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CHRISTIAN MORALITY DENOUNCED BY CAMPAIGNERS FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM

"Religious Opposition to Sexual Freedom" was the theme of a public meeting which took place in London last month under the auspices of the National Secular Society. Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS, was in the chair, and she told the audience that the meeting was part of the Society's continuing campaign in an area where the churches were concentrating their main rearguard action.

Miss Smoker stated that the freethought movement, particularly the NSS, has always been to the fore in liberation campaigns, and not least in matters of sexual freedom. She recalled that it was in 1876 that a very important event in the history of sexual freedom took place in this country, and had repercussions in other parts of the world. The prosecution a hundred years ago of Charles Bradlaugh, founder and first president of the NSS, and his colleague, Annie Besant, followed the publication of a booklet on contraception.

Miss Smoker said that from the press reports of the trial, "millions of people learned for the first time that it was possible to limit one's family without abstaining from sexual intercourse, and within five years there was a marked decline in the birth-rate.

"In those days, the main concern about over-population was not national or global over-population, which had been kept down by the high death-rate, but the effect on individual women of constant child-bearing, and the grinding poverty experienced by working-class families. It was in this context, with the possibility indicated by the Bradlaugh-Besant trial of solving these problems, that the family planning movement in this country was established.

"A century ago the main opposition to family planning came from the orthodox Christian churches. The Church of England dropped its official opposition as late as 1958, while the Roman Catholic Church has yet to do so. Indeed it was as recently as January of this year that a Roman Catholic

peer, Lord Clifford of Cudleigh, said in a House of Lords debate that he would like to see the Family Planning Association abolished forthwith. But the majority of individual members of the RC Church, including many of its priests, accept family planning."

Miss Smoker declared that the National Secular Society was probably the first organisation to publish a leaflet advocating a domiciliary family planning service. "And", she added, "in 1962, when London Transport refused, as a result of Roman Catholic pressure, to display Family Planning Association advertising cards in Underground trains, it was the NSS that took the initiative in organising a petition and a demonstration against this ruling, without the support of any other organisation apart from the FPA itself.

Superstitious Beliefs

"The NSS also played a leading part in campaigning for the various sexual law reforms of the 1960s. These included easier divorce, the legalising of homosexual acts between consenting adults, and, of course, the legalisation of abortion under certain circumstances. The Abortion Law Reform Association, which was behind the liberalising Abortion Act of 1967, was almost entirely secularist in its support. Diane Munday, one of our speakers this evening, and her colleagues proved too formidable for the unprepared religious opponents of the Bill.

"But they have been organising against the 1967 Act, culminating in James White's amendment Bill, which poses a very real threat to the right of a woman to have an intolerable pregnancy terminated legally and safely. The reaction against legal abortion has come almost entirely from the religious minority. It is obvious why, for the most part, the battle lines on the abortion issue are drawn along religious boundaries. If you believe, as we do,

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that it is human relationships that make human beings fully human, then a foetus can never be regarded as having human rights comparable with those of its mother. If, however, you believe, as many religionists still do, that the foetus has an immortal soul which, if denied baptism and the chance of working out its eternal salvation, will be deprived of heaven, then naturally you oppose abortion with all your might.

"That is why it is still important to combat the superstitious beliefs that generally underlie religious opposition to sexual freedom. And this is the particular role of the National Secular Society. Many of those who agree with us on social issues nevertheless fail to see the relevance of our continuing fight against the churches as such, although they have dwindled to a pathetic remnant of their former strength. But this remnant is able to exert considerable influence over Parliament and the communication media, so the time has not yet come to relax our secularist efforts."

The Church and Sex Education

Helen Dobson, a counsellor at the Brook Advisory Centre in Walworth, London, referred to the recent House of Lords debate on sex education which, she said, "highlighted all the old religious and moralistic taboos concerning sex." She quoted from a speech by the Duke of Norfolk, a Roman Catholic, who told the House that sex education in schools is "too progressive in relaxing the wise restraints which were inherited by us from the Victorian Christians."

Mrs Dobson said: "In looking at sex education, one must look at human growth and development about which we have much documented evidence. It is generally accepted by professionals involved with the care of children that sexual development starts at birth and continues throughout childhood and adolescence to maturity. In all these phases it should be pleasurable and satisfying. These healthy processes will progress unless they are interfered with by repression, prohibition, fear and guilt, all of which in sexual development produce conflict.

"It is in this very area that religious opposition to sexual freedom, which for young people can often be equated with sexual development, plays such an influential role. The churches argue that home is the place for sex education, knowing full well that most parents are themselves suffering from the same conflicts about their own sexuality. Therefore with such education the myths and morals are bound to continue.

"The influence of the home far outweighs that of the school in any case, therefore the effect of sex education is not likely to alter attitudes radically. What it can and should do is to dispel ignorance and superstition and open up the subject to children at each stage of their development.

"The religious morality about sexual matters prevalent today is a product of the Judeo-Christian religions involving the ethos of puritanism, sacrifice and pleasure taboos. The power of both these religions has been upheld by two factors—the domination by a male hierarchy and the immense value placed on marriage and the family unit. The two go hand in hand. Sex came to equal sin except within marriage and for the procreation of children. This tight network has also served to support an economic system favourable only to those adhering strictly to its rules. Therefore sexual freedom has always been outside the Church's morality code.

"The Church's strict adherence to sexual morality equalling marriage is totally without understanding or compassion. There was little discussion in the House of Lords debate of relationships which are sexual. It is a great pity that the churches feel they hold a prerogative on morality. Many of the young people I work with who are involved in sexual relationships have their own morality. They don't exploit each other sexually, they try to be honest and caring in their relationship.

"Those who moralise about young people having sexual experience before marriage are being totally unrealistic. Marriage is not economically possible for most young people, and from what we know of early marriages ending in divorce should not in my view be encouraged as a means of legalising sex.

"In fact I am very unsure about confining sex in any legal framework. At present, the age of consent for girls is 16 years. This often does not equate with normal growth and development and does not stop her having sex. But it does stop her from seeking contraception. Of course we need laws to deal with assault and exploitation. But for young people to be put into the position of feeling guilty and sordid about their sexual relationship is, in my opinion, doing more harm than good.

Evangelical Tricksters

Alison Henigan, national organiser of FRIEND and an executive committee member of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, said that the Church was confused in its attitude towards homosexuality and there was certainly a great deal of hostility in religious circles.

She warned against evangelical groups which were setting up in business to "advise" homosexuals. The speaker accused such groups of indulging in subterfuge by "placing sympathetically worded advertisements in local newspapers which appeared to have been inserted by homosexual self-help groups.

"When lonely or distressed homosexuals contact such groups they are told that their sexual activities are sinful and detestable in God's eyes, and the 'counsellor' insists that they could be helped only through chastity or conversion to heterosexuality, with God's help. In many cases this 'help' has

reinforced the enquirer's feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

"One such group, sponsored by the Festival of Light, freely admits that the advice they give could make homosexuals feel even more insecure. An organiser said that this is a risk you have to take. He was one of those who took part in a public meeting at Southampton which had been arranged in an endeavour to prevent the Campaign for Homosexual Equality from holding their annual general meeting in the city."

Christian Arrogance and Hypocrisy

Diane Munday, a former general secretary of the Abortion Law Reform Association, said it would be simple to show how old taboos concerning sexuality were enshrined in ecclesiastical laws which decreed that the purpose of sex is procreation, and that anything to "frustrate God's will" in this matter is sinful. The campaign against abortion is being conducted on similar lines to that which was waged against birth control, with the same arguments and the same lies being used.

"It is not so long ago", said Mrs Munday, "that a committee of Anglican bishops announced that contraception was 'dangerous, demoralising, sinful and erring against the first principles of true Christian purity.' All praise to those who have now changed their minds, but they are still prepared to pontificate just as arrogantly against abortion."

Mrs Munday referred to the catch phrases now being used by the religious anti-abortionists. She said: "A phrase like 'the sanctity of life' has been repeated meaninglessly and mindlessly to justify lack of thought or the taking of a difficult decision. It has a humane, compassionate ring to it, but let us examine it more closely. To justify reliance on a catch phrase it must be consistently applied and be valid in every context. Well, is this one? Of course not."

"We have not seen a campaign by the churches to abolish capital punishment. When we read the Hansard division lists it is noticeable that whenever this issue is discussed those who most loudly oppose legal abortion on the grounds of sanctity of life are always there voting to bring back hanging."

"As for killing in wartime, it is hardly necessary to point out that religious wars have been the bloodiest in history, and that ferocious religious wars are being waged at the present time in Northern Ireland and the Lebanon. Christian is killing Christian, Moslem is killing Christian, and all the sophistry about 'just wars' cannot negate the fact that in these circumstances the sanctity of life is ignored. The religious patriots in all countries involved in the second world war did not protest against the bombing of cities which no doubt contained their share of pregnant women and babies."

"'Natural law' is a catch phrase which has al-

ways been used by the religious opponents of birth control, and is now often heard in the abortion debate. Yet those who rely on the 'natural law' argument have accepted, presumably as natural, man's ability to cure God-given disease, to reduce God-given maternal and infant mortality, and to extend the span of life. However when it comes to the corollary of death control, namely birth control, that is a different matter, and the population explosion in many parts of the world can be blamed directly on this selective view of 'natural law'

"A newcomer to the armoury of religious catch phrases is 'It is a proven biological fact'. Perhaps we should just note in passing that religious authority was not much interested in 'biological facts' when evolution was first suggested as an alternative to the Garden of Eden."

Mrs Munday went on to say that "little love or charity is shown in religious attitudes to abortion, and little concern for the inevitable misery of a child born unwanted in the so-called civilised area of the planet, or born doomed to malnutrition and disease for all of a very short life in other parts of the world. And ironically, it is the religious people themselves who are most adversely affected by this lack of compassion. There is ample evidence that Roman Catholic women have at least, and maybe more than, their share of abortions. Letters have been written by such women expressing their former opposition to abortion, but their change of belief when faced with the reality of an unwanted pregnancy. Some of these women have experienced great misery in coming to terms with their education and conditioning."

Freethinker Fund

Once again we are pleased to record an increase in donations to the Fund. Nottingham and Notts Humanist Group set a good example with a donation of £10. Our thanks to them and to others who contributed during the period 21 April to 20 May. W. Armstrong, 40p; Miss C. Bilborough, 50p; F. Caldwell, Jnr, £8.50; W. Chapman, 50p; M. Dignam, £1.50; R. C. Edmunds, 50p; J. Gibson, 50p; D. C. Greene, £3.50; S. Grimsditch, £3.50; R. J. Hale, £1; D. Harper, £7.17; Mrs N. Henson, £5; S. Hillier, £1; G. B. Horne, 50p; E. J. Hughes, £1; Mrs B. W. S. Irwin, £3.50; J. Jeffrey, £3.50; A. and S. Lord, £3.50; H. Lyons-Davies, £1; R. Matthewson, £3.50; W. G. Matters, £1.50; P. J. McCormick, 50p; Nottingham and Notts Humanist Group, £10; Freda Padgett, £1; A. R. J. Pitcher, 50p; S. Quoistiaux, £1.50; R. Saitch, £1.50; P. Seager, £1; R. K. E. Torode, 50p; M. Villiers-Stuart, £1.50; E. Wakefield, 83p. Total: £70.40.

The original manuscripts of Greek and Latin literature, including the Greek autographs of all books of the New Testament, are lost. What reasons are there for believing that the printed text we read today is what the original authors wrote.

In his generous review of my *Did Jesus Exist?* (*The Freethinker*, October 1975), J. M. Alexander questions whether the gospels, as printed today, based on extant codices of the early fourth century, resemble very closely the originals written between AD 70 and 135. He says: *All we have are copies of copies and sometimes copies of translations of copies. Every Christian document that we possess was not written until Christianity had established itself as a going concern, and moreover, written by monks who had a vested interest in "proving" that the gospels were a contemporary record of a living person.*

The problem is real,¹ though this statement of it is exaggerated; for there are no serious grounds for regarding any New Testament book as a translation;² to counteract historical scepticism (rather than heresy) about Jesus is not a likely motive for emendations, as such scepticism will hardly have been to the fore in the audience envisaged; and furthermore there is considerable evidence of careful and painstaking copying: even difficult readings have been "transmitted with scrupulous fidelity."³ Nevertheless alterations were undoubtedly made, and the original autographs were not available to settle disputes about accuracy. Moreover, the whole question is clearly important, for we can only understand the development of Christian ideas by arranging the extant documents into chronological sequence. This is far from easy, even if we assume that the 27 books of the NT have not been tampered with; and to this day—as a Christian apologist has recently noted—there is no agreed relative dating for these books, as the gaps in our knowledge of the world from which they came are so great.⁴ But if, as Mr Alexander suggests, each of the documents as it now stands is a mixture of original material and of considerable and later various additions, then the task of putting them into chronological order will be well-nigh impossible. Let us then give his query the serious scrutiny it deserves.

(1) Recent papyrus discoveries have shown that the big codices are accurate copies of much earlier documents. Thus Papyrus 75, the Bodmer papyrus of Luke and John published in 1961, is dated AD 175-225 and is in essential agreement with Codex Vaticanus.

(2) If the discovery of these papyri takes us back at best to AD 175, we can reach a generation nearer

the originals with the help of Justin Martyr. He gives—*circa* AD 150—such copious quotations from and summaries of the synoptic gospels⁵ as to allow the inference that they existed at that date in substantially their present form.

(3) In Justin's day, the canon of four gospels was not everywhere recognised. Different Christian centres long used only one, or perhaps two gospels; and, even at the end of the second century, "Luke was only hesitatingly recognised and . . . there was considerable opposition to the Gospel of John."⁶ Many Christian communities, therefore, would not have been concerned to correct the four gospels for the purpose of harmonising them (although Tatian's gospel harmony of *circa* AD 150 shows that harmonisation was not out of the question). If, then, emendations were made, they will have served to make the one gospel in use in a particular area more edifying, or more in harmony with contemporary ideas.

Evidence Internal to the New Testament

However, such emendations cannot have been extensive, for each of the four gospels, as it exists today, has been shown to expound a distinctive theology which clearly reflects the mind of a single writer. The nature and significance of Jesus and his work is not the same in any two gospels. In particular, Matthew and Luke each independently adapts the gospel of Mark, differently from each other, yet in each case in such a way as to testify to a consistent standpoint in the redactor. Unevenness and contradictions are not entirely absent within each gospel, and are indeed inevitable in any work which redacts material of different provenance instead of making up its own story, yet there is a clearly definable Christology in each, and this would certainly have been blurred if it had been subjected to wholesale rewriting by a number of hands. As for the NT letters, the substance of many an epistle allows it to be assigned to a particular stage in the developing tradition. How, for instance, can the concern over circumcision in Galatians be anything but primitive, when the whole question ceased to excite interest in the documents of the next generation? And what later Christian writer would have invented the (even unresolved) quarrel between Peter and Paul, which in this same epistle gives the occasion for Paul's statement of his theological position? Again, in trying to decide whether the letter to the Ephesians was written by Paul or by a pupil of his, perhaps a generation later, theologians have shown that the two alternative possibilities are: either an inventor, with the other Pauline letters in front of him, succeeded in writing a letter which resembles them to the very great extent that Ephesians does; or

Paul himself wrote a letter which differs from his others to the comparatively small extent that this one does.⁷ Obviously the two alternatives would not be so clear-cut if the original documents had been extensively tampered with.

Sayings of Jesus Outside the Canon

Mr Alexander's next sentence does not seem to me to support his case. He says: *In a very real sense the oldest records of Christianity are the undeniably original "Logia" contained in the Oxyrhynchus papyri, the Gospel of Thomas (discovered in 1945) and the Dead Sea Scrolls.*

The Scrolls have the advantage of having been written by AD 68 (the date when they were hid in the caves), but the disadvantage of recording nothing about Christianity. The Gospel of Thomas is debarred by Mr Alexander's own reluctance to base much on translations, for it is a Coptic version (circa AD 400) of a Greek original of circa AD 150. The Oxyrhynchus papyri are many, but I take the reference to be to Papyrus I (discovered in 1897 and dated at soon after AD 200) which consists of a few sayings of Jesus, apparently transcribed from a Greek book.⁸ This document is not older than the Bodmer papyrus of Luke and John, and about contemporary with the Chester Beatty material, which includes most of the Pauline letters and parts of the four gospels and of Acts.

It has often been observed that acceptance of a book into the Canon did not involve having its text vetted by some central authority, like a Bible Commission. A work was taken into the Canon because it was popular in some powerful Christian communities. And the main argument for the authenticity of the printed text of today has always been that it was established from a very large number of manuscripts which were copied quite independently of each other in different Christian centres from earlier originals, and which nevertheless show in the main only insignificant differences.⁹ Already by AD 200 there were three main groups of gospel texts, but attempts to set out a genealogy for all the thousands of manuscripts now available have been defeated by their continual cross-ramifications.

Residual Doubts

Mr Alexander can, however, find an ally in the Cambridge theologian Professor J. C. O'Neill, whose commentary on *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Pelican Books, 1975) argues that Paul's original letter has been much expanded to make it more suitable for general use; and that the expanded text has become uniformly attested because "at various stages in the transmission . . . , powerful editors collected together as many manuscripts as possible and made a standard edition which became the one uniformly copied thereafter in that part of the

Church" (p.14). Again, B. Lindars' well-argued commentary on the fourth gospel represents it as a second, expanded edition of a lost original written some ten years earlier. And then there is the protracted debate about the "Western non-interpolations" of Acts (passages where, it is alleged, only the Western text has escaped expansion). So Mr Alexander is right to suggest that there is no ground for complacency.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Cf. my article "Which New Testament?", *The Freethinker*, March-April, 1975.
2. Mr Alexander may perhaps have in mind ancient translations from the Greek originals (e.g. the old Latin versions), which, I would concede, do form part of the textual critic's material. Furthermore, although all the synoptic gospels were certainly written in Greek, some theologians would hold that some of Jesus' pronouncements recorded in them were spoken originally in Aramaic.
3. B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the NT*, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1968, p.206.
4. John Bowden (Managing Director and Editor of SCM Press), in *What about the NT?*, ed Hooker and Hickling, London, 1975, pp.3-4.
5. I illustrate the phenomenon in my *The Jesus of the Early Christians*, London, 1971, pp.182-3. Cf. also L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, Cambridge, 1967, pp.58-60.
6. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Eng trans, London, 1972, p.187.
7. P. N. Harrison, *Paulines and Pastorals*, London, 1964, pp.34-5.
8. E. Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, Eng trans, London, 1963, I, 104-5. Mr Alexander may, however, have in mind other Oxyrhynchus papyri regarded as Greek versions of the Gospel of Thomas. (The correspondences are set out in J. Ménard, *L'Évangile selon Thomas, Leiden*, 1975 p.4). This would not affect my argument.
9. The ending of Mark's gospel, and story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 7 : 53ff), are among the rare exceptions.
10. The author of this article is very grateful to Prof K. Grayson for critical and helpful comments on the MS from which he has tried to profit.

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

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1776 marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of volume one of Edward Gibbon's "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". W. M. Thackeray wrote: "To have your name mentioned by Gibbon is like having it written on the dome of St Peter's, which is seen by pilgrims from all over the world." Professor J. B. Bury, a distinguished historian of the late Roman Empire, declared: "That Gibbon is behind date in many details, and in some departments of importance, simply signifies that we and our fathers have not lived in an absolutely incompetent world, but in the main things, he is still our master, above and beyond date." And this reluctant tribute came from Cardinal Newman: "It is melancholy to say it, but the chief, perhaps the only, English writer who has any claim to be an ecclesiastical historian is Gibbon." These quotations from the eminent will serve to justify the title of this article.

Since Gibbon wrote his monumental work, Holy Pontiffs have permitted a peep into the Vatican archives. Letters and documents have been discovered, but these do not in most cases emend, but substantiate the accuracy of his vast historical panorama, painted in large sweeps, yet so detailed when necessary. The first volume was published in 1776; the last saw the light in 1778.

Gibbon took 20 years to collect the data to break through the tissue of myth, fable, deliberate deception and forgeries with which theologians had obscured the truth about the great Roman Empire. He cleared the way for future historians to subject Christianity to the same critical tests as other subjects.

To us, as freethinkers, two chapters are of special interest; the conduct of the Roman Government towards Christianity from Nero to Constantine, and the causes of the progress of Christianity. Gibbon's exquisite use of satire, his covert method of exposing the frauds of the Church are unsurpassable. He subjects the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith—the death of its Saviour and the accompanying miracles—to his subtle irony, remarking that the sages of Greece and Rome, living and writing during such momentous happenings as the three hours of worldwide preternatural darkness, "omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which mortal eye has ever been witness since the creation of the globe." "How shall we excuse the supine inattention of the pagan and the philosophic world to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses?" Of the history of the early Church he says: "By the wise dispensation of Providence a mysteri-

ous veil was cast over the infancy of the Church, which, till the faith of the Christian was matured and their numbers multiplied, served to protect them not only from the malice, but even from the knowledge of the Pagan world." He would not accept the Church martyrology and plainly states that "The Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of the infidel."

The Decline and Fall . . . not only gives a picture of the Roman Empire, but it reveals the temperament of Gibbon himself. The virtues and abilities of the Stoic Emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the two Antonines, awakened all his enthusiasm: "During a long period of 43 years their virtuous labours were crowned with success . . . the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius offer the fair prospect of universal peace." He called it the period "during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous." And of the populace he wrote: "The superstition of the people was not embittered by any theological rancour. The devout polytheist, though fondly attached to his national rites, admitted with implicit faith the different religions of the earth." With disgust Gibbon wrote of the credulity and fanaticism of the early Church: "For it was not in this world that they (Christians) were desirous of making themselves agreeable or useful." His sympathies were with Julian, called the Apostate: "He derived from his philosophic studies an inflexible regard for justice, tempered by a disposition to clemency; the knowledge of the general principles of equity and evidence, and the faculty of investigating the most intricate and tedious questions which could be proposed for his discussion."

A Religion for Slaves

The penalty for open unbelief in his time was three years imprisonment, so was Gibbon's exquisite use of irony merely a cover for timidity as some critics have suggested? It is doubtful. Volume one met with immediate and extraordinary success. There were no libraries for the poor in eighteenth-century England, despite its great wealth; the ruling class felt itself safe to indulge in infidelity nicely put. "But, even if there had been no such danger", as Professor Bury said, "he could not have chosen a more incisive weapon for his merciless criticism of the orthodox opinion than the irony he wielded with superb ease."

Being a man of his age and class, Gibbon realised, as the early Emperors had, that the Christian ethic of other-worldliness, family disloyalty and exaltation

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The murder of Christine Taylor by her demented husband two years ago following an exorcism ceremony, in which an Anglican clergyman was involved, horrified Britain. So the Church of England attempted to assuage public disquiet by laying down guidelines under which this superstitious ceremony may be conducted. A Church of Scotland working party has now recommended that its ministers should refrain from conducting such ceremonies. The Reverend Trevor Dearing, an Anglican clergyman, who has performed "healing" services on television, has criticised the report as being "right against a great deal of the New Testament's teaching . . . If we can't trust what Christ said about the reality of evil forces, how can we trust him about the reality of heaven, eternal life and salvation?"

Exorcism evokes gothick pulp literature of the Dennis Wheatley type, reinforced by horror films and *Sunday People* or *News of the World* scandal stories of satanism and orgies. The bestselling book and film of *The Exorcist* rode on the crest of this wave. Anglican exorcisms were pictured to the public as a quirky survival which found occasional airing in silly stories in *Weekend* or *Titbits*.

In this scientific age, many people have been amazed to learn that exorcism is still earnestly practised by the C of E. Many clergymen perform dozens or hundreds of exorcisms every year. The Rev Dearing of Hornchurch performs thousands—Granada TV's *World in Action* filmed him performing the antique ritual in his trendy leather jacket. Make no mistake—"ghosts" are still "laid to rest", "devils" "expelled", and "the presence of evil" is "banished".

The Archbishop of Canterbury himself has ratified the situation: exorcism, he has said, should be performed in collaboration with the forces of medicine, with the full approval of the Church, privately, in the context of prayer. Christ, he affirms, spent much of his ministry liberating men from the power of evil. It is the Church's task to continue this job. Doctor of Divinity Coggan used the most modern means of communication—television—to utter this ancient creed.

There is nothing radical about current evangelical religion. It remains a threat only to the Established Church. It is a muted form of class conflict—working-class evangelicals v. middle-class C of E. In the Taylor case, the religious authorities' problem was made more difficult by the fact that Taylor's exorcism was carried out by an Anglican minister in collaboration with a Methodist minister and with members of an interdenominational

Christian group. Such unofficial church unity is embarrassing. Dark hints have been made in Church newsletters that the sects are to blame for the mishap in this case. The orthodox denounce "much unwise and uninformed ministry being performed in the name of Jesus". The allegedly progressive "junkies' vicar", the Rev Leech, in a letter to *The Times*, deplored the fact that "in recent years a cult of heretical exorcism has grown up, especially in the USA, influenced by a crude and unbalanced form of Pentecostalism".

And we thought heretics went out with the Spanish Inquisition! Oh no, there's a right and a wrong way of conducting an exorcism. But how is the Established Church to cope with the "distortions" of popular religions? The C of E can't get Parliament to ban them all, like Scientology. How are clergymen to boost and make scientifically respectable their fading authority?

One way is by collaboration with psychiatrists. The orthodox stress the religious roots of medicine: "Priest and medicine man were once one." But just what sort of scientist is prepared to condone collaboration with people who believe in possession by evil spirits? What scientist could go along with the vicar opening the vestry windows "so that the demons expelled could leave, if they wished"? Suppose they didn't wish? Would they stay in the vestry, flying around like bats, navigating with radar to avoid bumping into sacred objects? And if they did leave, where would they go? Down to the local?

Not Rational—but Legal

Belief in persecution by devils, like exorcism, is almost an anthropological universal. In England today, where religion has ceased to be a main cohesive force in society, those who complain that devils are persecuting them are invariably seriously disturbed people, often more willing to seek relief, however superficial, from those who share their religious convictions than from those who seek rational explanations for their troubles. But rational thought is not encouraged, for recognising rationally the chains that bind us is the first step to our liberation from those chains—and that is the last thing that either secular or religious authority wants. But common sense must not be obscured by a misplaced respect for ancient customs and beliefs. In the Taylor case, a wife is murdered, her husband is in Broadmoor, their five children are in the care of relatives.

Religion, whether organised or not, has been irrefutably shown to be entirely pernicious in its

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The 1944 Education Act decrees that religious instruction in schools should be given in accordance with an Agreed Syllabus drawn up by the local education authorities and "such religious denominations as, in the opinion of the authority ought . . . to be represented." Few drafting committees even pretend to approach the subject objectively or impartially, and the outcome of their consultations is often a handbook for the promotion of the Christian faith.

One Agreed Syllabus directed the teacher to "equip himself as best he can, do his best and say his prayers . . . and hope that the germinating seed of God's Word will fall on the good ground of God's growing children." A drafting committee opined that their Syllabus "will not have failed in its task if it has put its pupils in the way of learning the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ." A prominent Christian educationist has written of the need for Agreed Syllabuses "to help children to see the necessity for belonging to the Christian Church . . ."

Such candour is a bit too much for some Christians in education although until recently they did little to remedy the situation beyond replacing the term "Religious Instruction" by the less contentious "Religious Education". Secularists and realistic Humanists (particularly those in the teaching profession) said this is a face-saving measure, and that if RI had stood for "Religious Indoctrination" it would have been a more honest description of school religion.

However, it is now widely recognised that there is a significant number of adherents to non-Christian faiths and outright unbelievers in the population. There has been a corresponding decline in support for Christian churches which are closing down or merging with erstwhile rivals. The campaign for secular education which has been waged for the last twelve years has brought the whole question of school religion to public notice. Many teachers are no longer prepared to act as part-time evangelists, and the law relating to religious instruction and acts of worship is broken or evaded hundreds of times every school day of the week.

It is against this background that a working party was set up 18 months ago by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to consider the future of the Agreed Syllabus. Its report, *What Future for the Agreed Syllabus?*, was introduced at a press conference in London last month.

The working party made ten recommendations; they included the establishment of a National Advisory Conference to draw up "national guidelines" that would replace the Agreed Syllabus, and local working parties to assist teachers to work within those guidelines. The REC working party admits that legal requirements concerning religious education would have to be changed if their recom-

mendations were accepted, but its members who appeared at the press conference were rather evasive when the question of repealing the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act was raised. It is very difficult to believe that this group of mainly religious educators, many of them veterans in the Lord's service and all of them of wide professional experience, are so naive as to believe that their recommendations can be quietly implemented without rousing the ire of their co-religionists in the Festival of Light, National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, Order of Christian Unity and Pro Fide. Reformers who advocate a radical approach to the question of school religion must be unequivocal in their opposition to the religious clauses of the Education Act. Otherwise they are putting the cart before the horse.

The Religious Education Council was formed in 1973, and during the early stages of its work it has decided to concentrate on (1) the initial and in-service training of RE teachers; (2) the status of the subject and the supply of RE teachers; (3) the future and function of the Agreed Syllabus. The Council hopes to appoint a salaried secretary "and to expand its contribution to the work of improving RE in schools and colleges."

At this stage it might be useful to consider the composition and declared aims of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. The Council consists of 35 member organisations, the overwhelming majority of which are religious bodies whose representatives have publicly and forthrightly defended religious instruction and acts of worship in school, and demanded massive subsidies for Church schools. They include the Association for Religious Education, Association of Christian Teachers, Catholic Education Council, Catholic Teachers' Federation, Christian Education Movement, Muslim Educational Trust, National Society for Promoting Religious Education and the Welsh Christian Teachers' Association.

The British Humanist Association is one of the specifically non-religious minority of member organisations, and the inclusion of a Humanist on the working party was referred to in the press release which accompanied the report. Of course the BHA is quite entitled to join, affiliate to or support any organisation it likes. But many Humanists will feel that its participation in the work of the Religious Education Council will simply create a misleading impression of impartiality and unity. Others will feel that Humanism—and education—would be better served if the BHA employed its key personnel

AND NOTES

and resources to campaign for a straightforward repeal of the 1944 Education Act and the withdrawal of subsidies from denominational schools.

The report received extensive press coverage, and one of the most encouraging comments appeared in *Church Times* which described the claim that Britain is no longer a Christian country "is a fact which cannot be denied."

"Nor is it only due to the large-scale immigration from Asia and Africa of non-Christians in recent years, though that has played its part. The general decline of Christian faith and practice among the indigenous population has resulted in a situation where automatic and compulsory Christian teaching in schools (where indeed it is any longer attempted) has become something of an anomaly. Faithful Christians may deeply deplore this situation. But there is little point in pretending that it does not exist."

CONVERSION

There has been an upsurge of churchgoing in the Holloway district of London where the National Secular Society and *The Freethinker* offices are situated. St George's Church, Tufnell Park Road, is full every evening, but it is the Bard, not the Saviour, who is packing them in. The community owes an enormous debt of gratitude to George Murcell, an Old Vic actor who persuaded the wily Church Commissioners to part with the building for £25,000. And now, after five years of fundraising, planning and re-building, St George's Church has become St George's Theatre where all Shakespeare's plays will be performed during the next seven years. There will also be Sunday concerts.

St George's is a large circular building which was erected by optimistic Victorian Anglicans to accommodate over a thousand worshippers. But that was in 1867. Times have changed, and a hundred churches are being declared redundant every year. One commentator stated: "We should expect to see far more efficient use of many massive and lofty buildings that dominate neighbourhoods physically, long after they cease to matter to the local people spiritually."

The National Secular Society is celebrating the "conversion" of St George's by arranging a party booking on Wednesday, 7 July, when *Richard III* will be performed. Tickets are £1.25 each, and may be obtained from Jim Herrick (telephone 01-937 2341, during office hours).

EVANGELISTS SNUBBED BY GOVERNOR GENERAL

It has been reported that an eminent public figure in Australia turned down an appeal to sponsor a religious crusade. Sir Mark Oliphant, Governor General of South Australia, was invited by P. J. Daniels, chairman of the John Haggai Adelaide Crusade, to hear Dr Haggai preach and to receive him at Government House. Dr Haggai is a Baptist evangelist from Atlanta, Georgia.

Sir Mark Oliphant's letter to the crusade chairman was released to the Australian press. He wrote: "There are countless evangelical visitors to Adelaide, for all sorts of faiths, ranging from Baha'i and Zen Buddhism to apostles of Divine Light, Billy Graham and so on. All claim to deliver the true faith, to offer effective solutions to the manifold problems facing the world. It is significant that all these people, even the Asians, live in luxury in America, surrounded by disciples and servants, and that they travel the world ostentatiously.

"Great emphasis is placed on the prominent people and national leaders with whom they make contacts, ever since MRA (Moral Re-arnament) started the fashion. Yet MRA did not save Diem in Vietnam or give his people a better life.

"Billy Graham wins converts by the thousand, including the US President, but Watergate followed. The Maharishi offers self-fulfilment to Western societies but leaves his own Indian people in dire want."

Sir Mark went on to say that he respected the religious beliefs of people, but that he had no sympathy with those who shove their beliefs down other people's throats and grow rich in the process. He added: "No amount of evangelism will provide food for the starving in Ethiopia or India, stop the murder in Northern Ireland, solve the problem of Israel or banish nuclear weapons from the earth."

Sir Mark Oliphant is a distinguished scientist whose research work in the fields of radar and atomic energy have won him international fame. It was for this work that he was knighted.

THE FREETHINKER

VOLUME 95 (1975)

Price £2.60 plus 30p postage

(Bound volumes for other years available: various prices)

G. W. Foote & Company

698 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

NUNS by Marcelle Bernstein. Collins, £4.95.

This is a fascinating itinerary through the hitherto mysterious labyrinths of nundom and the intimate secrets of nunish minds. But it reveals astonishingly more: a sweeping view of the feminine revolution in full swing throughout the religious orders of the Roman and Anglican Churches.

Marcelle Bernstein, journalist and non-religious Jewess, spent four years gathering her material. She visited America, France, Spain and Italy, meeting nuns and sisters of almost every nationality. Why? "The constant question in my mind was why should any woman choose to live the life of a nun . . . I still cannot totally comprehend it. It is, I am reluctantly convinced, incomprehensible, a mystery of the human spirit that cannot be completely explained." Nonetheless, quoting "an irate sister at a recent conference" who declared, "Nuns have remained a mystery for far too long", Marcelle Bernstein admits that her book is "an attempt to unravel that mystery." Her first contact—on a magazine article assignment—with the Wantage Community of St Mary the Virgin "was a revelation." Expecting to find *The Sound of Music* type of nun, she met instead "chatty, intellectual women" willing to discuss every aspect of their life-style. She "left wanting to know more", impelled by "growing fascination", for "fanaticism is a compelling force, and there is no doubt that nuns are, in our terms, fanatics."

Her first chapter plunges into the heart of the mystery, the contemplative life. Allowed, even welcomed, within the Enclosure of Carmel, she is obviously impressed, for she concludes her list of acknowledgments: "Finally, and most deeply, I thank Mother Michael and the Carmelites of Llandoverly for showing me what the religious life can be." This I can well understand, for I recognise Mother Michael, the Prioress, as my young Mistress of Novices at the London Carmel half a century ago. But I confess I am astounded at the changes effected by Vatican II in this Carmel's way of life. Compared with what I endured from 1926 until 1946, the Llandoverly Carmelites enjoy a chaste version of *la dolce vita!* I note, however, that they are subject, not only to episcopal authority, but to the Carmelite Fathers and their Rule. The latter thralldom was constantly opposed by their saintly Mother Foundress, Mary of Jesus, throughout her extraordinary mission of founding 33 Carmels in Britain. In my time several Carmels succumbed to this form of male domination; I assume that others were eventually forced to. "But now", says Mother Michael, "We're all being asked to say what we want, to change that." Thus Women's Liberation

is successfully invading even the innermost citadels of consecrated life.

The following chapter contains the fruits of exhaustive research into the motives that induce women to enter religious life. "The varieties of call", according to one Superior of vast experience, "are like the stones of the sea." Then comes an intriguing account of initiation rites and rituals in the various orders, the chapter heading being underlined by a significant comment from one of the human offerings: "We were told to emulate the angels—but the angels don't have bodies." Which signposts naturally to the thorny theme of the Celibate Life, a revealing chapter on current attitudes, social and conventual.

Certainly, "Behind their chastity lies all the weight of ecclesiastical tradition", but "the attitude of many nuns towards the vow of celibacy is changing", as the active orders discard their religious habits and mingle with the secular world. There is now a franker recognition that nuns, in habits and enclosures, or emancipated from both, are women; that nature persists, even in the faithful consecrated. As one of them admitted, with disarming bluntness, "You can't sublimate it. You can't suppress it. You simply have to damn well sacrifice it." The very concept of chastity is changing; many see it, not as a lifetime decision, but a temporary one, necessary for a particular task. But of course "the minute the habit and the walls went there is what an American sister calls 'the danger of opportunity'." The new freedom, while promoting maturity, obviously creates new problems.

The overall picture at present is chaotic: "Aggiornamento brought with it uncertainty and restlessness, and the lack of clarity about the life and what it is meant to be has not yet resolved itself." Orders dwindle or die out completely as literally thousands of women leave. Smaller congregations amalgamate to survive. The leakage works both ways: "It is an unkind irony that the most liberal and forward-moving orders have lost the most members—and were the first to do so"; contrarily, many progressive-minded women leave "because the changes are not enough, and they feel their communities have not taken the cultural leap that is necessary for survival." One young Sister speaks of "the paralyzing mediocrity of women's communities today. Intelligent women feel hampered by restrictions a masculine Church still imposes upon them." For such, religious life is "irrelevant to the Church today, an anachronism surviving into the twentieth century by virtue of tradition and reverence, rather than need." The multiple aspects of human need in

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the modern world can best be served by working alongside the needy, without the artificial barriers created by the nunnish aura; "Even Cardinal Suenens has conceded that there is a feeling that secular institutes are better fitted for modern life than traditional convents."

So experimental groups are formed, with or without canonical recognition, in some cases accepting seculars, or even married couples with children, and members of non-Christian faiths. A sort of "free nun movement" is running parallel with the priestly revolt that is shaking the Church to her foundations. Those age-old rocks like the sanctuary and the cloister, once her pride and inviolate base of human submission and sacrifice, are crumbling.

Naturally this state of flux brings much human suffering. For instance, Father Andrew Greeley speaks of "tragic mistakes" made since Vatican II:

"There is so much discouragement, so much frustration, so much despair in the American Church at the present time." One American says: "The women religious I see are adapting and adapting and adapting until there's nothing left." But what else can the poor things do? "Those who continue to live within the old framework face almost insoluble problems. On the one hand, they realise they must look for new ways; on the other, they see all too clearly that they can be crushed and suppressed if those in authority lose their nerve in the face of innovation."

There are still the missionaries and martyrs, whose very way of life demands adaptation to all circumstances, acceptance of the inevitable, in every form of loss, suffering, torture, and death. "But today", writes Marcelle Bernstein, "almost a third of the world is closed to missionaries." The only orders comparatively secure in their ancient fastness are the contemplatives, those "aristocrats of the religious life", Cistercians, Benedictines, Poor Clares, and Carmelites. But these form only 6 per cent of all nuns, and one cannot help wondering how long their mediaeval remoteness will be suffered to survive. For the truth is, that with all their genuine aspirations to save the world through prayer and sacrifice, their spiritual love for all humanity, the real motivation of their lives is the promise of eternal life to come. As Mother Michael points out: "The afterlife is for ever. But this is only 70 or 80 years at most . . . Look, you *must* believe in the after world. It's a great comfort, you see. Pray to know." She sees eternity as an endlessly sunny garden, "where everything one wants is going to be happiness . . ." and so on, a dream full of childish hopes and images.

In retrospect, the interviewer, though full of admiration, realises that "much of what she says is couched in religious clichés." And I myself recall that when I was contemplating leaving Carmel, well-meant persuasion took the form of holy blackmail. "You may not have to wait long", I was urged. "Death and Heaven may come sooner than you think." That was all of 30 years ago!

Thus, while the active orders grope towards a humanistic outlook, the contemplatives still set their sights on the world to come and its supposed hundredfold reward for their life of sacrifice. That vision alone makes their life endurable, though they would not admit it in so many words. Emotionally, I retain a very real sympathy with their way of life, and its timeless beauty unspoilt by the world. Perhaps humanity will always need, and produce, its contemplatives. But they cannot survive on beliefs that are totally irrelevant in the scientific era.

PHYLLIS GRAHAM

HUMANISM IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL by Peter Faulkner. Elek/Pemberton, £7.

The effect of reading Peter Faulkner's *Humanism in the English Novel* is, for at least one practising novelist who is also a secularist, of being put into a straightjacket or one of those corsets that appear in Edwardian advertisements. It confines and warps into an acceptable shape, acceptable, that is, to Peter Faulkner's definitions of humanism and "the novel".

It isn't altogether Peter Faulkner's fault. He is simply going on custom and practice, particularly where this mystical entity "the novel" is concerned. He inherits a whole tradition of talking and writing about it as though it existed. The definition of "the novel" which Peter Faulkner gives is by his own frank admission from Ian Watts' *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). It suggests that the characteristics of "the novel" are "its rejection of conventional and traditional plots, its emphasis on 'particular people in particular circumstances', its un-Platonic sense of identity as experienced in the dimensions of time and space, its aim of rendering an authentic account of individual experience." Now the literary genre that most of these things are characteristic of is biography. Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and Augustine's *Confessions* are both closer to Ian Watts' idea of what the novel should be than the work of J. G. Ballard or Monk Lewis. What has come to be, as Peter Faulkner tells us, a "now widely accepted" view only begins to work if you exclude hundreds of works of prose fiction or put them into categories like gothick, science fiction, surrealist, thriller or romance and say that although they are in a recognisable novel form they aren't "the novel". The term has become almost (not yet quite) synonymous with another obnoxious,

“serious (or good) fiction”. As for “the novel” dealing with “particular people in particular situations”, so indeed do a great many lyric poems and many plays. *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* are as particular as can be. Push literary history back to Malory and nothing could be more particular than the last meeting between Gwenever and Launcelot.

This leads me to Peter Faulkner’s further supposition, once again an inherited one, that the novel began in the eighteenth century. Richardson’s *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, which are usually taken as this mystical starting point, are answers to the immense popularity of seventeenth century prose fiction, which was beginning, like its stage counterpart and like the poetry of the period, to be regarded as obscene by a later generation which in a resurgence of puritanism and Christianity wished to purge literature and in particular literature which might come into the hands of women, who were increasingly, after their comparative freedom in the second half of the seventeenth century, to be treated as second class halfwits from whom the pleasures of sex must be kept at all costs.

The novel which Richardson had especially in mind was, I believe, Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* which had gone into over 16 editions by the late eighteenth century. Richardson’s works are deliberately bourgeois in pitch and extol a species of conventional virtue like those papers which peddle soft porn under pretence of a crusade against prostitution. His women either hold out for marriage or drive the man to rape after which they can self-righteously die. As far as the advance of a secularist literature is concerned, *Clarissa* and *Pamela* represent a step back, since god is always present in their backgrounds.

The real trouble is George Eliot. No one, not even Shakespeare, has so overshadowed a writer’s preferred genre as she has hers. In received *lit crit* thinking, anything that isn’t like *Middlemarch* isn’t quite a novel and the less like it is the less claim it has to be considered a work of worthwhile prose fiction. This leads Peter Faulkner at the end of the book to dismiss Ronald Firbank as merely “a malicious and witty aesthete”, hardly a novelist at all, and to say that “it is dangerous to elevate eccentricity into a principle *unless we wish to make the artist’s skill in doing whatever he does into a higher value than the thing done*” (my italics). But in art, and novels are art, not life, the skill is part of the thing done, even when the artist has coddled the audience with a semblance of not using any skill. Naturalism itself is only another technique.

So much for “the novel”. What about the “humanism” of Peter Faulkner’s title? For a secularist few things are more worrying than to see humanism posing as a religion, a pose in which Christians are only too happy to collaborate. We have surely passed the point where atheists had to

prove that they weren’t unprincipled egoists simply because they didn’t believe in the supernatural. George Eliot may have had to do this because she lived in an aggressively Christian era.

Peter Faulkner’s humanism includes a commitment to free will and the possibility of ethical choice, a belief in human responsibility and potentiality with “human happiness as its central concern” and an emphasis on the importance of the individual. Since he also sees a close connection between humanism and “the novel”, these are the qualities which he finds most praiseworthy in the books he discusses and the lack of them in any work causes him to dismiss it. In this he is no worse but no better than the Roman Catholic critic Martin Turnell, whom he quotes as alleging that Graham Greene is better than E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf because the characters created by the other two writers have no souls, “no vision of salvation”, whereas Greene reminds his readers that “the alternatives salvation/damnation are . . . the only reality in the world.”

Peter Faulkner takes up an attitude which we would expect from someone writing from a doctrinaire religious or political position. This I find particularly disturbing in a critic whose particular job it is to interpret literature to students. It causes him among other things to misunderstand why many contemporary writers reject the traditional form of the realistic novel and to suggest that they may be exploring “areas of experience which the humanist regards as lacking in significance.” This must surely be a contradiction in terms unless humanism has become so rigidly doctrinaire, so like established religions, that it can regard part of human experience as unimportant, unless in fact it’s now being spelt with an initial capital letter. For humanists, with a small letter, all areas of experience, even the undesirable, must have some “significance”.

Most worrying of all, perhaps, is the divorce that is occurring between what the public wants and what this kind of criticism thinks they should have. The enormous popularity of *Shardik* and James Bond shows that what the public wants (leave aside in-built publicity, the publishing industry and so on) is fantasy and myth: things which like religion feed the lower psychological levels. The acme of the novel about “particular people in particular circumstances” which aims “at rendering an authentic account of individual experience” is the neo-realist work which concentrates on the surface trivia of daily life with its problems in a selected typical extended family. There is a place for such novels, as there is for all other kinds of novel, but it would be a great mistake to pretend that they constituted “the novel” and were the only ones that humanists should feel not guilty if caught reading.

MAUREEN DUFFY

Edward Royle, the Lecturer in History at York University, has written a fascinatingly informative and scholarly study of mid-Victorian secularism. *Victorian Infidels* is not only a precise and detailed collection of facts, some of which are quite obscure to many freethinkers, but also a most "readable" book in the fullest sense of the word. The filling in of the almost lost period from the collapse of Chartism after 1848 and the great resurgence of the 1860s and 1870s, is of particular interest.

Dr Royle traces the development of militant freethought from the Thomas Paine-Richard Carlile period of the great persecutions, through the meteoric rise and sudden collapse of Owenism. But absorbing interest lies in the intimate details of the organisational structure before the supremacy of Bradlaugh. As Dr Royle says: "The period between the failure of Chartism in 1848 and the enfranchisement of urban householders in 1867 is one of the most important in the whole of the nineteenth century, but until recently it has been one of the most neglected. In the 1850s attitudes which had been assumed two or more generations earlier beginning to be abandoned . . ." And in the following paragraph: "This aspect of Secularism is best known in connection with Charles Bradlaugh's efforts to enter Parliament in the 1880's, but Bradlaugh's aims and achievements can be understood only against the background of the 1840s and 50s. Because Secularism is now so closely identified with Bradlaugh's name, the history of the movement, and in particular the role of G. J. Holyoake, has been distorted. Holyoake had already provided for Bradlaugh the ideological foundations and the organisation for the National Secular Society . . ."

The excellent chapter entitled "Propagation" affords an insight into the several Halls of Science and Secular halls that existed, as well as the many freethought publications now forgotten. I found much of interest in the detailed activities of the "Fleet Street House" at 147 Fleet Street. It was removed to Johnsons Court in the premises afterwards occupied by the Rationalist Press Association. The publishing business of the Holyoake brothers is here dealt with in depth almost for the first time, and many new facts emerge. These are of immense value to the student of radical history and there is much of importance not given in works by secularist writers. Austin Holyoake seems to be a personality in his own right who has been rather neglected. A study of his life is overdue.

The charts appendices giving lists and dates of existence of freethought organisations in London and the provinces during the period 1837-66 are of outstanding value. These, together with details of the various fluctuations in membership and the occupational structure of supporters, add much to our

knowledge of the movement and the circulation of journals like Holyoake's *Reasoner*. There are also useful biographical studies of the leading figures of this era, which include many names now almost forgotten but who played important roles as the author clearly shows. The copious notes and references given at the end of each chapter enlarge our concept of this flowering of freethought which, as Dr Royle emphasises, made its greatest contribution to mid-Victorian Britain in the campaign for civil rights—something not without relevance today.

This book can be recommended as an important contribution to the history of secularism if only for the unbiased objective treatment of the development of freethought—"warts and all". The personality clashes, the resentments, jealousies of individuals affect the growth or otherwise of organisations and are therefore rightly to be discussed in a history of those organisations. So too are the intrigues, squabbles and denigration of others which have all too sadly been a feature of the freethought story throughout the nineteenth century and since.

JAMES M. ALEXANDER

Edward Gibbon

of the individual must lead to the detriment of society and tend to the breakdown of a coherent Empire. But he did not appreciate that in the long term, the slave ethic would prove acceptable alike to the dispossessed class and to the ruling class. To the poor it meant the acceptance of servitude, and compensation after death for present suffering; to the rich, the promise of full forgiveness on death-bed repentance, mightily facilitated by a handout to the priest; to the ruler, passive obedient subjects. As F. A. Ridley writes in his *Spartacus*, with more than a touch of Gibbon's irony and a pathos that the "master" never displayed: "It was no accident, but was in the nature of social evolution, that, barely a century after the final defeat of the slaves, there appeared in the Roman Empire the first great slave-religion, the divine symbol of which was the self-same cross upon which the last slave-warriors of Spartacus had gasped out their lives in agony."

Gibbon depicted the war of intolerant faith against liberal reason in the Roman Empire, when, as Harnack wrote: "An unmistakable resuscitation of the religious sense took hold of all classes in society." Does that hold a warning for us in 1976? Perhaps for that very reason every freethinker should read Gibbon this bicentenary year of the publication of his monumental work.

The last volume ends with the final collapse of the Eastern Empire and the complete "triumph of Barbarism and Religion."

LETTERS

Peter Cadogan ("The Freethinker", May) likes dishing it out, but he doesn't like taking it. I agree with him about the importance of the "question of respecting language and respecting people"; I agree that "absurd" is a rather strong word (though not a "very strong word indeed") and I assume that he is a pretty strong person. But I also insist on the importance of the question of respecting facts and of saying what one thinks. That is why I have described more than a score of Peter Cadogan's recent points as "absurd" and why I repeat that his argument in favour of religious humanism and/or a sense of the sacred is based on a series of absurdities.

He concludes: "It is important not to trivialise a serious argument." I agree; but at the same time he makes the (absurd) suggestions that humanism "centres on" the critique of religion, and also makes the (absurd) allegation that "there are some Humanists who go out of their way to deny that religious humanism is possible" ("Ethical Record", May). It begins to look as if his whole position is, literally, absurd.

NICOLAS WALTER

This correspondence is now closed—Editor.

ISIS AND MARY

I really thought that the sun had finally set on the solar mythicists. The astronomical interpretations of almost all mythology were effectively answered by scholars last century. Even Professor Max Müller suggested they were blinded by the rays of the sun.

Otto Wolfgang, writing in the May issue, forgets that solar explanations were invented long after the gods themselves, and were based on knowledge not available to the early god-makers. In the same way Isis (I am well aware of the Egyptian names) as the sister-wife of Osiris was a later creation of priest and politician. During the four thousand years of their history, the Egyptians' religious ideas developed from the primitive to the most complex. Centuries before she was theologically "married", Isis was a local tribal deity venerated as "Guardian of the Great Waters", as many inscriptions indicate.

When the Ptolemies, for political reasons, promoted her worship (see my article on Mithraism, "The Freethinker" December 1975), a magnificent temple was built to her on a most unlikely site, far removed from population centres. This was at Philae (Pylak) the traditional "source" of the Nile, the point where it entered Egypt proper, through narrow cliffs below the Aswan cataract. The site was chosen because from pre-Dynastic times a shrine to her as "Mistress of the Nile" had existed there, and continued association with archaic beliefs was considered necessary.

My reference to Mary was to the mythical mother of Jesus and not concerned with Jewish names or the fattening-up of Oriental brides. The fabrication of the Christian mythos did not spring from the narrow confines of orthodox Jewry, but was the product of a Hellenic-Judaic-Egyptian cosmopolitan culture centred on Alexandria. The symbol of early Christianity was the Fishes—not because Jesus was born in the sign Pisces (this was a later invention) but because he was the son of a water goddess. Similarly, he is considered the protector of fishermen, walks on the water, calms the seas, turns water into wine, and works several miracles with fish. The meaning of the name Mary given by me agrees with that accepted by many writers on the subject.

JAMES M. ALEXANDER

CRITICS OF THE POLICE

I hope none of your readers will be taken in by the biased, rather silly, and obviously irresponsible article by James M. Alexander on "Blueprint for a Police State" ("The Freethinker", May). I wonder just what "freethinking" means when reading his views.

The evidence he may have in his files in the form of newspaper reports that "there is a whole police orchard full of rotten apples" is simply ludicrous. That there are the occasional bad apples is admitted, and every group has one or two. But, like too many critics of the police and other organisations, he rushes ahead with these grave assertions without looking at the vast majority of good, capable and often first-class officers.

Come on Mr Alexander, let's have a real article on the good the police do and could do. There's an old song about eliminating the negative and accentuating the positive. Why not try it sometime?

I must admit that for a first view of Humanism I think we could well do without the likes of him.

BRIAN M. CLARKE
Director and Editor, "The Police Review"

CLASSROOM INTEGRATION

The Roman Catholic hierarchy in the Irish Republic, already worried by their followers' refusal to toe the line on various social issues, is now concerned by the number of Catholic children who are attending Protestant schools, particularly in urban areas. A confrontation between Church leaders and parents may follow an accusation by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Dermot Ryan, who has accused the Protestant school authorities of being un-cooperative about allowing priests to come into the schools and give religious instruction to Catholic pupils.

The charge has been denied by Protestant school managers who are no doubt aware that the initiative for such instruction did not come from parents. During the last few years an increasing number of Catholic parents have been crossing the denominational boundaries and having their children educated in Protestant schools.

The religious war in Northern Ireland, where children are segregated on religious lines, have encouraged citizens in the Republic to opt for integrated education. And the small Protestant schools, with a low pupil-teacher ratio, can provide an education that is superior to that of the often overcrowded Catholic schools.

Blood on Their Hands

effects on several individuals. Christian fellowship not only failed to resolve personal problems and create wellbeing, but religion actually generated in its followers deep passions which it simultaneously tried to repress. There is no sense in which Michael Taylor's exorcism was a release. The exorcists were themselves overwrought and subject to the same religious pressures as Taylor. They bound up Taylor's problems, already in an explosive state and lit the fuse.

PUBLICATIONS

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SERVING TWO MASTERS

America's Central Intelligence Agency has at last admitted using religious personnel as informers and for the clandestine gathering of intelligence, according to a report issued by a Senate Select Committee. The report goes on to say that "the CIA paid salaries, bonuses or expenses to the religious personnel or helped to fund projects run by them." Some of the CIA's religious allies were involved "in media activity" and one priest acted as an informant "on student and religious dissidence."

William E. Colby, a former director of the CIA, said that the use of religious personnel for CIA work in foreign countries was "completely proper" when he addressed 800 students at Worcester, Massachusetts. He said: "Missionaries have helped the country in many ways, including providing it with information, which is completely legitimate and proper. It is just another way of serving the country."

Mr Colby had previously told the Select Committee that "in many countries of the world, representatives of the clergy, foreign and local, play a significant role and can be of assistance to the United States through the CIA." He was supported by Philip Buchen, a White House counsel, who said: "Clergymen throughout the world are valuable sources of intelligence. Many clergymen, motivated solely by patriotism, voluntarily and willingly aid the Government by providing information of intelligence value."

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EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove. Sunday, 4 July, 5.30 pm. G. A. Walker: "The Role of the Shop Steward in Industrial Relations".

Humanist Holidays. Summer Holiday (7 to 21 August) at Weston-super-Mare. Details from Mrs M. Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey; telephone (01) 642 8796.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London S16. Thursday, 24 June, 8 pm. Group discussion: "Crime and the Moral Order".

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

Merseyside Humanist Group. Lecture Room, 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Meetings held on the third Wednesday of the month, 7.45 pm.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. 46 Windermere Road, London N10. Thursday, 24 June, 8 pm. Don Billingsley: "Workers' Control".

The Thomas Paine Society and South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 4 July, 3 pm. Professor A. O. Aldridge, Peter Cadogan, Michael Foot, MP, Audrey Williamson: "Thomas Paine and the Foundation of the United States".

Pope Paul recently made a bitter attack on Catholics who are standing as independent candidates sponsored by the Communist Party in the Italian general election on 20 June. The Pope complained that "our dearest friends, our most trusted colleagues, our brothers sitting at the same table, have turned against us. Dissent has become a habit." A dissenting group known as "Catholics for Socialism" has published a document supporting the Left-wing parties. One of the Communist sponsored Catholic candidates will be Raniero La Valle, a former editor of the Italian Bishops' Conference newspaper, "L'Avvenire d' Italia".