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NSS CALLS FOR ABOLITION OF RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING DEPARTMENTS

The National Secular Society says that religious broadcasting departments are an expensive incongruity and calls for their abolition. In its submissions to the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, whose chairman is Lord Annan, the NSS declares: "It is scandalous that huge sums are being expended on them at a time when economy measures are being imposed on other departments whose work is more worth-while and appropriate to the last quarter of the twentieth century. The churches must compete for time with other voluntary societies in features and news programmes".

Although the National Secular Society has views on a wide range of problems associated with broadcasting it concentrates on the one topic of religious broadcasting. While it is confident that the other points it wishes to make will, in fact, be made by other organisations, the NSS "... has no confidence ... that the questionable position occupied by the religious broadcasting departments maintained by the BBC and the independent broadcasting companies will be examined critically by any significant number of contributors. Indeed, their anomalous position will be defended both by the broadcasting authorities themselves and by the religious denominations, whose propaganda machine they are."

The impact of broadcasting—a medium of unprecedented pervasiveness and power—on society has been enormous; there has been no medium in history which has enabled so small an active minority to preach to so large a passive majority. That is one reason why the NSS has welcomed the establishment of the Annan Committee. It hopes that the Committee "will be able to free itself sufficiently from the dead-weight of current practice to examine the position of religious broadcasting in terms of the needs of a pluralistic, secular society".

In recent years "access to the media" has become a trendy slogan, and the broadcasting authorities have reacted to it with the creation of "phone-in"

programmes. In general the NSS welcomes this development, but describes it as being "of rather limited significance", in the context of broadcasting as a whole. It refers to one such programme, *Open Door*, and says "... it compares poorly with the output of the religious broadcasting departments, which institutionalise 'access to the media' for a few minority groups, the seven religious sects represented on the Central Religious Advisory Committee. Again, while *Open Door* is transmitted late at night the religious broadcasting departments command a sizeable slice of peak broadcasting ...

"It is also a matter of concern to us whether the existence of a programme such as *Open Door* represents the recognition by the BBC of a basic principle of their stewardship of the majority of broadcasting in the United Kingdom, or whether it is merely a transitory response to a fad. This fear is heightened by the recent economies implemented by the BBC. The *Open Door* was a programme slashed by all but 40 per cent. We look in vain for any similar contraction in the output of religious broadcasting. A BBC spokesman advises us there have been none ... religion is firmly established in every broadcasting institution in the country and is responsible for some three per cent of the total output."

Privileged Position of Religion

This is at a time when religion is clearly reckoned by the vast majority of the population who signally absent themselves from places of worship as a view of life incongruously irrelevant to the twentieth century. As a recent poll showed, no more than twelve per cent of the population attend church regularly. Yet the BBC boasts: "Since 1928 there has not been a day when an act of worship has not been broadcast." This is a far greater commitment to public worship than the vast majority of places of worship ever hope to attain.

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The ceremony at which Dr Donald Coggan was enthroned as the 101st Archbishop of Canterbury—the 31st Anglican to occupy the Chair of Augustine as one Roman Catholic newspaper reminded its readers—was an occasion of much pomp and splendour. It was also an occasion of unprecedented participation by representatives including Roman Catholic cardinals and archbishops, Orthodox patriarchs, members of the Free Churches, the Salvation Army and the Quakers. But was this demonstration of ecumenism a show of strength or an indication of the churches' realisation that they cannot any longer afford to compete for allegiance in a world where their power is waning and their commands are ignored?

enthronement ceremony we know today has a no longer history than from 1928 and is in fact no more than a mimicking of the coronation. Indeed it would appear that the splendour of the installation of the Archbishop of Canterbury seems to bear a strikingly inverse ratio to the real power of the Church of England and its bishop-barons. It is only when you have no power that the trappings of power become important in themselves. A medieval archbishop did not need fanfares, princes and politicians to legitimise his claims to power. In those days archbishops of the same Church were secure enough to squabble over who should be primate of England. Today—at least for the duration of a public spectacle—leaders of different churches forget their differences and stand together in trepidation at the disregard of the vast majority of the population for the worth of their message.

On 24 January the Right Honorable and Most Reverend Dr Frederick Donald Coggan, Primate of England, was confirmed, amidst ludicrous panoply that would provide endless material for some latter-day Gilbert and Sullivan, as ditto, ditto, ditto, Primate of All England, when he took his seat—sorry, was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury. Dr Coggan was admitted to the cathedral by those who had elected him, the Dean and Canons. They chose Dr Coggan because they had been instructed by the Queen, on pain of prosecution, to do so. She herself was not there to consummate her part in the proceedings, but three lesser royals were present to make good the deficiency. There too was Harold Wilson, Prime Minister and the man who had actually made the choice. True to the best topsy-turvy pantomime tradition, the man he chose to be Archbishop now shoots ahead leaving him, the Chief Executive, far behind, to become, in order of precedence, second only to the princes of the blood. Doubtless, but for liberal pressure during the 1960s some role would have been found this time for the Chief Executioner.

The quibbling of some Roman Catholics as to the legitimacy of Dr Coggan's lineage is thoroughly tasteless for an occasion where Church and state joined in an orgy of ecumenical religiosity. For there to greet Dr Coggan were representatives of the Scottish, Roman, Greek and Free churches. Admittedly, Pastor Jack Glass—Ian Paisley's Scottish side-kick—was there to remind the Church of England that it is a Protestant Church and should not consort at the Romish fleshpots with the Whore of Babylon. But, of course, he and his brethren across the water in Ulster are only fanatical cranks—and we all know that religion has nothing to do with the situation in Ulster. Tactless, too, were those who pointed out that the

A Sign of Weakness

Some sociologists have come to support the views of freethinkers that indeed this is the origin of the whole ecumenical movement. Commenting on the views of Bryan Wilson, author of *Religion in Secular Society*, Robin Gill states:

For Wilson, ecumenism, far from being a sign of strength and religious "progress", is an indication that religious practice, institutions and thinking are becoming increasingly epiphenomenal. Ecumenism is one sign amongst others that religion is no longer at the centre of the life of Western society. (*Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 7, 1974.)

The thesis is that organisations have no need to compromise their commitment when they are strong; they are only prepared to do so when they are weak. Gill was discussing this in the context of the proposed union of Anglicans and Methodists in the late 1960s. These are undoubtedly the two churches which have declined most in the last hundred years. Gill goes on to suggest, however, that as the union failed to get the necessary level of consent, this indicates that separate theological commitments of the churches continue to be a significant factor. Clearly this is true up to a point, but it has to be borne in mind that the Methodists accepted the union, and it was only by a small margin that the Church of England failed to meet the stringent requirements it had set itself. When this scheme failed, the Church of England frantically turned to join with the Roman Catholics to survey exactly what might stand in the way of union with the Church of Rome. Already an international commission has arrived at agreed statements on the nature of the ministry and the nature of holy orders. (Needless to say these were the

occasion for another "historical ecumenical event" recently when the Roman Catholic joint chairman was actually allowed to address a meeting of the Anglican Synod.)

Now it has been admitted by a leading Anglican theologian, Dr Moorman, Anglican Bishop of Ripon, that these agreed statements do not get very far towards the possibility of intercommunion or acceptance of Anglican orders, which in 1896 were infallibly stated by the Pope to be "absolutely null and utterly void". And it is no good thinking that the problem will be solved because modern research has showed the theological assumptions of the Bull of 1896 to be unsound, as the *Humanae Vitae* fiasco shows. This might be thought to indicate that the force of the churches' separate commitments overrides the pragmatic necessity of ecumenism. However, the difficulties being encountered by the ecumenical movement in this case are largely the result of the way in which the Roman Catholic Church has tied its hands over the question of authority within the church. The Roman Catholic Church has everything to lose if it allows any crack in its monolithic nature, in the same way that the Protestant Churches have very nearly lost everything, now they hesitate to admit they have an infallible source of authority in scripture. Nevertheless, the impetus to union is such that the same Dr Moorman whose cautious assessment was quoted above went on to say that "the coming together of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church has made the vision of one church something which can now be taken seriously".

Disestablishment

One topic that is bound to be considered in the context of church unions is that of Establishment. In November the Church of England got legislation through Parliament giving itself the right to order its own liturgy, and when Dr Coggan was being appointed there were demands that it should have the same powers over the appointment of senior staff. When this legislation was going through there were some in Parliament who asked how far this process of what might be called one-sided disestablishment could go. What privileges was the Church prepared to give up in return for the removal of the obligations of Establishment? The answer is, of course, none. But the Church is in the lucky position of being able to get almost anything it asks for. Religion is now such a marginal issue that governments are just not prepared to spend time thinking about it. The only situation in which they would be forced to take a definite line would be any proposal affecting the Queen's status (as opposed to her powers). For although an ecumenised Church owing allegiance to Rome could quite easily be an Established Church as it is in various other European countries, it is difficult to see how the Queen could be

the Supreme Governor of such a Church in this country. On the other hand if it is possible to have an ecumenical enthronement of an Archbishop of Canterbury it would be clearly possible (however fatuous in the eyes of freethinkers) to have an ecumenical coronation. In the past, the greatest demand for disestablishment has come from the non-conformist churches. Probably for the reasons already given (ecumenism being a product of weakness) this is no longer the case. A Free Church correspondent in the *Church Times* recently stated that disestablishment would have very little support from the Free Churches today, and he went so far as to hope that "the Free Churches may be able, in some way, to share in it", even if it did mean "a bit of processing and dressing up". It is clear that the Free Churches now realise that far from being a restraint on their activities it might be a means to greater privileges and what one might call spin-off from state occasions.

Staff Problems

The extent to which church attendances have declined is well known to readers of *The Free-thinker*, having been dealt with on the occasion of the recent BBC poll which showed that now no more than twelve per cent of the population attend church regularly. A matter of concern to all churches over the past few years has been the signal drop in the numbers coming forward (as the quaint phrase is) for the ministry. However, when his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury was announced, Dr Coggan was pleased to report that there had been 23 per cent increase in the numbers offering themselves for ordination. Now this figure is quite spectacular, until it is borne in mind that the figure is a percentage increase from the bottom of an abysmal slump. Even more spectacular figures can be quoted, for example, for the recent recovery of share prices on the Stock Exchange. The situation is slightly better, but still not very good. Moreover, the rapidly increasing decline in the number of clergy as a predominantly ageing work force dies off, is softening the embarrassment the Church is experiencing in not having the money adequately to pay its staff. The banks may be able to afford to have multiple branches in every High Street and every suburb, but Christianity cannot. The answer is obvious: the churches must rationalise their position by ecumenical mergers, and more importantly match its commitments with its purse.

When Dr Ramsey retired as Archbishop of Canterbury he remarked that the Church was considerably less secure than it was when he took office in 1963. This is particularly evident in financial terms. Freethinkers must be ever vigilant that in such a situation the churches do not surreptitiously maintain the inflated, anachronistic position in society to an ever increasing degree at public expense.

Speaking for Themselves: The Catholic Hierarchy and Euthanasia

CHARLES WILSHAW

The Roman Catholic hierarchy of England and Wales launched recently yet another attack on voluntary euthanasia in the form of a statement which was read in all their churches. In a message to their followers, the archbishops and bishops declared: "The time is opportune for speaking once again about the care and consolation which are due to those nearing death. We must see to it that in the final hours of life we ensure dignity and comfort to one who is being called to God.

"We are not required to go to extraordinary lengths to prolong a life which is obviously drawing near to its end. It is permissible to apply medical treatment to alleviate pain and relieve distress, even though such treatment may bring forward, to some degree, the inevitable process of dying.

"However, this positive and kindly support of those nearing death is quite distinct from the deliberate and direct ending of one's own or another's life. This form of killing (sometimes referred to as euthanasia or mercy killing) is murder and is forbidden by the law of God and the law of the land. The disposal of innocent life is in the hands of God by whom life itself is given. If we ignore the author of life, our respect for life in general will be lowered. Furthermore, too easily might the practice of euthanasia be extended to eliminate elderly or handicapped persons who might, by some arbitrary rule, be considered a burden to the community.

"We urge everyone to resist the evil of euthanasia. Let us bear witness to our respect for life by generous and compassionate caring for the sick and dying. By our love and support we must give to the dying the spiritual consolations and dignity which are their right."

If this is what Catholics choose to believe, and the way they want matters left for themselves, so be it; no one should ask for it to be otherwise for them. There is, however, the 71 per cent of the adult community who do not believe in a personal God and are equally entitled to decide how they would wish matters to be arranged in their own case. (Incidentally, many professed Christians have expressed their support for voluntary euthanasia.)

It is decidedly impertinent of any section of a community, religious or otherwise, not wanting a personal facility for its members, to deny that benefit to others, who might want it. Religious and civil tolerance should be practised mutually. Teetotallers are not permitted to deny others the right to alcohol, and the same rule should apply to euthanasia—each individual making his own choice.

This should also be applicable to doctors and nurses; no one would be asked to take part in voluntary euthanasia against his or her will.

Religious opponents of voluntary euthanasia will insist on calling it "murder"—or, at best, "mercy killing". But euthanasia is not murder. Murder is committed against the wish of the victim and is never intended for his benefit. "Mercy killing", too, is an inexact definition of euthanasia; it is the disease or body disorder that is the killer, euthanasia being only the merciful release from useless, prolonged suffering.

It is nature that is the killer. Since life began on this planet, nature has decreed that every individual life shall end. It is a biological necessity, upon which an adequate food supply and the evolution of species has depended. For mankind, nature has various means to this end. Sometimes it plants a cancer in the tissues, or supplies the infection that kills; or, if not, death may be caused by heart failure, or by the cessation of cell replacement of degenerating tissue or organs. Obviously, man does what he can to mitigate these ills of nature, and he does not ask God's permission to employ vaccines, antiseptics, or antibiotics, nor to intervene surgically to relieve troublesome conditions. Man has no compunction in interfering in such ways with the natural order, or disorder, when the occasion demands. Similarly, when voluntary euthanasia becomes legal practice in clearly defined and specified circumstances, the doctor administering euthanasia will simply be making the end of life more peaceful and less undignified for those patients that nature is already killing in a clumsy fashion.

It should be noted that opponents to voluntary euthanasia generally avoid reference to any disabilities in the dying other than that of pain. Pain is the symptom most easily controlled; nevertheless, Professor John Hinton in his extensive study and Dr Dewi Rees in his special investigation both found that pain was not suppressed in 18 per cent of terminal cases. Among other factors which cause distress in the dying are incontinence, shortage of breath, difficulty in swallowing, and the inability to communicate.

Life Before Death, a report by the Institute for Social Care, based on a sample of 785 people who died, gives these figures for those who had symptoms for a year or more: pain, 37 per cent; sleeplessness, 27 per cent; double incontinence, 7 per cent; constipation, 14 per cent; mental confusion, 10 per cent; breathing trouble, 24 per cent; and depression, 17 per cent. No reasonable person

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Another Turn of the Screw

MICHAEL LLOYD-JONES

In obedience to an order from their bishops the Catholic Teachers Federation has just called for a ban on the employment of non-Catholic teachers in state-aided schools. The salaries of teachers in these schools are paid entirely by the state, and the public have no say in whether they wish a large proportion of their rates and taxes to be reserved entirely for the benefit of Catholic teachers.

The effect of this ruling on teachers who are already limited in their choice of job by the cut-backs in educational spending and by the increasingly high cost of travel to and from work, will be that non-Catholic teachers will find that their opportunities of employment are even further restricted. How much unemployment amongst non-Catholic teachers will be directly caused by this intensification of religious discrimination, and what the additional cost of this unemployment may be to the taxpayer, it is impossible to guess. What is certain is that in an economic situation in which teacher unemployment will grow as local education authorities make drastic cuts in their schools budgets, the action of the Catholic Teachers Federation will ensure that the brunt of any hardship will be borne by non-Catholic teachers.

It is against this background that the church Colleges of Education (the Catholic and Anglican teacher training colleges) are being given a new lease of life by a change in government education policy. As long as there existed the anomaly of church schools in a state system, a faintly plausible case for church teacher training colleges could be made out. Now some of these colleges are to be allowed to expand their activities to include the provision of ordinary degree courses. Students at these colleges will be able to read for a BA or a BSc alongside other students preparing for a teacher's certificate or an education degree. The price the churches have to pay in return for a place in the field of general higher education is the closure of some of their smaller colleges and mergers between some of the others. By law these church colleges may not reserve more than 50 per cent of their places for students of a particular denomination. In practice this safeguard does not exist. Prospective students are not given any reasons for their rejection and so the colleges are able to practise widespread religious discrimination with impunity.

Church colleges of education often compel their students to attend divinity classes (such compulsion is illegal, but again the colleges have little difficulty

in getting away with it), and any student who attempts to opt out of these arrangements often finds himself in opposition to not only the college authorities but also many of his pious fellow students. When in 1969 a National Union of Students Conference passed a resolution calling for divinity classes in colleges of education to be optional (which is no more or less than the law requires) the opposition to the motion came entirely from students from the church colleges. Whether or not students reading for, say, a history degree at the re-vamped church colleges will find themselves compelled to attend bible lessons or benediction has yet to be seen.

Pressure to Conform

Some Catholic student teachers have complained that pressure was put upon them at their Catholic secondary schools in an attempt to persuade them to apply only to Catholic colleges. In extreme cases it seems that the heads of Catholic schools may refuse to give an educational reference to pupils who insist on applying to secular colleges. Until now this pressure has been confined to pupils who intended to become teachers. Once some of the church colleges are able to offer ordinary degree courses, one wonders what attempts the Catholic Church will make to prevent young Catholics from breathing the secular air of universities and polytechnics.

The National Secular Society foresaw these dangers some years ago and recommended to the recent government enquiry into teacher training that church colleges should be abolished or at least should no longer be funded from public rates and taxes. These recent developments in church schools and colleges show that sectarian divisions in education are going to be intensified and extended in the coming years. Secularists should respond by stepping up their campaign against the interference of the churches in state education.

Barbara Smoker

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Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality

JOHN LAURITSEN

This article is based on a lecture first given to the Scholarship Committee of the Gay Academic Union, New York, in February 1974.

Homosexuality flourished throughout the ancient world: among the Scandinavians, Greeks, Celts and Summerians and throughout the "cradle of civilisation", the Tigris-Euphrates valley, the Nile valley and the Mediterranean Basin. The art and literature of these people offer testimony to an unhindered acceptance and often exaltation of homosexual love. At this time there were not "homosexuals" (as a noun), only homosexual acts. Nowhere is there evidence that anyone was set apart as different from his fellow men, even semantically, because of engaging in homosexual acts.

The anti-homosexuality taboo originated among the ancient Hebrews. It first appears in the sayings of reformers in Hellenistic Judaism as they attacked the sexual practices of neighbouring fertility cults. The ancient Hebrews developed sexual attitudes drastically different from the rest of the world. According to some authorities, the sex-negative orientation developed about 700 BC, following the Babylonian Exile. Prior to this, the Hebrews, like other Asiatic peoples, had also allowed homosexuality, including male prostitution, as a part of temple worship.

As human societies evolved, religions came into being and died away. Religions changed; very broadly speaking, there were trends away from religions in which female deities were more prominent, typically involving worship of a Great Mother or Moon Goddess and her male consorts, to religions in which male deities predominated. There was also a tendency from many to fewer deities, from polytheism to monotheism. Judaism represented absolute monotheism and male supremacy; one true God, no goddesses.

Fear and hostility characterise the Hebrew attitude towards all sexuality. Consider the cursing of Eve: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis, 3-16). Here the male supremacist deity is laying down the law for women. Their feminine role is to be one of degradation, repentance for sins, grovelling submission to male authority.

What exactly were the sins of our Mother Eve? Sexual pleasure and the pursuit of knowledge. And

if one were to defend our woman ancestor, one would have to maintain that the human body and reason were good, in opposition to the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. But if the Jews pioneered in branding the body as shameful, we have to give first prize to the Christians for their hatred of the human intellect.

The keynote of Hebrew sexuality was prudishness. The beautiful sculpture of the Greeks and other "heathen" peoples was anathematised as "uncovering of nakedness". Dozens of Old Testament passages apply exclusively to prohibitions against viewing the unclothed body (e.g. Leviticus, 18: 6-19). Anxiety on this score became an obsession of pathological degree. The Jews considered themselves the "chosen people" of a vindictive god, morally superior to their neighbours. They developed a sexual code unlike anything in the ancient world. Mosaic law made 36 crimes punishable by death, 18 of which involved sexual relationships of one kind or another. For two men who made love to each other the law stated: "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus, 20: 13). The penalty for males who were guilty of homosexual acts was death by stoning, the most severe penalty. Adulterers, by contrast, were put to death by the more humane method of strangulation.

The Influence of Paul

Let theologians quibble over exactly what elements went into that *mélange* that became Christianity. But for our purposes we can say that the Christians carried forward the Jewish sexual code. To this were added elements of aesthetic neo-Platonic philosophy with bits and pieces of the mystery cults that were flourishing in the decay of the Roman Empire. A strident note of erotophobia was added by Saul of Tarsus, generally known as St Paul. His neurotic formulations left a great impress and did much to influence Christian practice towards homosexuals. Paul's hysterical railings against sexual pleasure account for dozens of New Testament passages. He writes: "God gave them up to vile affections; for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature. And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of the error which was meet" (Romans, 1: 26-27). We note the phrase "that

which is against nature", a formulation to enter the criminal codes of Christendom.

Paul chose to be celibate and regretted that everyone could not follow his example: "For I would that all men were even as I myself (1 Corinthians. 7: 7). However, for those weaklings unable to forego sex completely Paul offered the sole alternative of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage: "For if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Corinthians, 7-9).

Early in the fourth century AD, Christianity became the State religion of the Roman Empire. From this point begin the sufferings of homosexuals on a world scale. A decree of the Emperor Constantius (AD 342) imposed the death penalty for sodomy; in 390 AD Valentinian instituted death by burning. An edict of Theodosius (395 AD) banned all religions other than Christianity; loyalty to the State demanded loyalty to the tenets of the Christian religion, including its code of sexual morality. Justinian codified the Roman law in 529 AD, prescribing torture, mutilation and castration for homosexuals. His edict, *Novella 77*, condemned sodomites to death "lest, as the result of these impious acts, whole cities should perish together with their inhabitants", a reference to the Sodom and Gomorrah myth.

A Danger to the State

Justinian's edict portrays homosexual acts as a clear and present danger to the State, thus articulating the equation of homosexuality with treason. It calls upon "the most illustrious prefect of the Capital . . . to inflict on them the most extreme punishments, so that the city and the State may not come to harm because of such wicked deeds". And the edict goes so far as to threaten "the most illustrious prefect" himself with punishment should he be lax in finding and punishing all those guilty of homosexual offences. From this time onwards, laws in all Judeo-Christian states were stamped in the mould set by Justinian. During the Dark Ages homosexual offenders were punished by excommunication, denial of last rites, castration, torture, mutilation, death by burning, and burial in un-sanctified ground. Some Christian priests even felt it necessary to perform mutilation upon the corpses of offenders. The persecution of homosexuals was part and parcel of the intolerance of the Middle Ages. Jews, Muslims, pagans, scientists and "heretics" were all treated with the utmost viciousness.

By the Middle Ages sodomy had become *peccatum illud horribile inter Christianos non nominandum* (the sin so horrible that it must not be mentioned in the presence of Christians). Death by burning became the punishment of choice

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throughout Europe. Persons were burned alive for sodomy in France as late as the latter part of the eighteenth century. Sodomy cases—like cases of heresy and witchcraft with which sodomy was often equated—were tried usually in ecclesiastical courts. The offenders were then turned over to the secular authorities for punishment. The impression given by Christian commentators that the Church acted as an agent of clemency against harsh secular governments is the opposite of the truth.

At this point of human development all forms of religion, whether Roman, Protestant or Fundamentalist Christianity, or Judaism, have become united at the common altar of Reaction. As Freud rightly argues: "Our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere" (*Future of an Illusion*).

⑤ "Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality" is obtainable from G. W. Foote & Company, 20p plus 5p post.

MORE CHURCH PLUNDER

The Government's decision in principle to contribute at least one million pounds every year for the upkeep of historic churches still being used for religious purposes is the culmination of negotiations that have been going on for over three years. But at the time of announcing this latest handout no return concessions on the part of the churches had been arranged. It is clear that the Church of England will insist on retaining its freedom.

Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, declared in a press statement that as long as church buildings remain at the disposal of a minority cult, there is no reason why ecclesiastics should get the rest of us to pay their repair bills. She added: "When the Government hands out seven-figure grants to other bankrupt corporations some degree of public control is rightly demanded in return. But the churches always seem to have their cake and eat it, with icing on top paid for out of the public purse."

Especially in the Church of England congregations have been cushioned from facing this reality by what they imagined to be the bottomless coffers of the Church Commissioners. But the situation has arisen that the income from their ill-gotten gains, plus the substantial subsidies received from the public purse (rate relief, charity status, etc.), are proving inadequate to maintain their work force, and clergy standards of living are declining rapidly. The Church Commissioners estimate that the average churchgoer contributes only 20 pence per week towards providing whatever it is he gets from church membership. It is then surprising that so many clergy seek more lucrative posts in hospitals, prisons, broadcasting and the armed forces, where they are paid salaries in line with the staff in the institutions rather than the meagre stipends enjoyed by their clerical colleagues?

Further areas where the Churches are feeling the financial pinch are, of course, education and the cost of maintaining their churches. Education is a topic in itself, and will not be dealt with here. The case of the maintenance of buildings is instanced by Dr Coggan's cathedral at Canterbury, which has launched an appeal for three-and-a-half million pounds. The Church of England has traditionally stood aloof from receiving direct state aid for its buildings, but almost overnight the situation has dramatically changed. In the case of Canterbury a direct appeal for help has been made to the government. (This has been turned down.)

Again, the question arises, whether the Church will be required to give up a privilege in return for increased benefits from the state. In this case, the privilege in question is the ecclesiastical exemption from most of the planning laws. If past experience is anything to go by, they will not be asked to give up this exemption. Yet it is clear that it should. In

NEWS

my own area of West London a nearby Anglican Church has recently been demolished. Yet even in its present parlous position the Church refuses to cut its coat to fit its cloth, for that church is to be rebuilt, despite the fact that there is another Anglican church no more than half a mile away, and neither church ever had a noticeably overflowing congregation. This is a good example where the local planning authority should have the right of investigating whether the rebuilding of the church was either a necessary or desirable development, especially as the community will be subsidising the new church with continued rate exemption. Similarly, if the Church authorities had decided to sell the site for development, the local authority should be entitled to a percentage of the proceeds in recognition of the extent to which the community subsidised the site over the years.

Doubtless the other Churches will expect a share of any money the Government makes available for church buildings. Although their buildings are generally less ancient and of less historical interest than those of the Church of England, increasingly their drab Victorian edifices are being considered worthy of preservation. In another area of West London the local authority recently put forward a scheme to preserve the spire only of a redundant Methodist church typical of hundreds still in use all over the country, as part of a shopping area development. To do this a large sum of money would have to be spent to prevent the unsupported spire collapsing. Now the Greater London Council have ruled that the whole church must be preserved. Surely there is no intention of preserving every religious building more than a century old. In the Church of England alone churches are becoming redundant at the rate of over 100 a year. Many redundant churches already receive state aid through the Redundant Churches Fund. Is this fund intended to be expanded extravagantly, and an added commitment to support churches still in use added?

Between the years 1931 and 1968, a period of marked increase in the population, the numbers on the Church of England electoral roll fell by one million.

AND NOTES

The Greater London Council's decision, by a narrow majority of six votes, to reject the recommendations of its Film Viewing Committee that it should discontinue the practice of censoring films shown to adult audiences, was disappointing. Enid Wistrich, the FVC chairman, made a brave stand for principles, and her resignation from the post following the vote was regretted by most members, including some who had voted against the proposed reform. Mrs Wistrich's lucid and intelligent arguments in media discussions were in marked contrast to the hysterical, ignorant claptrap of her opponents.

The debate took place after a period of frantic propagandising by religio-political groups such as the Nationwide Festival of Light, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, the Salvation Army and most of the Christian churches. The religious press lent a hand by working up an orgy of letter writing (or, more accurately, letter copying) to GLC members. The campaign to dictate to Londoners what they shall see on their cinema screens was led by Mary Whitehouse, general secretary of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, who resides near the outer London suburb of Bewdley, Worcestershire. *The Sunday Times* obligingly published an article by Mrs Whitehouse, which appeared, rather conveniently, three days before the County Hall debate, thus preventing replies appearing in that paper before the vote was taken. Next day *The Times* added its support to Mrs Whitehouse's cohorts in a first leader entitled "The Need for Censorship".

The debate itself—broadcast direct from the debating chamber by London Broadcasting Company—was poor stuff. The Conservatives mouthed the usual platitudes and lamentations about the decline in moral standards; one Labour member ruined his otherwise impressive anti-censorship speech by introducing doctrinaire statements which were promptly, and correctly, described by a Conservative as cant and rubbish.

All the main Christian churches were opposed to the abolition of censorship, and the evangelical Jesusites were, as usual, the most vociferous in the campaign for its continuance. On the day of the debate a crowd of them assembled to pray outside

County Hall. No doubt they are now rejoicing and claiming that their prayers have been answered by the Great Censor in the sky.

Although the outcome of the debate disappointed those who value personal freedom, there is no cause for gloom. All reforms have to be worked for and campaigned for, usually over a period of many years. (It was in 1831 that a group of dramatists protested against the censoring of plays; stage censorship did not end until 1968.) Despite the setback on 28 January, the fight will go on against those arrogant and narrow-minded elements who seek to impose their diehard Christian morality on everyone.

TEACHERS SPEAK OUT

Delegates to the forthcoming annual conference of the National Union of Teachers may have an opportunity to vote on motions calling for the abolition of church schools and for an end to compulsory RE. One motion, sponsored by Nottingham City branch of the NUT, states that "the time has now come when public money should no longer be used to build, staff and maintain Church schools". It wants the NUT annual conference "to instruct the Executive to ensure that from September, 1976, all schools staffed and maintained by the local authority should be local authority schools".

Commenting on this demand, the Bishop of Southwell claimed that there were "warm relations" between the Church and the education authorities in Nottinghamshire. But he admitted: "There are certainly voices in the education authority which would gladly see the Church out of the education field, mainly on the grounds that Church schools are elitist." The bishop claimed that church schools do not aim to disseminate dogma, and added: "Our aim is to encourage faith, not to indoctrinate."

Sheffield branch calls on the NUT Executive "to make the necessary approaches to the Department of Education and Science so as to achieve those amendments to the 1944 Education Act which are necessary to remove the compulsory element from Religious Education in schools". Already the religious war-drums are beating and every stragem will be used to defeat these motions if they appear on the final agenda. It is equally certain, however, that teachers are becoming increasingly resentful of the way in which they have to participate in the farce of religious assembly. And the growing realisation that religion is divisive and socially harmful will increase demands that the Bishop of Southwell, and those who share his views, should "encourage faith" in their own churches and institutions, rather than in schools which are paid for by the whole community.

(Continued from January issue)

Theologians have been glad to free the fourth gospel from dependence on the other three for a further reason. If the author depended not on them, but on source material in part identical with theirs, then his sources may have been just as reliable as theirs, and we are not entitled always to prefer their version to his. Nevertheless, what he makes of this source material is so obviously dominated by his theological purposes that his gospel can hardly be regarded as throwing much light on the Jesus of history (if there was such a person). Some examples of his reworking of traditions will illuminate his methods and his unreliability as a historian. He tells (John 5: 1-9) how Jesus healed a cripple at a sheep-pool called Bethesda at Jerusalem—a story unknown to the other gospels—but fuses it with the story (represented in Mark 2: 1-12) of the man let down through the roof of the house at Capernaum in Galilee. The fusion is betrayed by the fact that Jesus' final instructions "take up your bed and walk" are verbally identical in the two gospels. Again, John 8: 12—"he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life"—is a saying, absent from other gospels, but formed by adapting a well-known Old Testament quotation about people who "walked in darkness" but have seen a "light" (Isaiah 9: 2) and combining it with traditional sayings on discipleship, typified in Peter's statement (Mark 10: 28-38) that he and others have left everything and "followed" Jesus. Such examples show the fourth evangelist using only fragments of his source material—a phrase or even a mere word—and working them up into narratives and discourses which are his own compositions. Starting with a small kernel from a source, he surrounds it with a whole chapter of his own reflective or homiletic theology. In fact the view is gaining acceptance that his gospel is an adaptation of homilies or sermons, given originally to the Christian assembly, possibly at the eucharist (chapter 6 obviously suits this setting). The evidence for this homiletic origin is that the evangelist's methods are not merely the habits of a writer, but discernibly those of a preacher. For instance, one of what Lindars calls his "favourite tricks" is to tell a dramatic story of dispute or dialogue between Jesus and others in such a way that Jesus' hearers are made to misunderstand his meaning, so that a finer distinction may be drawn and the subject taken deeper. "This", says Lindars, "is good theatre, but improbable in real life". It is not documented in the other gospels, and is but one of the factors which reveal that, for the fourth evangelist, emotional impact on an audience is as

important to the way he tells a story as the logic of the argument.

In composing speeches or discourses and putting them into the mouth of Jesus the evangelist is, says Lindars, "using the gripping device of the dramatic monologue". To us this seems dishonest, but the evangelist no doubt felt that the spirit of Christ was upon him, and that he could therefore speak with the mind of Christ, as we know from I Corinthians 2: 16 that early Christian preachers did. And his audiences probably regarded him as someone whose function was, in addressing the assembly, to provide it with revelation, knowledge, prophesying or teaching—an important function according to I Corinthians 14: 6.

Much of the teaching which the fourth evangelist puts into Jesus' mouth is concerned with points of dispute between Christians and Jews—whether, for instance, Jesus has the qualifications of the Messiah. The disputes in the gospel between Jesus and Pharisees are not really part of the biography of a historical Jesus, but scenes imagined on the basis of disputes in progress between Christians and Jews when the evangelist wrote (we saw that his chapter nine shows evidence of tension between Church and Synagogue). Thus much in the gospel is "a sermon addressed to Christians in order to deepen and strengthen their faith in a situation where Jewish objections to Christianity are a matter of vital concern".

It is today increasingly recognised that a number of important sections of early Christian writings—epistles and gospels—originated as sermons or liturgies for cultic acts such as baptism or eucharist. Professor Morton Smith, in a book which I reviewed in *The Freethinker*, September 1974, has given good reasons for believing that Mark 10: 13-45 was put together to accompany or explain an early Christian baptismal service. The Christian Passion narrative is, as Lindars says, in a sense the Christian Passover liturgy. The early Christians did not drop the Jewish Passover feast, any more than they dropped the Old Testament and much else in the Judaism from which Christianity emerged. These things were not abandoned but reinterpreted. With the Jews, the Passover was not, strictly speaking, an atonement sacrifice, but the Exodus from Egypt which it celebrated was interpreted by early Christians as deliverance from the power of sin, and on this basis Christ was equated with the Passover lamb as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world".

One thing which this recent theological work has established is how much in early Christianity

(Continued on page 30)

DINNER GUEST

Dora Russell, veteran campaigner for social reform and progress, will be Guest of Honour at the National Secular Society's annual dinner in London on 22 March. The second wife of Bertrand Russell, Dora Russell worked tirelessly to promote public acceptance of birth control, women's rights and new ideas concerning education. Together, she and Bertrand Russell established a small progressive school where children were encouraged to express their ideas and develop their personalities. Dora Russell is an eloquent speaker and her autobiography will be published later this year. She lives in Cornwall and her public appearances in London are now rare. Michael Duane, the controversial educationist and author, will propose the toast to Dora Russell. Mr Duane now lectures at a college in London but he is best remembered as headmaster of Risinghill School.

Phyllis Graham, who will propose a toast to the NSS, was a Carmelite nun for 20 years and recently published a provocative book entitled *The Jesus Hoax*. After she left the Carmelite Order, Miss Graham spent several years teaching. She eventually left the Roman Catholic Church and has been a member of the NSS and her local humanist group for the last twelve years. G. N. Deodhekar, honorary treasurer of the NSS, will respond on behalf of the Society, and Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS, will be in the Chair.

● See display advertisement on page 32.

Religious Broadcasting

An examination of the history of broadcasting in Britain clearly shows how the seed of religious broadcasting, once planted, continued to develop despite changes in society at large that made this development even more inappropriate than it always had been. The initiator of this policy was J. C. W. (later Lord) Reith, the progenitor of British broadcasting, who advanced the cause of Christianity in a way comparable to Knox or Calvin. When the Crawford Committee was enquiring into broadcasting in 1925 he told it "there should be a definite association with religion in general and the Christian religion in particular". His regime embodied all that was best and all that was worst in Scottish Presbyterianism, features that have, in greater or lesser degree lingered till today.

Although the Pilkington Report (1962) said it was important "that the non-religious bodies are allowed their fair share of time in controversial broadcasting outside periods set aside for religious broadcasting", there has been no significant change in policy since that time. And as each survey shows declining adherence to organised religion, the positions of pre-eminent privilege enjoyed by the religious broadcasting departments become more and more intolerable.

Speaking for Themselves

will deny the value of loving care for the dying; but love and compassion cannot cure an incurable disorder, and there is often a stage beyond which only death is a benefit.

People who have witnessed geriatric cases degenerating into mere caricatures of their former selves, their personalities disintegrating, will know how unrealistic the Catholic bishops are to exhort "By our love and support we must give to the dying the spiritual consolations and dignity which is their right", whilst aiming to deny every citizen the right to the solace of euthanasia—an induced, peaceful and more truly dignified death. As part of the concerted action by Catholics to oppose any impending move to have voluntary euthanasia approved in Parliament, Norman St John-Stevas, MP, contributed an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (3 December 1974) in which he offered to "endeavour to disentangle" the complex ethical and legal issues. Mr St John-Stevas then proceeded to describe the proposals, long since discarded, put forward in the first Voluntary Euthanasia Bill, introduced in the House of Lords in 1936. This suggests that he was not familiar with the contents of the Bill which he opposed in 1970 when Dr Hugh Gray sought leave to introduce it.

For the benefit of those truth-seeking Catholics who read *The Freethinker*, it should be emphasised that the current proposal is that those adults who wish to do so would sign a declaration setting out that, in the event of their suffering from an illness or affliction from which death was the only release, then the period of useless suffering and distress would be shortened by euthanasia. The intention is that people would make their declaration while in normal health, anticipating the possibility of a protracted terminal illness, so that there could be no question of the decision being made other than objectively. Declarants would thus be protected from the danger of the decision being subject to the prejudice of others, or even being taken by themselves at a time when their mental clarity was impaired. The declaration, which, like a will, could be revoked at any time, would be witnessed by two persons of approved standing, testifying that the declarant knew its meaning and was under no pressure to sign. A month is suggested as a period for second thoughts before euthanasia could be administered, and then only after a consultant, in addition to the doctor in charge of the patient, had certified that recovery was virtually impossible.

The Catholic bishops' statement, in common with all such attacks on voluntary euthanasia, suggests that once voluntary euthanasia is legalised it will be extended to become compulsory euthanasia. This is scaremongering nonsense, because the very Act of Parliament which grants certain rights also lays down firm restrictions.

THE REMAKING OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE by Maurice Wiles. SCM Press, £2.50.

Professor Wiles is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford. His style, as one would expect, is urbane and scholarly and full of incidental felicities. But on a first reading his book left me baffled. It seemed that it must surely be saying something important, but ah me, what! I felt that I was dealing with a mind so different from my own that communication was almost impossible.

Later, however, things became clearer, and I began at least to understand the reason for my feeling of lack of contact. For on a second reading an assumption came gradually to light from behind Professor Wiles's polished paragraphs—an assumption which seems to me baseless, but which underlies the whole of his thinking. Its nature can perhaps best be conveyed by a comparison.

The Chinese, as we know, are now disposed to reject Confucianism as too élitist and too individualistic for the China of today. To Professor Wiles it would be, not just unlikely, but impossible for anything of the sort to happen to Christianity. For he assumes that Christianity, unlike Confucianism, possesses some mysterious inner dynamic in virtue of which its doctrines evolve or develop in response to advancing knowledge or changing social conditions. This view does not derive, as one might suppose, from the belief that Christianity is based on a supernatural revelation, for Professor Wiles is inclined to reject this view, as will appear. None the less he assumes without question that Christian doctrine is continually subject to a process which might be described as the reverse of transsubstantiation: the attributes change—they are “re-thought”, “re-interpreted”, “seen from a new perspective” or “re-formulated in the language of today”—but the substance remains the same; though Professor Wiles admits that “the element of identity will be much more difficult to define” (p.7) for those who think as he does than it is for the more traditional type of believer.

In *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* the author examines, in effect, how far the remaking process can go without destroying the “element of identity” altogether. He makes no reference to such doctrines as heaven and hell, the virgin birth, the miracles and the second coming, so one assumes that in his view these have already been sufficiently remade. He addresses himself now to the more fundamental doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection, and he reaches the tentative conclusion that they too are dispensable; or, as he himself more cautiously puts it, “the resurrection of Christ is not a historical event on all-fours with the passion and the crucifixion” (p.74) and “the affirmations I have been making have, in very general

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terms, a non-incarnational pattern or character to them” (p.105).

Professor Wiles goes on to argue that disbelief in these doctrines (if so crude a word be permissible) is compatible with “a continuing sense of identity” in the substance of Christianity—which substance consists, in his view, of “belief in God on whom the world depends for its very existence, a God who cares about human suffering, who has a purpose for the world which men can come in part at least to know, and who elicits from men a mature response of faith and love in which sin can begin to be overcome and the goals of human life begin to be realised” (pp.117-8).

This declaration of faith raises two questions. First, is it really necessary for Professor Wiles to argue at length that the beliefs he specifies can be held independently of belief in the incarnation and the resurrection? They have been, and are, held by most Unitarians as well as by orthodox Jews. Second, and more important, on what evidence does he himself hold these beliefs—most of which are, to say the least, *prima facie* highly unpalatable—if not on the authority of a divine revelation which he appears to reject? His answer appears to be “on the witness of Christian experience”—but he never really faces up to this question or attempts to answer it systematically, and one has to try to piece together what he means from more or less incidental remarks that are scattered throughout the book.

Thus he says (p.108) that “God is not directly or irrefutably given”, so evidently he does not mean by “Christian experience” the sort of direct awareness of God that is claimed by the mystics. His main positive statements are “Part of the experience of God is experience of that which makes ultimate sense of things, not only in the sense of their being there at all but in terms of an overall and ultimate purposiveness in them . . . To dispense with the concept of God would be to leave a whole dimension of human experience even more opaque and inexplicable than it already is” (pp.34, 108). And he refers briefly to “the experience of divine guidance and divine providence” (p.37) and to “the experience of redeeming grace” (pp.54-5).

But this really will not do. What Professor Wiles calls “experiences” are in fact interpretations of, or inferences from, experience—and inferences that would be drawn only by one who was already a Christian, or at least a theist. The “experiences”, so-called, do not produce the beliefs—the beliefs produce the “experiences”; so to cite the “experiences” as supporting the beliefs is to come danger-

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ously near to arguing in a circle. Thus Professor Wiles believes in a divine cosmic purpose over and above the purposes of individual men and women, and he therefore tries to "make sense of" (i.e. interpret) his experiences in the light of this view. But a secular humanist who saw no reason to believe in cosmic purpose would feel no need for this type of interpretation. Again, events which Professor Wiles "experiences" as manifestations of divine providence would probably be called fortunate coincidences by a humanist: and what he "experiences" as divine guidance might well be described by a humanist, if he were psychologically minded, as letting the subconscious mind get to work on the problem. It is really no more convincing to cite "Christian experience" as a ground for accepting certain beliefs than it would be to cite "humanist experience" as a ground for rejecting them.

It is doubtless hard for a "rationalist" (a term he regards as opprobrious) to be fair to Professor Wiles, and I am conscious that the passages from his book that I have quoted do not show him at his best. So I will conclude on a more mellow note by quoting a passage that seems to me as admirable in style as in content. This judgment is perhaps influenced in some degree by the fact that, for once, I agree with the content! But anyhow, here is the passage.

"Death of God theology" has proved itself a notoriously elusive as well as a deservedly evanescent concept. If it was intended to declare either that there never had been or that there was not now any transcendent reality as a referent for the word "God", then it would have been better entitled "the death of God and of theology". If on the other hand it was intended to affirm either that some conceptions of God commonly held in the past had now to be abandoned or that there were particular difficulties in affirming the reality of God at the present time, it was saying something both true and important, but seeking a spurious kind of attention by saying it in a misleadingly sensational manner (p.21).

MARGARET KNIGHT

Phyllis Graham

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This book is a welcome addition to the "Pioneers of Science and Discovery" series, for few have a greater claim to recognition as a pioneer than Marie Stopes, and few pioneers in any field have done so much to increase human happiness. It is difficult for us today to comprehend the mental climate in which she commenced her work. Sexual activity was an unmentionable aspect of life, and no decent woman was expected to enjoy it. Yet in 1918, this young botanist, after the tragic experience of a first marriage annulled because her husband was unable to consummate it, published *Married Love*. This book actually spoke openly of sex as an important aspect of marriage, which each partner should enjoy and help the other to enjoy. This was revolution!

But Marie Stopes and her second husband and stalwart helper, Humphrey Verdon Roe, realised that a woman haunted by the fear of regular and debilitating pregnancies could not possibly have a happy sex life with her husband; and *Married Love* was immediately followed by *Wise Parenthood*, a book on birth control. In 1921, Marie and her husband, having become particularly conscious of the needs of working-class women, opened the Mothers' Clinic, the first birth-control clinic in Britain. (The house, 61 Marlborough Road, Islington, is still standing, just a few minutes' walk from the *Freethinker* office.)

In later publications, Marie told the tragic stories of some of her clients, with harrowing statistics showing that the greater the number of pregnancies a woman had had the smaller was the chance of her giving birth to a healthy child, until in the case of a thirteenth pregnancy there was a 40 per cent chance of the child either miscarrying or dying shortly after birth. (This figure does not of course indicate the state of health of the mother or of the child if it were actually to survive.)

Marie Stopes did her work despite a barrage of harassment hardly conceivable today. There were libels of all kinds, court cases, discrimination by advertisers, and even arson by Roman Catholic opponents. However, nothing daunted her; and in 1930 she was involved in setting up a co-ordinating body, the National Birth Control Council—now the Family Planning Association.

Unexpectedly, this purposeful botanist and organiser made poetry her main interest during the last years of her life. Yet perhaps we should not be surprised that the woman who had written so poetically about sex in *Married Love* should later write *Love Songs for Young Lovers*, emerging as an attractive and interesting, if not a major, poet.

The authorship of her son, known to freethinkers as a perceptive writer on educational affairs and as

chairman of the British Humanist Association, enables us to feel we are getting an authentic picture of this woman to whom we all owe so much. The book is profusely illustrated, and a valuable piece of social history. I would recommend it particularly to young readers, who may be shocked to realise what life was like in an age so close in years but so different in sentiment to their own times. I would also recommend it to those who maunder on about the "good old days".

MARGARET McILROY

TELEVISION

OPEN DOOR, BBC Television, 27 January 1974.

The South Place Ethical Society was the subject of the first of a new series of the BBC-2 programme, *Open Door*. This series consists of programmes on voluntary societies, made by those societies, the BBC providing a producer and technical equipment and staff. Each programme lasts 25 minutes. (Unfortunately, this programme has suffered from the recent economy cuts, having previously been 40 minutes.) The format chosen was a typical Sunday in the life of the Society, introduced and concluded by remarks by their General Secretary, Peter Cadogan. His introduction traced the Society's origins from the Unitarianism in the second half of the eighteenth century to its position today. As readers probably know, the climax of the story was when Moncure Conway announced to the committee that he could no longer pray. The sequence was well illustrated with still pictures, many being the paintings that hang around the Society's library. Mr Cadogan concluded his introductory remarks with a statement of the basis on which Conway Hall, their headquarters, is let for meetings, which has been the basis of some controversy lately.

The body of the programme, the typical Sunday, began with the musical introduction to a Sunday lecture, being the last vestige of the original "order of service" (ethical hymns having survived until as late as 1961). The lecture shown was a typical precision exercise by Professor Antony Flew on Sartre. Needless to say, it was frustrating when it was necessary to fade out and then in again for Professor Flew's concluding sentences.

At this point the strict sequence was interrupted to include examples of South Place's involvement in "rites of passage". A recent wedding was reconstructed for the programme, with Denis Campbell officiating. The funeral sequence was less satisfactory: it consisted of a reading from Bertrand Russell against a still of a rural idyll typical of undertakers' windows and some music, sickly in this context, reminiscent of some parody of a chapel of rest. (These apparently were selected by the producer.)

The typical Sunday was picked up again with a

Forum introduced by John Beloff speaking on parapsychology. During tea afterwards, two long-standing members of the Society, Percy Sowler and Rose Bush, were interviewed on their memories of the Society and the social composition of the membership in the 1920s, before the move from South Place to Bloomsbury. An unexpected bonus was that a visitor from the United States, when approached, turned out to be a fourth-generation member of the Ethical Culture Society.

The typical Sunday ended with sections of the exhibition of paintings, a Sunday concert and bridge playing. Apparently, the exhibition facilities are particularly valuable to young artists as an alternative to the established galleries. The chamber concerts have, of course, been an esteemed contribution to the musical life of London for nearly 90 years. The present hall is acoustically one of the best of its size in the country. As a result of the cost of lighting the hall for filming for so short a period, this sequence was represented by still photographs—the music, of course, was unimpaired.

The programme ended with some closing remarks by Mr Cadogan, with what is the now obligatory reference to religious humanism. To what extent this is a meaningful combination of words, or, indeed, represents the views of the membership of South Place is debatable. Mr Cadogan had taken at the beginning the theme of continuity and change in the Society. The introduction of this concept would seem to be a retrogressive change, and any notion of religious humanism seems to have been absent a few years ago when the hall became known as the Conway Hall Humanist Centre.

All in all, however, the programme showed a Society dedicated to intellectual enquiry, offering a wide range of attractive activities, but we must still wait, it seems, for the secular humanist viewpoint to be represented in this series.

CHRISTOPHER MOREY

Recent Work on the Fourth Gospel

is traceable to Jewish antecedents. Rationalist writers have tended to stress pagan parallels, many of which are remote or forced. But even the fundamental Christian thesis that a supernatural personage came to earth to enlighten men, but was rejected and returned to heaven, is an easy inference from well-known passages in pre-Christian Jewish Wisdom literature. And Lindars' work shows the fourth evangelist writing in an environment where Christian adaptations of Jewish ideas were being hotly debated with orthodox Judaism.

Jewels valued at £77,000 have been stolen from a statue in a church at Teror, Las Palmas, Canary Islands.

LETTERS

PAINE AND WILKES

It is a pity your reviewer of my biography of Wilkes attempts to reverse the verdict on my *Thomas Paine* which was highly praised in your journal by the Paine expert, R. W. Morrell, about a year ago. As the two men's careers overlapped, and Paine (as I am the first to discover), worked alongside Wilkes' lawyer in an election at New Shoreham, with similar results for their winning candidate to those experienced by Wilkes at Middlesex, I fail to see why Bradlaugh (a century later) is considered more pertinent to Wilkes.

But your reviewer not only fails to notice my original research on elections and the franchise, and my extensive use of academics' statistics on social backgrounds, the "mob" and the Gordon Riots, he also overlooks Wilkes' friendship with the French *philosophes*, particularly d'Holbach and Diderot, to whom freethinking owes so much.

The Freethinker, surely, should pay some tribute to Wilkes who, for all his faults, as a magistrate constantly pressed for freedom of conscience ("I would not persecute even the atheist") as well as reforms in capital punishment and other cruelties of the times.

Biography and history are about people, not only politicians. It is a decline in our historical standards that academics nowadays rarely recognise this, and if *The Freethinker* also forgets perhaps it will continue to shrink.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EUTHANASIA

Christopher Morey's review of *The Right to Die* (Reviews, December 1974) tellingly quotes several important points made by Charles Wilshaw, but there are matters on which the arguments could be made yet more strongly.

Mr Morey says the opponents of Voluntary Euthanasia "seem determined to do all they can to ensure that the climate of opinion never becomes such as to allow its legalisation". Rather, there is substantial evidence that public opinion has favoured it for some time. In 1969 a poll by Mass Observation showed 51 per cent of people in favour, and only 28 per cent against. On the programme, *Jim's World*, recently an audience of about 50 people, who had come with no idea of the subject to be discussed, voted about three to one in favour of euthanasia. Our opponents were so worried by this that they later accused us in the *Catholic Herald* of rigging the audience in advance. Letters to the papers and mass media have shown a big majority supporting the actions of Dr Mair in giving euthanasia. *Any Questions* had all four panellists in favour, but, surprisingly, *Any Answers* had a "Christian" majority against. This is not so surprising when one knows that the Human Rights Society asked its members to write to *Any Answers*. The real problem now is to convince MPs that they would not be risking their political careers in supporting euthanasia.

While 76.2 per cent of doctors polled agreed that some doctors do, if necessary, curtail life, this action is quite compatible with the principle of "double effect", supported by the Roman Catholic Church and the British Medical Association, that one may shorten life only if this is incidental to relieving pain. A more telling statistic is the 36 per cent of doctors polled who said they would be willing to administer euthanasia if it were legalised. Equally telling is the increasing number of doctors who will now admit to having given euthanasia, and the member of the General Medical Council, who said that "it is going on all the time".

But this merely makes the present situation, in one sense, worse. As our opponents point out, many old people are now worried about going into hospital, in case they get "bumped off". While we continue with the hypocrisy of admitting it occurs frequently, but keeping all cases of it secret, those fears are perfectly justified. The BMA now has two alternatives: (a) To clamp down on all admissions of euthanasia, have its supporters dismissed, and try to ensure that its practitioners are imprisoned if they are ever found out. (This seems to be what our opponents want.) (b) To admit that euthanasia is sometimes justified, and to agree to legislation to allow it under strict conditions.

Only if people know that they will *never* be given euthanasia unless they have signed an advance declaration, will they be able to feel completely safe. Without such legislation, the situation can only get worse.

NICHOLAS REED

"THE STUFF OF HISTORY"

I am rather surprised that Edward Royle should treat Audrey Williamson's recent biographical study of John Wilkes in such a cavalier fashion.

He considers that omission of a reference to Charles Bradlaugh, "even in passing", serious. As a historian I would have thought that Dr Royle would know that when it comes to advancing the claims of various individuals for mention in a biographical study of the character of Miss Williamson's, which touches deeply upon the issues of political and press freedom, a formidable list can be drawn up. In consequence any writer, unless he or she has unlimited space available, has to leave out many a person who they might have thought merited mention. In fact when it comes to the campaign against restrictions on publication Richard Carlile is a far more important figure than Charles Bradlaugh.

Far from being unimportant to the historian of eighteenth-century politics Miss Williamson's study of Wilkes contains important original research which can be taken up and developed. For example, we know little of the influences on Thomas Paine in his younger days, indeed we know precious little about Paine before he went to America and became involved in the struggle for independence. In her book Miss Williamson has established a link between Wilkes and Paine, and left us wondering whether or not Paine met Wilkes man to man. Thus Paine is seen to have been directly influenced by the clash of ideas that surrounded Wilkes, and we are given something which, if researched in greater depth, might well produce some interesting facts. This is the stuff of history, and the sort of thing one should expect from a serious historical work—it stimulates further research. If Edward Royle considers this unimportant one can only suggest that he has an odd idea as to what constitutes value in historical studies.

R. W. MORRELL

"PLAYING GOD"

Although suicide is no longer an indictable offence, apparently it is still considered by some people to be a sin, and therefore abetting Voluntary Euthanasia is murder. It is totally absurd to say that doctors have no right to "play God" when that is exactly the whole object of the exercise of medicine, that of redressing the balance of what God has done, or left undone. When a surgeon operates or when a doctor gives medicine to a sick patient, he is "playing God". And, in fact, he is doing his duty in "playing God" since he is, quite rightly, doing the job he was trained to do.

The following poignant words were written by

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Annual Dinner

DORA RUSSELL (Guest of Honour)
MICHAEL DUANE
PHYLLIS GRAHAM
G. N. DEODHEKAR
BARBARA SMOKER

The Pavours Arms, Westminster SW1
Saturday, 22 March
Reception 6 pm Dinner 6.30 pm

Tickets (which must be obtained from the NSS in advance and not later than Thursday, 20 March) £2.70 each

Vegetarians catered for; advance notice essential

Letters: "Playing God"

Joseph Last in his book *Eleanor—The Last Years Alone*: "There was no moment of serenity, there was only anger, helpless anger at the doctors and nurses who tried to keep her alive. . . . They can do with me what they want, not what I want, she said bitterly." To ask such a person who has spent her life in the service of humanity to end that life with every shred of that dignity which was so precious to her, stripped from her, must be the ultimate crime against the person.

No drug has yet been found to hold the pain of the mind, which to some people can be worse than any pain of the body.

IRIS HARVEY

TAKE YOUR PARTNERS

I am pleased if my review of *Last Tango in Paris* provided Geoffrey Webster with some amusement, albeit unintentionally (Letters, January).

The film did not strike me as light-hearted and I wrote accordingly. But I should be sorry if the impression was established that I have a solemn attitude towards sex as something sacred. On the contrary, my main criticism of sex education is that it draws back from allowing that sex can be good fun. I thoroughly enjoyed the phallic fun and frolics at Fuckingham Palace in a recent production of *The Truth Dentist*, by Heathcote Williams, at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs.

JIM HERRICK

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Brunswick House, 11 Brunswick Square, Hove, Sunday, 2 March, 5.30 p.m. James Hemming: "Our Incredible Brains".

Croydon Humanist Society. Public Library, Katharine Street, Croydon, Wednesday, 19 March, 8 p.m. W. Lewis: "The Independent Adoption Society".

Harrow Humanist Society and Ealing Humanist Society. The Library, Gayton Road, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Wednesday, 12 March, 8 p.m. John Taylor: "Can the Brain Bend Spoons?"

Leicester Secular Society, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Sunday meetings at 6.30 p.m. 16 February, Professor J. H. Fremlin: "The Evolution of God". 23 February, Dieter Peetz: "Private Gain and Public Duty". 2 March, Barbara Smoker: "Religious Education: the New Indoctrination". 9 March, Sam Kingdom: "Astrology and Materialism". 16 March: Film Show.

London Young Humanists. 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8, Sunday, 2 March, 7.30 p.m. James Young: "The Private Life of Queen Caroline of Brunswick".

Merseyside Humanist Group. Lecture Room, 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead, Wednesday, 19 February, 7.45 p.m. Annual General Meeting.

Southampton Humanist Society. Friends Meeting House, Ordnance Road, Southampton, Friday, 7 March, 8 p.m. Tony Reese: "The Child Poverty Action Group".

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1. Sunday morning meetings, 11 a.m. 16 February, Harold Blackham: "Authority in Our Society". 23 February, Professor G. A. Wells: "Strauss and After: The Development of New Testament Criticism". 2 March, Peter Cadogan: "Individuality, Status and Hierarchy". Tuesday evening meetings, 7 p.m. 18 February: "The Black Explosion in Schools". 25 February, Andrew Mann: "Parents as Teachers".

Welwyn Garden City Humanist Group. 12 Elmwood, Welwyn Garden City, Wednesday, 19 February, 8 p.m. Discussion on Capital Punishment.

Worthing Humanist Group. Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing, Sunday, 23 February, 5.30 p.m. Veronica Tippetts: "Hardy—the Reluctant Atheist".

The clock at St Peter's Church, South Bank, Middlesbrough, is to be reserved at the ratepayers' expense. Langbaugh District Council has agreed to the Roman Catholic priest's request for a maintenance grant.

THE FREETHINKER

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