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BLASPHEMY LAW RESURRECTED— MARY WHITEHOUSE v. GAY NEWS

"This AGM is dismayed that the obsolete common law crime of blasphemy should be revived in 1976, first by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Home Secretary referring to the possibility of evoking the law, and by a certain Mrs Mary Whitehouse initiating an action against 'Gay News'. This situation emphasises the need for this common law offence to be statute barred." This emergency motion was passed at the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society on 12 December 1976. During the previous week Mrs Mary Whitehouse, of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, had obtained leave from Mr Justice Bristow to initiate criminal prosecution for blasphemous libel at a private hearing in the High Court. Proceedings will be taken against Denis Lemon, editor of "Gay News" and their distributors Moore Harness Ltd.

Gay News is a leading homosexual newspaper with a wide reputation for responsible reporting of gay events and discussion of homosexual rights; it has had contributors of the literary distinction of Angus Wilson and Christopher Isherwood. The poem, published in issue Number 96, June 1976, which has so offended Mrs Whitehouse, was by James Kirkup, a distinguished academic and poet. *The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name* is a poem in which a centurion speaks of his homosexual love for the crucified Jesus, and recalls the passionate vitality of Jesus' love for men. The description is both earthy and abstract and enables a metaphor of the historical persecution of homosexuals to develop, so that it becomes a persuasive plea for homosexual love to dare to speak its name. Even if it were not defensible on literary grounds, the attempt at its suppression by an obsolete law is outrageous.

The secularist movement has for over a century campaigned for repeal of the laws of blasphemy and for writings of a controversial religious nature

to stand before the law on an equal footing with any other expression in a free society. In 1967 the blasphemy laws were repealed, but blasphemy remains a common law criminal offence with penalties of fine and imprisonment. It is claimed that the offence is "an obscene poem and illustration vilifying Christ in his life and crucifixion." Mrs Whitehouse is applying for costs of the application. Should personal obsessions be paid for from the public purse?

The last blasphemy case was a private prosecution in 1971 by Lady Birdwood against the directors of the play *Counsel of Love* at the Criterion Theatre. The play depicted a deity, Jesus, the Virgin Mary with a blue rinse and so on, but the case was dismissed on a technicality. The last successful prosecution for blasphemy was against John Gott for selling in Stratford Broadway on 12 November 1921 *Rib Ticklers* and *God and Gott*, two of his own pamphlets. Gott, an experienced and determined secularist who had previously faced blasphemy charges, was sentenced to nine months hard labour from which his health never recovered. He died shortly afterwards.

Putting the Clock Back

A statement by the NSS was issued in December 1976: "This prosecution threat must be an embarrassment to all reasonable Christians. To the country as a whole it is more than an embarrassment: it threatens to put the clock back to the days of Christian tyranny.

"For the past 50 years whenever the National Secular Society has campaigned for a repeal of the blasphemy laws, we have been assured that this is unnecessary as these laws could never be used again. But within the past few weeks the possibility of invoking them has been raised by three

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Bad Press For Goodman Report

The report of the independent committee of inquiry into Charity Law and Voluntary Organisations, under the chairmanship of Lord Goodman, has now been published. The report was given wide publicity since the charitable status of many organisations ranging from political parties to church groups and from public schools to private animal hospitals is so controversial. The committee described itself as "independent" and was composed almost entirely of solicitors and charity officials.

Wide and strong dissatisfaction has been expressed with this report. This Committee has been two and a half years in labour, and has given birth to a statement of mammoth irrelevance. The delay in publication has slowed public discussion in an area seriously in need of reform. The report is woolly, unhelpful in suggesting ways of administering a Charity Law effectively and fairly, and offers as much light on a confused subject as a candle guttering in the dark.

At present organisations seeking charitable status and the tax advantages that go with it have to steer clear of political campaigning and confine themselves to relief of hardship. This does not prevent religious groups, established and maverick, from achieving charitable status, in fact it is almost automatic, while discrimination against many voluntary organisations, such as the National Secular Society, remains.

A press release issued by Barbara Smoker for the NSS stated that "the opening sentence of Chapter one of the 150-page report states that 'all the great religions enjoin their followers to give alms to the poor'— and this unpromising start sets the tone for all that follows . . . The Report wrestles with the impossible problem of modernising the old concept of charity based on subjective value judgments instead of putting fiscal privileges on a factual basis. The Committee considered proposals to restrict and proposals to expand the scope of charity status—either of which would make it possible for the law to be made fair and objective—but both solutions were rejected on totally inadequate grounds."

Lord Goodman claims a heavy responsibility for the choice of the committee, so he must accept some responsibility for its inadequacy of representation and its complete failure to face up to attempting a more imaginative definition of charity. Fortunately a minority report by Mr Ben Whitaker provides a clear dissenting voice. He points out that while religious and charitable activities may overlap they do not always coincide. He writes: "There are clear practical arguments in favour of concluding that religious bodies should be granted charitable status only in so far as they carry out otherwise charitable activities: e.g. for their work in relieving poverty but not for providing vestments. De-

clining which religious practices are too anti-social to be allowed charitable status is an invidious task." The NSS commented favourably on Mr Whitaker's minority report, "under his recommendations for instance, the National Secular Society . . . might at least gain legal parity with its traditional political opponents, such as the Lord's Day Observance Society (which now enjoys charitable status simply because it is religious), not by our gaining charitable status but by their losing it."

The proposals of the Charity Law Reform Committee for extending tax exemption by replacing the unworkable concept of charity with straightforward concessions for all non-profit distributing organisations (NPDOs) was cavalierly treated in the report. The Charity Law Reform Committee has roundly condemned the report as "lightweight and inadequate". They particularly criticise its failure to provide any objective criteria for definition of charity. In fact, even though the report's recommendations might allow some widening of definition to include "ethical and moral societies", it further compounds existing confusion by proposing that they would have to demonstrate their benefits to the community "according to basic principles which should be established." These "basic principles" can only be guessed.

Confusion and Anomalies

The report was also strongly criticised in a joint statement from the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association, issued by Kenneth Furness and Nicolas Walter respectively. They described it as "a mass of detailed recommendations which, if accepted, will introduce yet further confusion and anomalies" and "a sad report, born of frustration, and reared on misunderstanding—an ideal case for Voluntary Euthanasia."

Religious groups, at present concerned with their declining support, will cling to their privileged position—witness the non-visit of the month, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Coggan, failed to see the Prime Minister to plead for special treatment for the Churches in the new National Insurance Bill. It is therefore all the more important that the Goodman Report, in its massive irrelevance, be quickly forgotten and as the NSS urges "the Government set up a Royal Commission, in the hope that it might come forward with a less timid set of recommendations than the Goodman Committee for a long-overdue reform of the law in this sphere."

Charity Law and Voluntary Organisations. £2.00. Bedford Square Press, National Council of Social Service, 26 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HU.

Unsound and Uneducational

JANE COUSINS

The ultra-conservative Order of Christian Unity recently published a handbook entitled "Sound Sex Education", which was written by Margaret White and Jennet Kidd. The authors' chief aim appears to be the instilment of guilt, rather than knowledge, in their readers. There is little of educational value in their document. Their document is riddled with the purience and narrowness for which many Christian sex educators are notorious.

My own introduction to sex education was puzzling. We were given half a lesson about the reproductive system of the rabbit, then handed a booklet about the human reproductive system and told not to giggle and to keep reading until the lunch bell rang. Later all that remained in my mind was the final paragraph which invoked me to drink a hot milky beverage whenever I menstruated. Since my father drank this particular beverage every night as a night-cap, for some years I was convinced that he suffered from particularly bad period pains. Experience of that one sex book did not incline me to turn to another to answer the many questions I had on the subject.

My generation was badly taught about human sexuality; most children today are still badly taught. Michael Schofield (*The Sexual Behaviour of Young People*, 1965) established that of the children he interviewed 62 per cent of boys and 44 per cent of girls learned about sex from their friends. Learning about sex from friends still seems to be the most common source of information today. This is why so many young people are totally mystified about sex, and explains why for so many of them sex is invariably associated with dirty jokes, nudges, winks and dirty words scratched on lavatory walls.

It is not easy to assess exactly what or how much sex education is provided in schools today. The policy at both central and local government level is to provide some sort of sex education within the school curriculum, but this remains a matter of recommendation and is not mandatory. In short, the system is chaotic.

The Health Education Council has some two hundred individual titles on its list and the Family Planning Association has almost 250. But all these books appear to have little direct influence on the sexually ignorant young person. Schofield discovered that only 7 per cent of boys and 0 per cent of girls mentioned books as the source of their knowledge. When he followed up his research eight years later in *The Sexual Behaviour of Young Adults* he found that only 7 per cent of men and 4 per cent of

women mentioned books as a preferred source of information.

In view of these findings it seems likely that the vast market for books on the subject is made up of those who have to provide some sort of sex education. Teachers, youth workers, health visitors, clinic workers, lecturers and parents, inevitably badly instructed themselves when young, turn to these books in order to pass on reliable information to their pupils, clients and children. But the authors of these books don't merely pass on accurate facts (and not all even get as far as accuracy); attitudes are inseparable from facts. So the sexual political attitudes of the sex education writers are of the utmost importance. Margaret White and Jennet Kidd have written a handbook, entitled *Sound Sex Education* specifically for parents, teachers and education authorities. Rightly they are concerned about the present chaotic situation in our schools:

"Although in some schools there is responsible and sensible instruction, in others, unprincipled propaganda is allowed into the classroom." But their solution is to produce this handbook which is no more than an exercise in propaganda of a totally unprincipled and irresponsible nature. "Misleading sex education can be physically and psychologically harmful," they write, and it is impossible to disagree with them. But if adopted, the safeguards they suggest would only perpetuate the many existing myths about human sexuality which unhappily still persist.

To the authors, all sex outside marriage is shameful and dangerous. They see the existing sex laws as "protective" laws and not as an unwarranted intrusion into our lives. "We should use the existing law to protect children," they glibly write, but fail to understand that unless a law can actively prevent people from being harmed or can prevent some sexual behaviour from resulting in demonstrable suffering or offence to others, all that it does is to increase the amount of guilt which sexual activity can and does produce. The abolition of guilt, fear and shame in regard to sexual activity is something that every sex educator should concern themselves with. The authors of this handbook seem only anxious to encourage an attitude of guilt towards sex.

Dr White and Mrs Kidd fall into the trap of many a sex educator. They treat the psychological or sociological as a "fact" in much the same way as a fact about the position of an ovary or a prostate gland. Using this technique they present totally unwarranted assumptions and speculations based on their own personal experience and particular "Christian" ethic. Hence their advice to par-

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Why I Left the Church

GEORGE JAEGER

George Jaeger was born in London and grew up in the Anglican tradition. He was a victim of a broken home in his youth and for this reason emigrated to Australia at the age of 18. He was involved in the Christian Endeavour movement and later decided to become a clergyman. After being a Lay Reader for several years he entered a theological college to study for the priesthood.

I arrived at Ridley College, Melbourne, in 1936 to study for ordination examinations. It was an era when people like Bishop Barnes refused to believe in the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, and when the Higher Criticism played hell with the biblical narratives. The modernist viewpoint was expounded at Ridley College with the result that several of the students, myself included, eventually left the ministry for other fields of work or refused to submit to ordination in the first place.

However, a general philosophy of religion emerged which made it possible to continue in the faith in spite of all the criticism and reservations. Swallowing the 39 Articles was another matter, perhaps even more difficult, and much time and study were spent on these with a view to convincing us that they were all right if you did not press the points too literally. We were aided in these studies by a well-known propagandist, E. J. Bicknell, whose large volume on the subject became our *vade mecum*. In psychological terms, we learned the art of rationalising, i.e. finding reasons for accepting what was basically unacceptable.

The philosophy of religion above referred to was this: behind the universe stood a Deity (God the Father) in all respects similar in character to the Jesus of the gospels. Jesus, in fact, had been the very image of God the Father, and in his 33 years of existence he had revealed the secret of the universe by showing us the kind of person who "ruled the roost". This made for an acceptance not only of the universe itself but all of its anomalies, cruelties and inconsistencies. If anomalies existed it was because the universe was not yet completed or because the human race had great strides still to make in its evolution. (We accepted evolution and did not in the least think that this ruled out the need for a creator-deity.)

In 1938 I was made a Deacon and in 1939 became a fully ordained priest. At the end of 1940 I was accepted as a Chaplain to the Forces in the Australian Army.

The war itself brought about changes in my outlook and was certainly a big factor in my leaving the Church. For one thing, I met many men in

uniform who were agnostics or who held creeds opposed to my own, and in addition, I began reading more widely. The greatest anti-orthodox influence in my reading was undoubtedly Emerson. He declaimed against adherence to a dead Bible and a dead Church. Some of his aphorisms struck home with particular effect, e.g., "The course of history shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside."

The most important thing the war taught me was that God, if he existed, was powerless to prevent Hitler and the Nazis from doing anything, however cruel, they set their twisted minds on. He was powerless to save the six million Jews (the Chosen people?) from extermination. He did nothing to save either the innocent or the faithful. Why should an enemy "doodlebug", launched entirely at random, make a direct hit on the Guards Chapel at Wellington Barracks at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning, completely wiping out those who had assembled for worship? It gave one "pause" as they say. At a later date I was to ask why Kathleen Ferrier, who used her marvellous voice to praise God, should die of cancer of the throat?

Changing Beliefs

After the war I returned to England and another shock came my way. My sister, after producing two healthy girls, had given birth to a mongol child. In a way, this was the final blow to my belief in a beneficent God. What nonsense it made of such sentiments as "The Lord is my shepherd", etc. The truth dawned on me that one could not expect to be exempted from tragedy by belief in the "almighty". If one believed at all, it would have to be in spite of every appearance to the contrary. (The child in question lived for 20 years, still a child, and died of convulsions shortly after the death of his mother.)

Before the war ended I had decided to leave the Anglican fold, but I was not yet ready to make a complete break with Christianity. For a time I decided to throw in my lot with the Presbyterians. The latter had a democratic outlook that was unknown in the Church of England. High offices were not held in perpetuity, but any minister, in his turn, might be appointed Moderator (or leader) of the Church. Moreover there was equality between layman and minister, for they believed in "the priesthood of the laity".

In 1946 I was accepted into the Presbyterian fold on the strength of my Anglican Orders and stayed for 18 months or so at Westminster College, Cambridge, imbibing Presbyterian, as distinct from Anglican church history and doctrine. This did little to remove my nagging doubts as to the foundations of

the faith. The daily services in the chapel came to be more and more a complete formality.

The Presbyterians had their own "39 Articles" in the form of the Westminster Confession of Faith—a reactionary document if ever there was one. It was much opposed by our chief lecturer in dogmatics, Professor H. H. Farmer.

After leaving Cambridge in mid-1947 I accepted the pastorate of Everton Valley Church, Liverpool, but I knew then, and Dr Elmslie, Principal of Westminster College knew, that it was to be a sort of final test in my battle of faith versus doubt. I carried on the pastorate for about 16 months and then resigned for good from orthodox ministries of whatever complexion they might be. In later years I was accepted for a short time, as an avowed godless Humanist, into the ministry of the American Unitarian Association, but that is another story.

The main reason for my leaving the Church was this. I found that there were no grounds for the belief that a god of love ruled the universe. God, if he existed, was completely indifferent to what went on in this sublunary world. There were other reasons, e.g. I had ceased to believe in prayer, in the immortality of the soul and in the so-called inspiration of the Bible. As regards the latter, I found more inspiration in other forms of literature.

Return to Lay Life

Apart from the lessons of experience, it was obvious that no god of love could have created a world in which species preyed upon each other throughout the animal kingdom. Things made sense without god, but not otherwise.

Once the decision was made, I felt like Christian in reverse. The hero of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you may remember, dropped his great bundle of woes when he came to the foot of the cross. I dropped my equally great bundle of woes, doubts and religious difficulties when I found myself facing in exactly the opposite direction.

There was a sequel which involved becoming a layman again by legal process. I had been taught that Anglican Orders were "inviolable" and ineradicable: "Once a priest, always a priest". It turned out that becoming a layman again was comparatively simple.

In pursuing the idea of taking up teaching as my next profession, I wrote to a friend at the House of Commons, Arthur Skeffington, whose mother had taught me at school. Would it be possible for me to obtain a grant which would enable me to take a teacher training course?

He consulted the then Minister for Education, George Thomson, who pointed out that the 1945 additions to the Butler Act forbade persons in Holy Orders from teaching in State schools. The Minister suggested that if I were serious about the matter I should see a lawyer and take out a Deed of

Relinquishment, after which I would be able to apply for the necessary grant.

I acted on the Minister's suggestion, but there was some delay because the signed document had to be lodged with the Diocesan Registrar at York for six months before the legal process was completed. By the time my "de-frocking" was accomplished I had been in Holy Orders for eleven years, and had spent some five years prior to that in preparations of one kind or another for the priesthood.

Blasphemy Law Resurrected

public figures on three separate occasions—first by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as spokesman for the Church of England; secondly, by Mr Merlyn Rees, as spokesman for the Home Office (in the House of Commons on 22 October); and now by Mrs Whitehouse as spokesman for Christian busybodies.

"The idea of invoking the blasphemy laws was presumably put into her head by the two earlier references to them—which shows that irresponsible statements of this kind by people in responsible positions are far more dangerous than any of the unconventional publications and films that are their targets."

Perhaps it is also not accidental that the circulation of *Gay News* has been steadily growing and it is becoming increasingly available in newsagents sometimes reluctant to display controversial material until its profitability is proven. Mrs Whitehouse and the Festival of Light, of which she is a leading campaigner, has been virulently anti-gay. As was reported in the December issue of *The Freethinker*, Mrs Whitehouse has alleged that the work of the Albany Trust is a misuse of public funds. The Albany Trust has pioneered research and counselling in the field of sexual minorities. A pamphlet published by the Festival of Light *The Truth in Love—The Christian and the Homosexual Condition* is an incredible hotch-potch of untruth and prejudice.

In the year 1878 Charles Bradlaugh published a pamphlet on *The Laws Relating to Blasphemy and Heresy* vigorously opposing the blasphemy laws. "Laws to punish differences of opinion," he wrote, "are as useless as they are monstrous." Who could have predicted then that blasphemy would still be a crime almost a hundred years later? Let us hope that this case will demonstrate the absurdity of blasphemy as a criminal offence, and this year see its total extinction as a legal concept.

● Copies of the poem "The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name" is being widely circulated and would be available to any one who sends a stamped addressed envelope to Nicolas Walter, 134 Northumberland Road, Harrow, Middlesex.

Two Christian Fallacies Examined

R. A. D. FORREST

Some of the arguments used to justify Christian belief do not easily bear critical analysis. R. A. D. Forrest, who has highlighted some of the inconsistencies of the Biblical portrait of Jesus in a previous article, here looks closely at two commonly held strands of Christian apologetics. They seem notably lacking on examination.

I was present recently at a public discussion between a Methodist minister and an atheist—who remained good friends despite the divergence of their fundamental views. So many points were made by both speakers that it is quite impossible to summarise the discussion as a whole, especially as questions from the audience elicited further points. I was, however, particularly impressed by two points in the Methodist's discourse. Both are, I believe, fallacious, and I should not have thought them worthy of note were it not for the frequency with which such arguments are offered by the less sophisticated defenders of conventional Christian belief.

First, the speaker said that he found in Jesus his ideal of humanity; secondly, this belief had proved itself in practice as a comfort, a support, and an inspiration. In what follows I shall deal with the latter point first, as the answer to it is more easily appreciated.

The view that a proposition is to be accepted because it works in practice is, of course, a form of pragmatism, and as such is vulnerable to the criticism that we do not believe a thesis because it works but because it is, as far as we can see, true. It is absurdly easy to find analogies for this position; nothing is more obviously acceptable in practical life than the flat-earth theory which was long held by a majority of mankind. And nothing is more certainly false. So, too, we continue to talk of sunrise and sunset, using terms handed down from pre-Copernican times which no educated person accepts as giving a true picture of the facts.

Less easy to state succinctly is the fallacy contained in the Methodist's first point. Christians who worship Jesus, and at the same time venerate the gospels, too often forget that any mental picture they have of Jesus must ultimately rest on the testimony of these books. The historian or biographer who begins work with a preconceived idea and uses the primary sources to uphold and fortify that view, neglecting any discrepancies in his sources which would give a different picture of the object of his study, is hardly likely to produce a reliable work. Yet this is the way in which many Christians, possibly a majority, have formed a picture of the object of their worship.

In an earlier *Freethinker* article ("What is Chris-

tian Morality?", September 1975) I sought to show that the man Jesus, doubtless a very good character by the Pharisaic standards of his time, was seriously defective by the civilised standards of our day. To the examples there quoted I should like to add one more: how does the believer who sees his ideal man in Jesus judge his action (John II, 2-10), where he is represented as supplying further liquor to men already drunk? Those who read the Authorised Version may be excused for overlooking this point, since the words "when men have drunk freely" hypocritically hide the truth; the original Greek says bluntly "when they are drunk".

There is much to be said for each of us to form and hold fast to his ideal of what a man should be, and such an ideal picture may well be an inspiration and a support throughout life. But it is very dangerous to project that vision on to a historical, or an allegedly historical character, concerning whose actions there exist authoritative documents. In the case of Jesus those documents are, we must grant, incomplete, self-contradictory, and coloured by the prejudices of their compilers; but they are the only sources available and must be appealed to in support of any assertion concerning their subject. When those sources show failings in the character of their central figure, failings which are judged to be so in the light of the best thought of modern civilisation, they cannot do otherwise than lower the ideal which was our starting point.

Two points remain to be made clear: the above has been written without prejudice as to the important question whether Jesus was a historical character or not; it is perfectly legitimate to criticise the characters of Lady Macbeth or of King Lear whether or not such persons ever lived. In the second place the examples quoted here, as well as those used in my earlier article are far from exhausting the number of deeds and words of Jesus recorded in the gospels which would incur censure if imitated in a modern civilised community.

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ents and teachers is not only often incorrect but also dangerous and potentially harmful.

On the subject of masturbation the authors offer advice that is both ignorant and misleading. They are totally oblivious to female masturbation and suggest that the best way to treat a small boy who may be "innocently" masturbating is to give "him a biscuit or toy" so that he may have something else to do with his hands. Advice like this will only perpetuate the myth still strongly held by many parents and teachers that there is something wrong and harmful in masturbation. The fact that there is no medical evidence whatsoever to suggest anything of the kind is ignored by the authors. Onan has a lot to answer for.

When it comes to the myth about the female's low sex drive the authors surpass themselves. "A girl needs the security of total love—not just sexual desire—in order to be really responsive," they confidently assert. And they conclude from this wrongful premise that therefore "sex before marriage is inevitably less than the best." In this statement is contained the clue to what Dr White and Mrs Kidd are really writing about. They are less concerned with providing a handbook for sound sex education than with propagating their view that society should outlaw all sexual behaviour outside Christian marriage.

On the subject of homosexuality their attitude is predictably both wrong and potentially damaging: "Physical attraction to those of the same sex is a normal part of puberty. This is a phase to grow out of. It is homosexual practice which is wrong." And their concept of sin is strongly stressed: "Temptation acted out is wrong, but temptation controlled and avoided produces strength."

So convinced are they of this that they do not scruple to recommend that a girl resort to deceit in order to preserve her virginity. They write: "The temptation to go too far when you are alone may be hard to resist. Parents can be useful. It is often a good excuse to blame your parents' presence, however remote, for your not being able to accept advances." It would seem that the authors are not anxious to teach children about the fulfilment that can be derived from a caring, honest relationship. Instead they are urged to resort to the kind of hypocrisy and deceit which is found in paragraph after paragraph of this handbook.

In his introduction, Sir John Peel recommends *Sound Sex Education* as a "very valuable contribution to the wide debate currently taking place throughout the country on a subject of vital importance." In fact, this handbook contributes nothing at all to this debate other than a narrow moralising attitude based on a structure of mythology. Sex education is of utmost importance. It is far too important to be influenced by the emotional,

hypocritical and pontifically sexist speculation which is passed off as good "common sense" in this OCU document.

Our sex educators must realise the importance of teaching that sexual equality and quality in human relationships go together. Only then will our children be able to grow up without making the same mistakes that have been made in the past, and, tragically, are still being made.

The Board of Directors of G. W. Foote & Co wish to put on record their appreciation of the Editorship of Mr William McIlroy. He stepped into the breach on two separate occasions, in 1970-71 and in 1975 and brought vigour and topicality to the paper. He continues to work as the secretary of the National Secular Society and his help and advice we are sure will be available to "The Freethinker" when required.

G. N. Deodhekar
Chairman, Board of Directors

In assisting William McIlroy as Editor of "The Freethinker" I have learnt a great deal from his knowledge, astuteness and editorial flair. In particular his ability to persuade established and new writers to contribute excellent material was remarkable. There could be no better aim for a succeeding Editor than to sustain the high quality which he has achieved. J.H.

It is regretted that the price rise to 12p per issue of "The Freethinker" has been unavoidable. The corresponding increase for postal subscription rate is to be £1.75 for twelve months and 90p for six months. As was reported in the last issue—and as is well known—costs increase continually. But, with the continued generous support of donations, every effort will be made to hold the price at as reasonable a level as possible.

Freethinker Fund

During the period 24 November until 16 December 1976 a total of £50.59 was donated. Our thanks are expressed to the contributors who are listed below.

Anonymous, £1; P. Barbour, £8; Brigid Brophy, £3.25; D. C. Campbell, £7.75; Mrs M. F. Campbell, £3; E. Cybart, £6; A. E. Garrison, 25p; R. Gerrard, £1; D. Goldstick, 62p; V. Harvey, 50p; J. Hudson, 50p; C. Clidsay, £2; E. A. Napper, £2; A. Oldham, £4; G. Raphael, £1; F. E. Seward, 44p; Miss W. Shinton, £5; M. D. Silas, £1.10; G. Swan, £1.18; Mrs L. Timson, £1; Miss K. M. Tol-free, £1.

"GOD-SLOT" SLIPS

The Sunday religious "God-slot" has gone. Yet, this simply means that it will be slotted into other parts of the week. This new flexibility, which changes the rules about periods reserved for religious broadcasting, begins in the New Year. It cannot be especially welcomed since it in no way curtails unjustifiable privilege in presentation of one particular viewpoint, merely reorganises its timing. The programmes may take the viewer and listener unawares in a more insidious way. This is why a joint comment by the Humanist organisations, the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association, has called for programmes to be clearly labelled, when they emanate from the religious broadcasting departments, just as are party political broadcasts. (See Letters p.14). Such clear kinds of mental health warning will at least enable people to know what they are watching and not find a handful of pop songs lulls them into the mood for a medley of pious platitudes.

Religious broadcasting is in fact frequently informative and interesting and Sunday spots such as *Anno Domini* on BBC Television, for example, have recently given us two programmes which report clearly and leave viewers to draw their own conclusions. One was an account of a visit to England of the Yogi Swami Muktananda, a guru with an international following of thousands, who work themselves into an emotional state (comparable to that seen in charismatic Christian groups) at a touch of his whisk—a kind of divine tickle. Another programme showed Sgr Marcel Lefebvre stating clearly that he favoured fascist rulers like Franco in Spain. Freethinker readers will draw their own conclusions from such reports. The most important point is that religious programmes should find their own level in the market of the media, just like any other subject.

Doubt can, of course, be cast on the impartiality of the higher echelons of broadcasting and one can suspect that they show greater sensitivity to pressure in some directions than others. What kind of work will result from the Anglo-American-Italian co-production of Zeffirelli's *The Life of Jesus*, or *The Christians* a 13 part history of Christianity, two major ITV projects to be shown next year, remains to be seen. One programme which will not be seen is in a different area, that of discussion of sexual relationships. The series *Sex in Our Time* is reported to have shown a consistent concern for psychological health, and one episode *A Legacy of Guilt* apparently describes swings of the moral pendulum throughout the ages, contrasting the sado-masochistic extravagances of Christians in many periods with a saner attitude in the East. The series caused no outcry after a showing at a peak time in Australia but withdrawal of this Thames Television

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programme by the IBA caused Jonathen Dimbleby and a host of Thames Television producers, directors, reporters and researchers to write to *The Times* complaining bitterly of "covert censorship".

Another recent instance of complaint about broadcasting arose over Granada TV's programme *Report Action* where the emphasis is on practical help and requests for assistance from kidney donors, visitors to mental hospitals and drivers for meals-on-wheels services produced very positive responses. The problem was that this programme, though officially timed within the "God-slot" had no explicit reference to religion. Some denominational members of the Central Religious Advisory Council voiced their objections to this. No doubt the religious pedants will be seen as irrelevant by the public who responded to the appeals. The programme will be seen by secularists as a serious challenge to the assumption that religion and responsible attitudes towards the community are synonymous.

BIBLE SPEAKS INC

The list of sects of an extreme kind continues to expand. Such sects often cause rifts in families, accusations of exploitation, and dedication to the point of mania. After the Divine Light Mission, The Children of God, and the Moon Children we now read of The Bible Speaks sect, or Bible Speaks Inc, as it is known in America. The sect has its British Headquarters in Essex and more than one MP has received letters from anxious parents worried about the group's activities. It is reported that a Church of England parson, the Rev Christopher Johnson, who allowed the cult's members rent-free accommodation eventually decided to ask them to leave because he felt their approach was disturbing and unpleasant.

The group is apocalyptic; its belief that the end of the world is near is based on the familiar calculation of one generation from the time when the people of Israel regain their lands. Another feature which this group has in common with many sects is the financial contributions and total commitment expected of its followers. Students at Essex University are said to have abandoned their studies and some disciples apparently became zombie-like.

In the United States allegations have been made that money was taken from a mentally deficient man for lessons he was incapable of understanding. The organisation has accumulated considerable wealth, with a private plane and a centre with

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sauna and swimming baths. If big business has at times been accorded religious status in the States, equally religion is no stranger to big business. There is nothing new in the Bible Speaks sect: but the continuing proliferation of these groups, which are at best silly at worst damaging to individuals, (often those who have been encouraged into an emotional conversion) is a potent reminder of the need for clear rational comment on religion today.

SCHOOL ASSEMBLIES DEMANDED

It is often claimed that reform of the religious education clauses of the 1944 Education Act is unnecessary as they are so frequently ignored. This may no longer happen if a case in Sheffield becomes a significant national precedent. According to a report in the press, Mr Robert Mason found that his daughter's infants school in Sheffield was not holding religious assemblies. He checked the 1944 Act's relevant sections and approached the headmistress. When she refused to change her policy, he says he wrote to the chairman of the managers and then threatened legal action. They climbed down and morning assemblies were resumed.

If such action were to be taken all over the country by committed Christians impudently demanding that the state do their own indoctrination for them, we could have a flurry in staff rooms all over England where teachers know full well that they are turning a blind eye to the letter of the Act. No doubt there would be numerous complex arguments about whether *The Holly and the Ivy* played by the recorder group at the end of the morning, fulfilled the legal requirements for an act of worship.

The reviving hopes of evangelizing parents is further instanced by an editorial comment in *War Cry* referring to the incident where a young child was asked by the judge to take religious instruction before taking the oath in a Leeds Crown Court: "Christians should surely regard the evangelization of children as a master thought—not an after-thought." Christians are not the only groups seeking to sustain or extend religious instruction in schools. A recent special supplement on religious education in *The Times Educational Supplement* contained an article by Owen Surridge "The Moon of Islam: Rising or Waning?" subtitled "Muslims prepare to extend the battle for their children's religious education." It makes clear that Muslim groups

are preparing to demand greater privileges for the teaching of Islam in schools. The National Secular Society has for several years been pointing to the dangers of other religions, such as Islam, demanding their rights under the law. Every group is of course entitled to instruct its youngsters in its own beliefs, (though one would hope this would encourage the growth of tolerance and understanding not the reverse)—but should this be the task of the state?

Two arguments are often forwarded in relation to religion in schools. Firstly, that it is so innocuous and honoured so much more in the breach than the observance, that no-one could take exception. Secondly, that all concerned with religion in schools are moving towards a sufficiently reasonable common ground of an implicit and non-evangelical approach that with a little reform all will be well (in the best of all possible worlds?). Do these news items give grounds for hoping that either of these arguments holds water?

EMERGENCY MOTIONS

Two emergency motions which were passed at the Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society on 12 December 1976 were: "In view of the failure of the Goodman Committee to recommend an end to the present obsolete, anomalous and unjust concept in law of charity, this Annual General Meeting urges the Government to set up a Royal Commission to investigate the subject further" and "The recent case at Leeds Crown Court when a seven-year-old girl was required to undergo religious instruction to enable her to take the oath before being allowed to give evidence, prompts this Annual General Meeting to reiterate the National Secular Society's demand for universal affirmation."

Copies of the book *The Anarchists in London: 1935-55*, by Albert Meltzer, reviewed on page 12, are available from Stuart Christie, Cienfuegos Press, Over the Water, Sanday, Orkney, £1 plus 15p postage.

In Italy the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic is being revised. A draft version of the new Concordat has been presented in Parliament by Prime Minister, Sgr Giulio Andreotti. The previous Concordat (1929) included handing down of the Christian doctrine as a compulsory subject in all state schools, with exemption only where parents ask for it in writing. The new proposal is that, while the teaching of religion be guaranteed, it become an optional subject. The parents, guardian, or pupils of prescribed age would choose whether or not to take part. Perhaps there is a lesson for England here.

BOOKS

ALONE OF ALL HER SEX: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary by Marina Warner. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £6.50.

In my view the best of this book is the Prologue. It states a case in a human, personal, interesting way that makes one want to read more. Unfortunately the author goes on, for over three hundred large pages, to prove and illustrate her thesis with a deadening overdose of piety and superstition, which must have cost her a colossal total of labour and research, apart from making the finished article expensive, unwieldy, and pretentious.

The Prologue shows her as a convent school-girl, "a child of Mary" who "dedicated herself to the Virgin and promised to emulate her in thought, word, and deed: her chastity, her humility, her gentleness. She was the culmination of womanhood." There is humour here and there, which sadly gets submerged later on: "As my agnostic father maintained, it was a good religion for a girl." The convent girls thrilled to what they called "holiness" . . . "She's so *holy*, we'd say in admiration of a classmate who spent particularly long on her knees before the Thirteenth Station of the Cross: 'Mary takes her Beloved Son to her bosom.' Only moments before we had been stifling our giggles at that risqué word 'bosom.'"

So, concludes Marina, their "holiness was a shallow affair." But untroubling, because simple and certain; and the Virgin was the chief certainty of all. Always loving, and so ready to help, she heard and answered all prayers; one felt that "she did not really need to be asked." What the girls never noticed, when "studying" the New Testament—because their attention was never drawn to the fact—was the singular reticence maintained about this All-important Figure in Catholic devotion, "passed over almost in silence."

Marina Warner tells us that it was only in her last two years at school that she felt the first chill of doubt. But this was negligible compared to "the absolute misery that shook me when I was confronted, in puberty, by the Church's moral teaching." She had to face the fact that "The price the Virgin demanded was purity, and the way the educators of Catholic children have interpreted this for nearly 2000 years is sexual chastity. Impurity, we were taught, follows from many sins, but all are secondary to the principal impulse of the devil in the soul—lust." (No wonder that, where this besotted notion is instilled from earliest childhood and haunts the Catholic conscience to the grave, persecution, cruelty, and every crime against compassion, human rights and human dignity, have flourished uncondemned by the Church, or at most been regarded by theology as lesser evils!)

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But Marina, even while the terror gripped her, had the good sense to be doubtful. She felt, albeit confusedly, "that the problem of human evil was more complex than concupiscence—at least in the narrow sexual definition." She reached the conclusion at last, though with tears of nostalgia and the pain of the heart's rebellion, "that in the very celebration of the perfect human woman" (the Virgin Mary) "both humanity and women were subtly denigrated."

This is her main thesis: the "paradox" she attempts to illustrate by exploring the many aspects of Mariolatry in European culture. The method chosen may have been the best for her purpose, but it leaves me, personally, puzzled and disappointed. The mammoth task is undertaken in five long parts, subdivided into chapters: each part dealing with an aspect of the cult as it developed with the growth of Catholic devotion and the vicissitudes of history. Under the titles of Virgin, Queen, Bride, Mother and Intercessor, the cult is detailed with a wealth—or extravagance—of information, apparently inexhaustible and certainly exhausting to read. References occur every few words or so (every page bristles with brackets); Marian quotations in verse, carol and prose flourish like daisies; the oddest superstitions are impartially included, miracles, legends of the saints, the whole ragbag of Catholic romanticism. Illustrations are sometimes familiar, devotional: oftener quaint, symbolical, cryptic. (The seven rose-crowned angels supporting the Madonna on the cover—from the Virgin panel of the Wilton diptych—were described on a Radio review as looking "supercilious" and "expensive"—and they do just that!) Finally, Appendices, Chronology, Notes, Bibliography, and Index consume 77 more pages.

Having dutifully and laboriously read (practically) all through the text, I felt as one fed on a surfeit of wedding-cake and dubious sweet wine. What, I still wonder, could have been the need for this gargantuan celebration of primitive devotion, when the message could have been condensed into a book less than half the size, far more sharply and convincingly, in a human and interesting way like the prologue? As a Mariolater myself for many a mad year, I only wish that some very necessary truths had not been dolled up in the trappings of superstition, and consequently half smothered in a mass of devotional verbiage. As a woman, I heartily endorse the thesis of the book as sound, factual,

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and absolutely vital to be published far and wide. But the author lingers too long, too lovingly, on outdated myths, pretty fancies, and absurd stories about the Perfect Woman (and her retinue of saints), as though the book were a product of Catholic devotion by some enthusiastic mediaevalist. The down-to-earth Woman, waiting to be freed from the priest-imposed yoke, hardly gets a look in. Perhaps I am being unfair to Marina Warner, but that is the impression I was left with. What a pity she didn't leave her nostalgia out of it!

PHYLLIS GRAHAM

DEATH, DYING AND THE BIOLOGICAL REVOLUTION by Robert M. Veatch. Yale University Press, £9.35.

This treatise by Dr Robert M. Veatch is both comprehensive and complex. It deals with the philosophical, moral and medical aspects attendant on dying with the various influences intermingled with widely differing shades of opinion. The author gives and comments upon quotations from many sources; the bibliography lists over 200 books, reports and journals.

The fundamental issues which are familiar to all who have given thought to this matter are examined: for example, that the irreversibly unconscious individual is dead to the world, but his or her body might continue involuntary activity by heart, lungs and vital fluid flow if apparatus is applied. Whether there is justification for artificially using mechanical devices to maintain this activity when there is no hope of restoring the patient to consciousness is affirmed as a moral rather than a medical question. Dr Veatch summarises: "The question whether to treat a person who will never regain consciousness as dead is really one of what concept of death ought to be used by society. It is . . . a philosophical question which can be answered independent of medical training or medical skills."

This leads to consideration of the definition of death. In the United States the different states have their own definition and many have been formulated afresh with transplant surgery in mind. However, more recently, the concept of clinical moratoriums, or organ banks, is being phased out with the diminishing call for heart transplants. Concomitantly, all 50 states have adopted the "Uni-

form Donor Card" for personal anatomical gifts similar to the Kidney Card in Britain.

Dr Veatch states his belief, "that death is most appropriately thought of as the irreversible loss of the embodied capacity for social interaction." It is now becoming universally accepted that death occurs when there is complete and irreversible loss of brain activity; certainly when the brain stem has become inert. The criteria laid down by the Ad Hoc Committee of Harvard Medical School are widely recognised in the United States, these are: 1 Unreceptivity and unresponsivity. 2 No movements or breathing. 3 No reflexes. 4 Flat electroencephalogram. The tests must be repeated after 24 hours and to exclude hypothermia and drug cases.

For centuries the criteria of death were that the person had ceased to breathe and the heart had stopped beating. Now that these functions can be taken over almost indefinitely by biomedical machinery, even when brain function has ceased, there is much controversy in the United States, as elsewhere, to decide when the patient is to be deemed as dead. Another contentious point is whether or not to withhold the use of a respirator or, if applied, when to withdraw. There is no measure of agreement as to whether it is less moral to withhold mechanical support, than it is to discontinue once it has been engaged.

At the present time these decisions rest with the physicians. Dr Veatch, who declares that such decisions must be seen to be free of conflict of interest such as research, continued treatment fees or transplantation, is opposed to the decision lying with the physicians. In the United States treatment fees are significant. An official State survey showed that even in 1964-65, 38 per cent of all deaths were in hospitals and the average fees were over 1000 dollars. Recently a family lost everything in meeting bills of over 160,000 dollars for the care of a relative who was kept alive although there was "no chance of rehabilitation."

Dr Veatch is opposed to active euthanasia and even (quite illogically) objects to the term "euthanasia". Dr Veatch advocates that the whole matter should be resolved by the patient's right to refuse treatment. To meet the contingency of the patient not being competent to do so at the crucial time, the author suggests that an agent with legal authority should be nominated while the individual is capable. As a standby, the next of kin—the majority decision from three—should resolve it.

Obviously Dr Veatch is keen to abolish the power now prevalent in the United States of physicians making the vital decision consequent to harping on such terms as "ordinary" or "extraordinary" treatment. Many in Britain might be surprised at the number of cases that are taken to the courts by the next of kin for the grant of right to have elaborate treatment stopped in the interest of the comatosed patient. The Karen Quinlan case is a

continuing example often referred to in the treatise. Dr Veatch declares that incompetency of the patient "can and has been used to infringe the right to a humane, dignified death free of suffering."

Many citizens of the United States do not agree with Dr Veatch that the critical decision should rest with an agent or next of kin when the patient is unable to express his or her wish. There is a tendency towards the British pattern of advance declaration by the individual concerned which aims to eliminate all doubt. Some physicians have composed and published their own letter of instruction on these lines. The Euthanasia Educational Council has issued the "Living Will", which is an instruction hopefully to influence the medical attendants in terminal illness not to dally with an inevitable death.

The following disclosure is quite encouraging; "The Euthanasia Society of England prepared a Draft Bill which was considered in Parliament in 1969. It has become a model for one of three main types of bills. Since then no fewer than 20 bills have been introduced into the legislature of at least 14 states." The Florida house was the first state to approve such a statute, but the senate did not concur.

It is reasonable to conclude from the widely based discourse and correlation of facts, which Dr Veatch has so ably and conscientiously assembled, that the British proposals for voluntary euthanasia are both sensible and practical.

On the question of deformed infants there is evidence that the right of parents to refuse surgical interference in spina bifida cases, where treatment would save the life of the child but leave it with severe physical and mental burdens, is now being more generally recognised and practised.

Consideration is given to the pros and cons of telling cancer patients the truth about their condition. It must to a large measure depend on the patient's personal qualities. The author tends to favour telling the truth and would most certainly do so for a patient who had domestic or business affairs to set in order.

A standard comparable to the Harvard one general in the United States, described so clearly in this book, now adopted in Britain was recently disclosed:

The Conference of Medical Royal Colleges and their Faculties in the United Kingdom (October 1976) in formulating criteria for the diagnosis of brain death, stated: "It is agreed that permanent functional death of the brain stem constitutes brain death and that once this has occurred further artificial support is fruitless and should be withdrawn. It is good medical practice to recognise when brain death has occurred and to act accordingly, sparing relatives from the further emotional trauma of sterile life."

CHARLES WILSHAW

There was one hilarious day in Hounslow Magistrates Court during 1937 when a minor blow for freedom was struck. The smooth conveyor belt system of dispensing justice was completely disrupted by three successive and separate charges of "obstruction" arising from street corner meetings. These were brought by an over-officious police sergeant with a pathological dislike of democratic processes, but instead of pleas of guilty the court was subjected to protracted and vigorous defence arguments by each of the defendants. These were Bill Gape, "the tramps' KC", Fred Tonge of the British Empire Union (rather surprisingly) and myself. The result at the end of the day (almost literally so) was discharge for Bill and nominal fines for the others. But never again did police interfere with meetings on that site.

This was recalled by the tribute to Bill Gape among many others paid by Albert Meltzer in his entertaining and vividly written personal viewpoint over 20 years. He has performed a much needed and valuable service in recording the activities of humble people in the great struggle for human freedom, who would otherwise remain anonymous and forgotten. It is good that this should be done while memories are still clear, for standard histories invariably only refer to the great names. Many are those in the army of freedom who remain virtually unknown but have played a small but not always insignificant part in shaping history.

I found this book fascinating reading recalling, as it does so many events and personalities I have known, and often disagreed with! In fact, the title is somewhat misleading, for Meltzer deals with much more than the Anarchist movement in London. It is almost a mini-encyclopaedia of the Left. Of particular interest to all freethinkers are the frequent references to people and personalities connected with Secularism and associated causes. Many *Freethinker* readers will enjoy the snap, off-the-cuff judgments of persons well-known to them.

The Anarchists in London does not pretend to be a serious historical study. In the words of the author it is "a personal memoir". But it does give some important sidelights on events. The 1945 prosecution of the Anarchist *War Commentary* group (significantly at the end of hostilities) as well as others (including Meltzer himself, whose own activities deserve wider recognition) was of greater relevance than appeared at the time. It now seems that the authorities really feared an outbreak of violent revolution, with disaffection among the armed forces similar to that of 1918-19. As usual, Anarchists, Trotskyists and others were confused in the minds of officials. Communists then being almost part of the Establishment, others had to serve as scapegoats.

The chatty, intimate style of writing covers such a wide panorama that it is difficult to pinpoint particular items. It is, within its scope hard to fault. The severest critics may well be found among Meltzer's Anarchist colleagues, for he does not spare some of them. His candid comments portray the movement-warts and all. There are but two smaller items that I must correct. Saklatvala was not a "practising Hindu" (p.24). He was a Parsee and related to the steel and cotton millowning Tata family. There was quite a furore when his children were initiated into the faith, to ensure their share of the family fortune. Also, the "shorthand professor" and "old Charlie" were not the same person, as the author indicates.

This is writing worthy of the widest circulation both among those of an age group wishing to indulge in nostalgia as well as for those desiring to learn how things really were and of the otherwise unrecorded, unknown individuals who played their roles.

JAMES M. ALEXANDER

TIME FOR CONSENT by Norman Pittenger. SCM Press, £1.80.

It is a pleasure to be able to welcome almost without reservation a book on the subject of homosexuality written from an entirely Christian viewpoint. Norman Pittenger, a theologian at King's College, Cambridge, pleads with passion and insight for the churches fully to accept homosexual loving as potentially as fulfilling as any heterosexual relationship. In an autobiographical introduction, in which he describes the response produced by an earlier, less fully-developed version of the book, he expresses surprise that people professing themselves Christians should have been so uncharitable as to use phrases such as "filthy creatures", "disgusting perverts", "damnable sinners". Freethinkers will be less surprised. The Church's attitude in this direction is abominable—to put it mildly—and has ranged from the intermittently persecutory to the indefatigably persecutory, with a multitude of gay clerics on the way.

Mr Pittenger has begun a long overdue re-examination of the Church's attitude to homosexuality. Yet judging from statements which I have seen emanating from Christian quarters it will be an uphill task. The *Church Times*, for instance, recently withdrew and apologised for an advertisement on behalf of a group of gay Christians. At best the attitude seems usually to be sympathetic to "the Problem" which people must come to terms with, and to make a distinction between the unfortunate state of being homosexual and the definitely controllable physical homosexual act, which can, like all sinful acts, be coped with by prayer and counselling. This approach reminds me of Baden Powell's

advice to go for long walks and have cold showers when certain feelings are aroused.

A couple of quotations will make clear how positive is Norman Pittenger's approach: "I am sure that like all other human beings, the homosexual wants to give and receive genuine love—if by love we mean commitment of self, sharing of life and openness to another." And: "The homosexual is indeed different in his sexual orientation from the heterosexual; in every other respect he or she is simply another human being. He or she is not an 'abnormal' person, with 'unnatural' desires and habits."

Given the change of climate of opinion during the last two decades, such statements should no longer need emphasis. But they do, and I am pleased to see a theologian making them. It does, after all, involve a theory of sexuality quite different from that dominant in the Christian tradition, from one of dutiful procreation to one of pleasurable giving and receiving.

A large part of the book is devoted to complex arguments to persuade Christians that homosexuality is neither sinful nor unnatural. To me this is something of a pseudo problem. It is much simpler just to abandon the concept of sin and naturalness. And Norman Pittenger does seem over-anxious to emphasize the pair-bond possibilities of homosexual relationships, rather than to state a possible variety of relationships.

However, I would not wish to conclude with such minor criticisms. The book quotes how Antony Grey reported a San Francisco policeman who told a homosexual youth: "If you are homosexual be the very best homosexual you can possibly be." If this book enables more churchmen to give the same advice, it will have served an enormously valuable purpose.

JIM HERRICK

THE JESUS FILE, by Desmond Leslie. Sidgwick and Jackson, £3.75.

Was the order for Jesus' execution made out in triplicate, with copy to Armoury, Tenth Legion, stationed at Jerusalem, requisitioning crosses and crossbars, and file copy to the emperor Tiberius at Rome? We shall never know. The Roman civil service did not, of course, enjoy the benefits of modern print-through forms, nor indeed of paper. They managed remarkably well, however, with waxen tablets erasable after use, rather like today's magnetic tape; and wisely eschewed committing too much to permanent written record—hence the relative lack of source material for the Roman version of the gospel story.

This book is a clever and witty attempt to fill the gap. It tells the story of the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus as it might have been set down in the official Roman records, with the poetic license of

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modern bureaucratic idiom and procedures thrown in. Mr Leslie has researched widely, but wears his learning lightly. His book does not exactly throw new light on the familiar material, but it persuades the reader to take a rather more light-hearted view of the gospel events than biblical scholars would like us to.

All the paraphernalia of officialdom is here. Jesus is arrested and charged with offences many and various; "conspiring and threatening to depose the lawful head of state, Tiberius Caesar and Herod, and to usurp their Position, their Power, their Crown and Dignity" mixes incongruously with "catering without a licence". "Inciting, subverting and causing H.M. Collectors of Taxes to vacate their posts to follow his corrupt and heinous practices" was doubtless as serious an offence two thousand years ago as any government would regard it today. And the indignation of the manager of the First City Bank of Jerusalem (Temple Branch) at Jesus' high-handed expulsion of the money-changers from The Temple is splendidly portrayed—after all, "bankers are like everyone else. We have to make a living." "Indeed you have," answers the prosecution.

And how about this for a new twist on the millions of words written about the Judas Iscariot story:

"The above sum (thirty pieces of silver) was later returned to the Temple Treasury by the above J. Iscariot . . . the Treasurer refused acceptance, as there is no machinery for dealing with such eventualities. Whereupon said J. Iscariot, flinging said sum on the floor of this office, shouted 'I have sinned! I have betrayed the blood of an innocent man!' . . . it has now been ruled by Head of Treasury that these monies may not be re-credited to Treasury account, as they are alleged to be the price of blood (viz. subsec 4/b, paras 5,9 Tres. Regs. Herod 1), but should be utilised for the purchase of the disused potter's field as a burial ground for strangers, thereby relieving City Rates".

Or this, a nice example of Mr Leslie's sense of humour: Pilate, refusing audience with Caiaphas who had come to enter his specious plea that Jesus be crucified to salve the dignity of Caesar, saying "Put it in writing!"

The story of the birth of Christianity—immensely important for the understanding of western civilisation, if not for the good of our souls—has not in general been regarded as suitable for satirical comment. But bureaucracy, whether Roman or modern, is always fair game. Mr Leslie's characters act out their elaborate official games, knowing little of what is really going on, and caring less about the moral implications. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

I enjoyed this book for its vein of seriousness, as well as its novelty and wit.

PHILIP HINCHCLIFF

It was agreed at a recent meeting of the Humanist Liaison Committee that it would be useful to form a small group concentrating on research and action in areas of reform relevant to Humanism. The group might hope to have the same expertise and impact as the Charity Law Reform Committee. There are many fields where Humanists are still at a disadvantage vis a vis the churches and the religious, ranging from the Establishment of the Church of England to oath-taking. Would anyone who would like to work with such a group please contact me at the following address: 105A Clarendon Road, London W11. Tel: 01-727 6432.

ANTHONY CHAPMAN

HUMBUGGING BAN

Derek Allen condemned "the humbugging, face-saving partial ban" imposed on the National Front by South Place Ethical Society ("The Freethinker", November 1976). Having re-read the account of a previous annual general meeting on pp.22-24 of "The Ethical Record" for July-August 1975, I consider the remark is fair comment, and mild at that.

Peter Cadogan only makes bad matters worse by claiming "the full knowledge and support of our General Committee" for a situation he chose to "set up". No such words were used; instead, "plainly if any hirer uses the Hall in breach of the Race Relations Act, 1965, is taken to court and found guilty, then that hirer will cease to have access to the Hall under the 1975 Resolution." The latter reads: "Our policy, in accordance with our belief in civil and religious liberty, is to let the Hall without any discrimination beyond the terms of our contracts and the law of the land."

The Committee approved all the arrangements made in view of the bookings already accepted for 15 and 16 October 1976.

There was, however, a separate motion: "To add practical effect to the Society's declared opposition to racialism, the General Committee now decides that no further hirings will be accepted from or on behalf of the National Front." This was lost by eight votes to seven with 20 members present. Totalitarianism narrowly averted—another miracle?

Nobody has been taken to court—but "the hammer duly descended" in the blameless hands of Peter Cadogan and the Chairman. Mr Cadogan tells us, "This is how justice, properly understood, works." Why so?

A. L. LOVECY

IDENTIFY "GOD-SLOT"

The Humanist movement welcomes the abolition of the so-called "God-slot" on television, but looks forward to the abolition of the whole system of religious broadcasting in the long term, and in the meantime calls for the identification of religious programmes.

The British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, and the Rationalist Press Association have always opposed the restriction of certain times to religious programmes, and we are therefore glad to see the opening of television on early Sunday evenings to all kinds of programmes. But we still oppose the present system, in which programmes about

(Continued on back page)

PUBLICATIONS

- The Philosophy of Atheism, Antony Flew £3.50 (26p).
 Honest to Man, Margaret Knight, £3.75 (26p). Humanism, Barbara Smoker, 50p, (9p). The Longford Threat to Freedom, Brigid Brophy, 10p, (7p). The Right to Die, Charles Wilshaw, 25p, (9p). An Introduction to Secular Humanism, Kit Mouat, 45p, (9p). What Humanism is About, Kit Mouat, 53p, (26p). The Dead Sea Scrolls, John Allegro, 95p (17p). Did Jesus Christ Exist?, Chapman Cohen, 5p, (7p). Morality Without God, Chapman Cohen, 5p, (7p). Woman and Christianity, Chapman Cohen, 5p, (7p). Thomas Paine, Chapman Cohen, 15p, (7p). Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality, John Lauritsen, 20p, (9p). The Absurdities of Christian Science, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). The Jesuits: Religious Rogues, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). How Christianity Triumphed, Joseph McCabe, 12p (7p). Phallic Elements in Religion, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). Pagan Christs, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). The Fraud of Spiritualism, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). Legends of Saints and Martyrs, Joseph McCabe, 12p, (7p). 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Identify "God-slot"

religion are almost entirely controlled by religious interests and in which such programmes are also frequently broadcast without any explicit indication of their origin and purpose.

We suggest that the time has come in our pluralist society to abolish both the religious advisory committees which supervise religious broadcasting, and the religious broadcasting departments which produce religious programmes. Until this reform is accepted, however, we propose that, since it is no longer possible to identify religious programmes by the times they are broadcast, all programmes produced by religious broadcasting departments should be introduced with some formula like party political broadcasts, so that the public may know when they are being offered proselytising propaganda rather than unbiased information or honest entertainment. Broadcasting about religion should be as open and balanced as about every other controversial issue; until it is, injustice should at least be seen to be done.

KENNETH FURNESS, British Humanist Association
WILLIAM McILROY, National Secular Society
NICOLAS WALTER, Rationalist Press Association

FESTIVE YEAR

Although, like G. B. Shaw, I have long felt Christmas should be abolished, I would have no objections to a good old pagan feast, raucous and boozy. I noticed this year that things are moving my way. It has been reported that collection boxes filled much quicker on one occasion when the carol singers switched to pop songs. Recently I noticed an advertisement in the "Catholic Herald" which read "It is said that a jug or two of Bull's Blood helped the Bishop of Eger feel a little closer to heaven." And it is rumoured that Monks' Mulled Cup was one of the merriest recipes of the season. Good wishes for a festive year to your readers.

ROBERT KING

According to hearsay, which although of course unreliable often contains a grain of truth, the parents of a child taking part in a nativity play were recently deeply offended. The offence was given by the casting; whereas in a previous year the infant had been sweetly playing the Virgin Mary, now she was offered the role of one of Herod's dancing girls. The parents naturally felt such a swift decline was unacceptable.

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove. Sunday, 6 February, 5.30 pm. Sir Hermann Bondi: "A Personal View of Humanism".

Havering Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, corner of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road. Tuesday, 18 January, 8 pm. Philip Buttinger: "Religious Humanism".

Humanist Holidays. Easter at Southsea. Details from Mrs M. Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey. Telephone (01) 642 8796.

Humanist Housing Association. Opening of Robert Morton House, London, Saturday 15 January. Admission by ticket obtainable from the HHA, 311 Kentish Town Road, London NW5.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 27 January, 7.45 pm. Bill Hughes: "The State and Religion".

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. Meeting held on the third Wednesday of the month, 7.45 pm.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. 15 Woodberry Crescent, London N10. Thursday, 20 January, 8 pm. Nicolas Walter: "Religious Education in Schools".

National Tribunal on Abortion Rights. Day of Evidence at Westminster Central Hall, London, Saturday, 29 January. Details from Tribunal Committee, NAC, 30 Camden Road, London NW1.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House Annex, Page Street, Swansea. Friday 14 January, 7.30 pm. John Fussell: "The Development of Music in Swansea".

Worthing Humanist Group. Burlington Hotel, Marine Parade, Worthing. Sunday, 30 January. Dr M. Cornwall: "Science and Religion Since the Renaissance".

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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