy to arrange that they receive some leaflets. As well as currently providing some 25,000 abortions a year in its own nursing homes, BPAS has a flourishing Fertility Control Clinic in the Midlands, provides male and female sterilisation and does free pregnancy testing.

And finally, may I make a personal plea? On 7 February, in the House of Commons, there is to be the second reading debate of a Bill which if it succeeds would seriously restrict the 1967 Abortion Act. Its proposer, James White, wishes to reduce the period of pregnancy during which abortion can be legally performed, exclude all foreigners and delete all "social" grounds for abortion.

I hope readers who wish the law to remain as it is (or to be further liberalised) will write immediately to their MP telling him/her that they oppose any restriction in the law. The anti-abortion lobby, backed by the Roman Catholic Church, is better organised and more articulate than ever before. It must not, under any circumstances, be allowed to erode the reform for which we fought so long and so hard. That reform brought immense benefit to numerous individuals and families; these benefits must be allowed to continue.

DIANE MUNDAY

Squalid Attack on 1967 Act

The Roman Catholic Church and its front organisations which have been working assiduously to sabotage family planning projects and the 1967 Abortion Act will make full use of this grubby little volume in the coming campaign over James White's Bill. Mr Litchfield (having shed his mantle of impartiality which deceived *The Times* if no one else) has been busy firing away from Catholic platforms. At a meeting held recently in Cumberland and arranged by the Right to Life organisation, Mr Litchfield "reminded those present that only Members of Parliament could repeal the Act, and it was a duty to support those MPs who are against abortion, and to withdraw support from those for abortion". Have you taken these words to heart, gentle reader, and written to your MP yet? If not, please do so now, and send his reply to Sally Hesmondhalgh at A Woman's Right to Choose, National Council for Civil Liberties, 186 King's Cross Road, London, WC1.

● See "Defend Abortion Law Reform" (above).

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Brunswick House, 11 Brunswick Square, Hove, Sunday, 2 February, 5.30 p.m. George Vale: "Trade Unionism in Modern Society".

Croydon Humanist Society. Public Library, Kathrine Street, Croydon, Wednesday, 19 February, 8 p.m. Donald Madgwick: "How Private is Your Private Life?"

Leicester Secular Society, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Sunday meetings at 6.30 p.m. 19 January, David Pollock: "Charity Law Reform". 26 January, Edmund Taylor: "Why Man is no Longer a Rare Specie". 2 February, Gillian Hawtin: "Aspects of Nineteenth-century Secularism". 9 February, John Frears: "Nationalism, Democracy and the EEC".

London Young Humanists. 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8, Sunday, 7.30 p.m. 19 January, C. A. W. Manning: "South Africa—a Blot on the Landscape?" 2 February, speaker: Robert Massingham. 16 February, Jonathan Guinness: "Economics and Ethics".

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. 30 Archibald Road, London, N7, Monday, 3 February, 8.30 p.m. Informal meeting.

Nottingham and Notts Humanist Group. University Adult Centre, 14 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, Friday, 14 February, 7.30 p.m. D. J. Smail: "The Treatment of Mental Disorder".

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. Sunday morning meetings, 11 a.m. 19 January, Richard Clements: "Turner and the Humanism of a Great Artist". 26 January, John Crook: "The Evolution of the Unconscious". 2 February, Hector Hawton: "The Male Chauvinism of D. H. Lawrence". Tuesday evening meetings, 7 p.m. 21 January, Philip Sansom: "Planning and Freedom". 28 January, Dick Jones: "Thinking About London". 4 February, Michael Duane: "Politics of the Size of Classes". 11 February, Barrie Fitton: "The Depriving Curriculum".

Worthing Humanist Group. Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing, Sunday, 26 January, 5.30 p.m. George Rawlings: "Drama and Your Child".

PUBLICATIONS

The Freethinker 1972 Bound Volume, edited by Nigel Sinnott, £2.50 plus 30p post.

A Chronology of British Secularism, G. H. Taylor, 10p plus 3½p post.

Broadcasting Brainwashing Conditioning, David Tribe, 25p plus 3½p post.

Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society (paperback), David Tribe, 90p plus 13p post.

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