

The FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Secular Humanist Monthly

Vol. 97, No. 9

SEPTEMBER 1977

12p

CHURCH SCHOOL PUTS RELIGION BEFORE HEALTH

There are many objections to the continued existence of church schools. One which has been highlighted by some recent cases in South London is that the school may use its powers of selection to reject children whose parents are not regular church-goers. This has happened even when there are medical reasons for the child to go to the nearest school and this is a church school. It seems an uncharitable use of church privilege—to say the least.

Northbrook Church of England School, Taunton Road, SE12 is a secondary school which is maintained out of public money—for the churches which sponsor such schools pay only a small percentage of the building costs and none of the running costs. Yet, the school seems to be discriminating in such a way that one child has not received schooling for a year and another is being forced to accept a school which will mean taking a bus journey against medical advice.

Sandra King of Lee Road suffers from a medically recognised phobia which makes travelling extremely difficult. Although Northbrook School is her nearest school, she has been refused a place there because her parents are not regular church-goers. Her case was reported in the *South East London Mercury* of 21 July and the *London Evening News* of 29 July. The headmistress, Mrs V. M. Kirby, is reported as saying "Our admissions are based on church membership first of all, being a church school. Last year, we had three applications for every place we had." It was pointed out by the headmistress that Sandra King had been offered a place at Thomas Tallis School which is within walking distance. For an energetic child in full health it might be a possible—if longish—daily walking distance, but for someone with travelling difficulties it is not.

As a result Sandra King has been educated at home for the last year. This has not been easy, since tuition is expensive and the help of friends

not always sufficient.

It has been made clear that Sandra, who went to a Church of England primary school, is herself quite a religious child.

Mr Denis Cobell, Hon Secretary of the Lewisham Humanist Group had letters on the subject published in the *South East London Mercury* and the *South London Press*. He pointed out how the present system of selection by church schools could act against the interest of the child. Mr Cobell also wrote to Mrs Shirley Williams, Secretary of State for Education. He received a reply stating that no comment could be made on individual cases, and that the government had no intention of reviewing the structure of the dual system, which was generally felt to be acceptable at present.

Protest to Mrs Shirley Williams

A similar case came to light as a result of Mr Cobell's letters to the press. As a result of this further information Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, also wrote to the Secretary of State for Education giving details of cases and protesting at discriminatory selection. A press release, including a copy of the letter, was issued on 19 August emphasising this reason for objecting to church schools' privileged position.

Barbara Smoker's letter gave details of the case of Julie Clark of Chalcroft Road, who lives within sight of Northbrook School. She suffers from a medical condition, which means travelling is inadvisable. But she was refused a place at Northbrook School because her parents are not church-goers. A place at Thomas Tallis School has been offered to Julie, and her mother says that the surgeon who was seeing her advised strongly against the regular bus journey this would involve. Her parents have accepted this place as the only alternative to keeping her at home.

(Continued over)

Part of the admission procedure was to obtain a letter from a vicar stating that the parents were regular church-goers. Mrs Clark says that when she saw the headmistress of Northbrook School, she was immediately told "You have no church connections." (In fact, although her parents do not visit church regularly, Julie Clark attends monthly as part of her activities as a Girl Guide.) So despite medical advice Julie has been unable to attend the school nearest to where she lives.

Mrs Clark has heard of other cases where medical reasons for not travelling far were not seen to be as important as the parents' lack of church attendance.

The continued existence of church schools in our secular society remains a campaigning issue for secular humanists. Among the many objections to church schools, Barbara Smoker points out in her press release that despite being maintained by pub-

lic funds "they retain the privileges of private schools—as well as serving to reinforce the religious prejudices of the child's home background, with the socially divisive consequences which, in their most extreme manifestation, have laid the foundation for violence in Northern Ireland."

Church schools use their privileged position to reinforce Christian beliefs, but this is not necessarily successful. Barbara Smoker commented that she has visited Northbrook School to talk to the Sixth Form about secular humanism: "The ironic fact is that, in spite of the school's discrimination in selecting its intake and its subsequent years of indoctrination, many of the older pupils have reached a position of convinced atheism by the time I see them!"

What emerges strongly from these cases is that a church school may pay more attention to the formal adherence to worship of the parents than the views or needs of the child.

The Committee Against Blasphemy Law

The recent trial and conviction of the editor and publishers of the fortnightly journal, *Gay News*, surprised and shocked the British public. It caused surprise because most people thought it was not possible to bring such a prosecution in 1977. The shock was caused by the vindictiveness of the prosecutor (Mary Whitehouse) and attitude of Judge Alan King-Hamilton who imposed heavy sentences on the defendants.

The trial also prompted a number of people to form the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, a working group which will campaign against any proposal to extend blasphemy law and combat those intolerant and censorious elements who are attempting to impose their standards and beliefs on all. In the long term, the aim is to secure the total abolition of law relating to blasphemy.

The inaugural meeting of CABL was held in London on 7 August. The Hon Secretary is Bill Mellroy (temporarily, as he is leaving London), and the press officer is Nicolas Walter, editor of *New Humanist*. The formation of the Committee was reported in *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Time Out*, *Liberal News*, *Peace News*, *Catholic Herald*, *Church of England Newspaper* and three north London weeklies. The secretary and press officer were interviewed on LBC.

The Committee have already issued a manifesto explaining their case. After sketching in the historical and legal background to the blasphemy laws, the manifesto argues that the law is unsatisfactory because it is "unpredictable and unrestricted. Blasphemy has never been defined by Parliament, and it has been interpreted in widely

different ways by various judges and juries to cover anything from the mere denial of Christianity to funny or frank material found offensive by sympathisers with Christianity. It is impossible to know in advance what material may be found blasphemous, and almost any controversial material concerning religion could be found blasphemous. The main effect of the law is to inhibit free expression about religion in a way which is elsewhere thought to be completely unacceptable."

Unclear and Unpredictable Law

Four possibilities concerning the blasphemy law are examined—that it could be left as it is, extended, restricted or abolished. In its existing state it is unclear and its use is unpredictable.

Some are now suggesting that the law be extended so as to protect not just the Anglican form of Christianity. "It is already being argued that recent legislation against racial discrimination should be followed by legislation against religious discrimination, which would put the blasphemy law at the disposal of the increasing number of religious denominations in this country—whether old (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc) or new (Mormons, Christian Scientists, Scientologists, Unification Church, etc). At present, Christianity enjoys intellectual as well as financial and educational privilege from the law, and such a move would extend this privilege to all religions."

If the law were to be retained it should at least be restated so that it is clearly defined as an offence. But if it were abolished altogether, "objec-

tionable material about religion could still be prosecuted for being 'defamatory', 'seditious', 'obscene', 'indecent', 'profane' or racist, or for tending to cause a breach of the peace. The point is that material should be restricted only if it involves a genuine threat of private damage or public disorder, and the abolition of the blasphemy law would simply allow the same freedom of expression in religious matters as is taken for granted in all other areas."

The Committee conclude completely in favour of abolition. "After more than three centuries of legal discrimination, after more than a century of cam-

paing by freethinkers and progressive Christians, after the repeal of the statute law, and after the *Gay News* case, the time has surely come for such a Bill to be introduced into Parliament and for the law of blasphemy to be swept into oblivion at last."

The Committee welcomes support from individuals and groups and would be pleased to hear from sympathisers. Financial assistance is also needed to cover running costs. (Send to the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, c/o W. McIlroy, 7 Harberton Road, Highgate, London N19.)

Joseph Symes, the Mephistopheles of Melbourne

NIGEL SINNOTT

Part 2: STORM AND STRUGGLE

In the first part of this article, Nigel Sinnott, a former Editor of "The Freethinker" now living in Australia, described the activities of Joseph Symes before he left England. Symes associated himself energetically with the National Secular Society and its early struggles, played a crucial role in some of its internal wrangles, and was involved together with G. W. Foote with the founding of "The Freethinker". He sailed for Australia in 1883 and this article follows his career there and eventual return to England. The complete account will shortly be available as a separate booklet.

After a brief stop in Adelaide, Joseph Symes reached Melbourne in February 1884. Here he set to work giving regular lectures on behalf of the Australasian Secular Association; on a fine evening people soon needed to arrive half an hour early in order to be sure of a seat.

Not content with his success as a lecturer, Symes decided that the Association needed a literary mouthpiece. Funds were raised with remarkable rapidity, a printing press was purchased, and on 1 June 1884 (the day of the *National Secular Society* conference back in England) the first issue of the *Liberator* made its appearance in Melbourne. The same week the Victorian authorities seized a batch of *Freethinkers* destined for the ASA; if this was meant to intimidate Symes, it was singularly unsuccessful.

Symes Launches the "Liberator"

"We mean warfare", Symes announced in the first issue of the *Liberator*, "and quarter will neither be begged nor granted." As for the matter of blasphemy:

"... If blasphemy is the equivalent of fearless truth and the exposure of consecrated shams and pious imposture, our course is clear. We shall crowd our paper with all the blasphemy its pages can carry."

Symes was as good as his word, and the *Liberator* soon raised the wrath of the religious and establishment press of the colony: "A flagrant outrage upon public decency"; "a cesspool of moral (or immoral) filth . . ."; the *Gippsland Mercury* lamented "Would that we had a law which would consign such ruffians to the hangman's lash." Symes, of course, thrived on it all, despite violence real and threatened.



JOSEPH SYMES, after a photograph

The *Liberator* became, in the late 1880s, one of the most successful freethought papers in Australasia, if not in the world. In its heyday it reached twice the size of the *National Reformer*. Each week it carried reports of Syme's lectures and debates, cartoons, poems; Australian, New Zealand, British and other news. Symes used it to lambast the clergy, orthodox Christianity, monarchy, sabbatarianism, racialism, and Victoria's ruling élite; and to air his views on republicanism, radical politics, birth control (Neo-Malthusianism) and even abortion. Other contributors debated the merits of socialism and anarchism in the paper's columns, and protagonists of Christianity were allowed to defend their religion or oppose the principles of secularism. In 1887 the *Liberator* and ASA announced a "Republican and Atheistic Jubilee Fund"!

Freethought Success in Melbourne

Symes was soon elected president of the Victorian branch of the Australasian Secular Association. In September 1884 he was elected president of the Australasian Freethought Congress at Sydney, which he addressed on "Secularism, the life and light of the world." Delighted at the success of their Mephistopheles in Melbourne, the National Secular Society sent out another lecturer in 1885. He was William Whitehouse Collins, and had an interesting and, on the whole, successful career in Australia and New Zealand. For a while he was co-editor of the *Liberator*.

Symes was soon prosecuted under an old law (once used on Bradlaugh in England) for publishing a newspaper without first depositing financial securities against blasphemy and sedition. He offered to pay the resulting fines and costs "at the resurrection, if you make the demand". The Victorian customs authorities also tried seizing parcels of the *Liberator* and *The Freethinker*, and for six months the *Liberator* was boycotted by the Victorian post office. None of these tactics dampened Syme's spirit or his paper's circulation. Symes and the ASA were also involved in litigation because they charged admission for meetings on Sundays, insisted on using a wharf for outdoor lecturing, and were even prosecuted for holding meetings in a tent without official sanction. They were also banned from hiring many halls and institutes, or else would find that bookings had been summarily revoked; and in country districts they had, from time to time, to contend with Christian strong-arm tactics and ugly scenes of violence.

All went well with the ASA, Symes and the *Liberator* until the early part of 1888, when the Association was rent by an exceedingly bitter split. The details of the two factions are highly complicated, but basically an anti-Symes group emerged which consisted of a mixture of overlapping ele-

ments: opponents of birth control, "milk and water" freethinkers who objected to Symes's "extremism", one or two people jealous of Symes's leadership, and finally a violent political group of extreme so-called anarchists. Australian writers have, on the whole, blamed Symes for the split, saying that he was difficult and alluding to his autocracy and alleged paranoia. Little, however, has been published about the violence and pathological malice of Symes's ultra-left opponents. Symes claimed, of course, that he was defending the ASA from a coterie of extremists who were out to wreck it and misappropriate its funds. I have found hard evidence that one, at least, of the anti-Symes faction intended not just to remove Symes, but to destroy secularism *just as Symes claimed!* If anything, Symes was remiss in not forcing a showdown sooner than he did—by which time the opposing faction had built up considerable strength.

The split resulted in a badly weakened secularist movement in Melbourne. The ASA had not been properly registered as an organisation, and with a majority of its trustees going over to the anti-Symes faction, Symes and his followers found themselves progressively deprived of their funds and assets. They were even removed from a Hall of Science which they built after the split, because the land on which the building was erected had been purchased beforehand, and the land certificates were still held by anti-Symes trustees. Any hope of building up the Association again was dashed by the severe depression which hit Melbourne in 1893: this caused a mass exodus (in a frantic search for employment) from the city of the skilled artisans who were the main members of the movement.

Courage in Hard Times

Symes's first wife had died in 1892, and the following year he married his loyal publisher, Agnes T. Wilson. And the way in which Symes and his second wife kept the *Liberator* going through the depression is a touching story of courage and self-sacrifice. They were often so poor that the paper had to be set up in its battered type and they would then wait for sufficient money to come in for them to buy enough paper to go to press. A few loyal friends in Victoria rallied round in times of crisis; *The Freethinker* and resolutions from NSS conferences helped to bolster the Symeses' morale, and sometimes they received contributions from British freethinkers or from NSS branches. From about 1897 the *Liberator* ran at a loss, but the Symeses kept it going for another seven years. Finally, with Symes's ill health, the lack of a sound financial base for the paper, and the added responsibility of baby Stella Bradlaugh Symes, it was decided to terminate the paper with the issue of 12

March 1904. The *Liberator* ended as it began: rumbustious, militant and defiant! Symes might have run out of financial ammunition but, as he reminded his readers, "I am still an absolute atheist." The *Bendigo Evening News* had given the *Liberator* "a month's existence" in 1884; but, despite everything ranged against it, Symes's paper had lasted 20 years.

After the demise of the *Liberator* Symes's friends found the family a small farm on the suburban fringe of Melbourne. Here Symes rested from his intellectual and political labours, followed Voltaire's advice and cultivated his garden; but, of course, after about two years he became restless:

" . . . I felt like a fish out of water. My brain was ever busy with the old problems and with new ones of a kindred nature . . . Here was I skulking, away out of the Freethought battle, while my comrades were in the thick of the fight."⁹

So in May 1906 G. W. Foote, now President of the NSS, received a letter saying that Symes was returning for a visit.

Symes arrived back in England in August 1906. He was warmly received by Foote (whom he had last seen in Holloway Jail) and the NSS gave him a formal reception in September. Symes's old energies flooded back: he was soon delivering article after article on Foote's desk for *The Freethinker*, or dashing round the country to lecture to NSS branches. He was offered a job as resident lecturer to the Liverpool branch, on a three months' trial basis, starting in the new year.

But first he had a tryst with destiny on Tyne-side, where 30 years earlier he had delivered his first official freethought lecture. The freethinkers of Durham and Northumberland received Symes warmly, and on 16 December 1906 he delivered his thirtieth anniversary lecture back in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. His subject: "My 30 years of storm and struggle for freethought".

Swan Song of Staunch Fighter

It was his swan song. For while in Newcastle Symes caught bronchitis. Pneumonia set in, and he died on 29 December 1906. The funeral took place at Golders Green crematorium, London, with speeches by Foote and Chapman Cohen. In an obituary, Foote said of Symes:

"He was bold and brave and fearless; he went straight to his aim; he was a staunch fighter and a staunch comrade; he was incapable of treachery and could not understand it in others; and he hated lies and superstition with every drop of blood in his veins."¹⁰

Besides being a lecturer and journalist, Symes was also a great writer of pamphlets, both in Eng-

land and Australia. Titles include *Hospitals and Dispensaries Not of Christian Origin*, *Philosophic Atheism*, *Christianity Essentially a Persecuting Religion*, *From the Wesleyan Pulpit to the Secularist Platform*, *If Jesus Came to Melbourne* and *The Scamp's Directory and Sinner's Handbook*. Publication of *The New Testament Manuscripts; or Christianity completely undermined* coincided with his death. But perhaps Symes's most controversial, most interesting, and least known pamphlet was his *Ancient and Modern Phallic or Sex-Worship* first published in Melbourne in 1887. It has, I think, never been published in Europe, which is a pity as it would still be good propaganda material against the New Prudery of the 1970s.

Permanent Secularist Contribution

Symes was unable to establish a lasting secular movement in Melbourne, but he did much to ensure the permanence of secularism in Britain. "I have", he wrote, "spent my best years in trying to substitute knowledge for faith and self reliance for bogies and impostors."¹¹ His contribution to the emancipation of women was considerable; and, in turn, he obviously owed much to the gallant Agnes—she goes largely unsung, but one can perceive enough to realise that she must have been a truly wonderful human being. Joseph Symes had his failings and setbacks but he had his triumphs, and he died unrepentant. "The only thing I regret is that I have not been able to do more in the way of emancipating men and women from the thralldom and corrupting influence of religion."¹²

"I sow the seed", wrote Symes, "others will reap the harvest . . . My name is blazoned on no rolls of fame and a great many quite ignore me. What then? I am doing as much as they, as the best of them, perhaps, and should feel sorry if it were not so."¹³ Symes has indeed been almost forgotten by the freethought movement in Britain; he deserves better. If it forgets him again, it forgets its history and its heart. Despite his faults, Symes was the epitome of the secularist virtues—virtues that are by no means out of date: Loyalty, defiance, moral bravery.

NOTES

9. *Freethinker* 11 November 1906: p.709.
10. *Ibid.* 6 January 1907: p.8.
11. *Liberator* (Melbourne) 12 March 1904: p.3557.
12. *Freethinker* 18 November 1906: p.725.
13. *Liberator* (Melbourne) 18 April 1903: p.3035.

Following the prosecution of "Gay News" for blasphemy, clergy will be anxious to avoid confusion. An advertisement has been noticed in "Church Times": "Share house with curate . . . single . . . Not gay."

Blasphemy: The Public Reaction Assessed

BARRY DUKE

That the pro-Whitehouse faction had hoped to incite a strong public reaction against the homosexual community in Britain by means of the "Gay News" blasphemy prosecution cannot be doubted. Nothing would have delighted them more than to see a "kill a queer for Christ" campaign take off in the UK as it did in Dade County, California, under the instigation of Mary Whitehouse's American "altar"-ego, Anita Bryant. But what they failed to anticipate was that the anger they provoked would run against, and not with them. In this article Barry Duke analyses that anger as it manifested itself in the letters columns of three national daily newspapers.

A slogan pasted up in Oxford Circus underground proclaims: "It's Mary Whitehouse we hate, not her sin!" It is one of many to appear around London in recent weeks. A newspaper editor in a television debate on the blasphemy trial refers scornfully to the interference with free expression by "menopausal Valkyries". And suddenly the folk on the Clapham omnibus realise that *Gay News* is not a journal packed with jolly tales. But, as anonymous graffiti and journalists' cutting remarks are not always accurate yardsticks of contemporary opinion, I switched my attention to more conservative forums—the letter columns of *The Times*, *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*.

In the weeks that followed the trial I collected a total of 38 letters which were either critical of, or supported the prosecution. Of these, 26 expressed varying degrees of shock and disgust that the trial should have been allowed to commence. Twelve supported the resurrection of the ancient law of blasphemy—but of those letters three were penned by Mary Whitehouse herself, and consequently do not count. And significantly, of the remaining nine, none expressed direct support for Whitehouse's key role in the prosecution. Where were the 30,000 members of her National Viewers' and Listeners' Association in her hour of need?

She had clearly been abandoned, and left to justify, on her own, a foolhardy action that simultaneously succeeded in (a) deeply embarrassing less dogmatic Christians, (b) ensuring that James Kirkup's "blasphemous" poem received a much wider readership than it ever would have had in normal circumstances, and (c) giving martyr status to *Gay News* editor Denis Lemon, who suddenly found himself a celebrity. No doubt, in the months to come, his paper will experience a very definite upswing in circulation. For Whitehouse, meanwhile, the reaction was less than satisfactory. Criticism came from all quarters—including some that clear-

ly shook her. She complained of having been ambushed in print by the "homosexual/intellectual/humanist lobby." But among her principal detractors were Christians and clergymen. She was particularly stung by criticism in the *Telegraph's* letter columns. They supported neither her, nor the newspaper's leading article which felt the invocation of the blasphemy law was right.

C. J. Clement of Felsted, Essex, for instance, wrote the following to the *Telegraph*: "How much longer, I wonder, can Mary Whitehouse continue her crusade without doing permanent damage to the popular image of Christianity and Christians in this country? . . . The image Mrs Whitehouse most readily evokes is not that of Grace Darling battling through the waves, of Elizabeth Fry or Harriet Beecher Stowe fighting in their own ways for needful reform: it is of Machiavelli ruthlessly manipulating language and laws to his own ends (though Machiavelli was at least honest about it in *The Prince*); of Dr Goebbels imposing perverted standards and the emigration of all self-respecting artists from embattled Germany; of the burning of books and even, if I may be forgiven the comparison, of the Papal Index.

"The impression is also becoming inescapable that the Festival of Light and the National Front are blood-sisters under the skin."

"Christians must feel shame"

Beneath it, was this letter from Mr Peter Mackay, of Cuckfield, Sussex: "Mrs Mary Whitehouse is preserving minority beliefs by means at which many Christians must feel shame. If they are the truth, they need no ancient privilege, but should be able to stand up unprotected in the market place."

Whitehouse reacted soon afterwards in the *Telegraph*: "It has been very instructive, if at times painful, to watch the reactions of some of your readers to the recent blasphemy case. I had not intended to get involved, but Mr Christopher Booker's piece 'In the well of sadness' and several letters since have changed my mind.

"He [Booker] makes great play with the word 'truth' and the need to protect it from emotive judgment. But he is guilty of the very practice he deplores. In order to make his case he imputes to me feelings I do not have, i.e. 'wild hostility' to *Gay News* and homosexuals. He is a victim—as are perhaps others—of the many myths which are now being established in connection with this case.

"I have no particular interest in the paper, and certainly, as I made clear in my recent book *Whatever happened to Sex?*, have no animosity to homo-

sexuals as people, though believing homosexual practices to be wrong . . . Anyone would think that I had stood over the jury with a whip, a gun, and with the power to throw them into a concentration camp! However, that particular correspondent shows himself, in any case, to be uninformed in his effort to link me via the Festival of Light with the National Front. I am not, and have not been for some years, officially associated with the Festival of Light and certainly not with the National Front."

Whitehouse's protests that she bears no malice towards homosexuals is typical of a Christian fundamentalist's double-think on this subject. Indeed, on any subject. This ambiguous approach is echoed in the thoughts of the Reverend J. A. Kidd, of Mayfair, London, who wrote to *The Times* in support of the prosecution: "How can we say sufficiently clearly and loudly that our views have little to do with anti-homosexual attitudes? Those of us who are Bible-based believers accept the assessment that all sexual acts outside marriage are sinful—whether heterosexual or homosexual. It is the unsubstantiated assertions that Jesus was promiscuous, as well as some unquotable obscene statements about the source of 'our salvation', which seem to fall clearly within the terms of the law as it stands."

Christ should toughen up?

His tortuous argument was quickly challenged—by another clergyman. The Reverend Jack R. Burton of Norwich replied thus: "Those who initiated the prosecution of *Gay News* have come near to winning a battle and losing the war. The Christ who emerges from their case sounds petty, hypersensitive, and in need of care and protection. If he is to be understood as a twentieth century saviour, he will need to toughen up.

"The fact is that all the furore springs from an admittedly traditional but no longer credible Christian approach to human sexuality. The Reverend Kidd's familiar and glib little creed gives the game away: 'All sexual acts outside marriage are sinful—whether heterosexual or homosexual.'

"That's fairly comprehensive: but whatever does it mean? How does he define a 'sexual act'? Is he unfamiliar with the delightful subtleties of human behaviour? Where does he draw the line of acceptance between a smile, a look, an arm round the shoulder, a dig in the ribs, a kiss, an embrace, a caress? Is teenage masturbation a sexual act? And 'sinful'? Does he believe in some form of homosexual marriage—as his creed suggests? Or does he believe that huge sections of humanity should be subjected to a celibacy to which they feel no calling? John Kidd's creed is a piece of unrealistic nonsense which fills one with despair.

"Christians would do better to study these matters—calmly and in the light of modern understanding

—rather than dash off to defend Jesus at the Old Bailey by invoking laws which have lain dormant for 50 years."

Prosecution deplored

Two other Christians who deprecated the prosecution were Mr Philip Gaskell, a Quaker from Edinburgh, and the Reverend H. A. Williams of Mirefield, West Yorkshire.

Mr Gaskell wrote: "Many of your readers will have followed reports of the recent blasphemy trial and heard the verdict and sentence with dismay. As a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) I am appalled that such a law should still remain on the Statute Book, as it seems to me a dangerous and pernicious piece of legislation calculated only to prevent open-mindedness and mature discussion . . ." And the Reverend Williams commented: "I have not read the poem which led to convictions for blasphemous libel. But I believe Lichtenberg's remark to be of fairly wide application: 'A book is a mirror. If an ape looks into it, then obviously, what looks back out is not an apostle.'"

In a leading article the day after Denis Lemon was given a nine month suspended sentence and heavily fined, *The Times* argued that the crime of blasphemous libel should "on balance" exist, and pointed to Northern Ireland as "an example of the real danger that can spring from treating what others hold sacred with contempt—one of the reasons one has for permanently distrusting Mr Paisley. The newspaper then goes on to suggest that if blasphemy is to remain a crime "adherents of the main non-Christian religions should also be entitled to have the benefit of its protection. Where to draw the line could cause difficulties. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jews would clearly need to be placed on the same footing as Christians. But what of the innumerable minor sects and quasi-religions which have a presence in Britain? The protection should be confined to major religions and not be extended to the scientologists or Mr Moon."

Mr Robert Reedman of Salisbury, Wilts, replied: "It is clear from your leading article that you and I have a deep mistrust of Mr Paisley as a guardian of the protestant cause; equally I have a profound mistrust of Mrs Whitehouse as a champion of morality. As a Protestant I regard Mr Paisley as having done irreparable harm to the Protestant cause and to the same degree Mrs Whitehouse as a guardian of morality. I can only hope that the damage is not in the same proportion."

Mr John Leeson of Harrow took up another point: "Your leader entitled 'It is right to respect other men's gods', suggests redrafting the blasphemy law to cover so called 'major' groups but excluding 'minor' groups. This appears dangerously close to the granting of a licence for discrimina-

(Continued on page 142)

MARCH OR CHURCH PARADE?

Although one would not have thought it from the news reports, more than ten thousand people took part in a non-violent anti-racist march through Lewisham on Bloody Saturday, 13 August—a couple of hours before the provocative National Front march and the counter-demonstration which allowed itself to be provoked exactly as the NF desired.

The first (and by far the largest, though least reported) of the three marches in Lewisham that day included the Mayor of Lewisham, the Bishop of Southwark, and a contingent from the Lewisham Humanist Group, which is affiliated to the National Secular Society. Its Hon Sec Denis Cobell (who is also a member of the NSS executive committee), had realised, reading between the lines in the local papers, that the march, although organised by the secular ALCARAF (the All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism), was being taken over by the Church, so he made a secular humanist placard, to show that Christianity does not have a monopoly in the brotherhood of man.

It was a modest little placard, swamped by the big political, trades union, and religious banners, but its wording was refreshingly different: *Lewisham Humanists Say No Racialism—And No Religion In Schools Please*. It attracted quite a few of the marchers to march behind it—not all of them previously conscious of being humanists. One young Israeli woman said she immediately recognised the connection between racialism and religious indoctrination.

We were pleased to march together with the Rt Rev Mervyn Stockwood on this occasion—even though he and his fellow clerics, in all their finery, contravened the teaching of their nominal founder by heading the procession—and we do not blame a declining Church for taking the opportunity of getting in on the act. But hogging the limelight is another matter. Not only were episcopal robes and back-to-front collars much in evidence at the head of the march; not only were thousands of people kept standing in the rain for more than an hour at the assembly point to be preached at through a distorting public-address system; but the ecclesiastics had apparently been in consultation with the police as to the exact point where the police barrier would bring the march to a final halt—conveniently near St Stephen's Church, the only Church in Lewisham with a large traffic-free space in front suitable for an open-air service. The facade of the Church was decked with banners, and microphones were in position on the steps.

Some of the marchers defied the police and made their way to New Cross. But those of us who wished to avoid the threatened violence had no alternative but to turn about—and so find ourselves part

NEWS

of a captive congregation. Earnest young men in dog-collars bustled about, gloating with pride at the unaccustomed size of their flock, however temporary.

It was another two hours before the scene changed to that of a running battle between the police and the less tractable socialist demonstrators. This has been fully reported elsewhere. Suffice to say here that we agree with the Bishop of Southwark that the violence must be blamed mainly on the orders of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, David McNee. We make no excuse for left-wing demonstrators who resorted to violence, let alone for hooligans who just went along for the riot, but the bone-headed orders given to the police made violence inevitable—and some of the police themselves were heard muttering about McNee.

Unfortunately, the National Front were successful in presenting to the ordinary television viewer an image of respectability, their march being preceded by a rank of large patriotic Union Jacks, in turn preceded by a large posse of police—the whole presenting the very picture of “law and order”. The NF violence had taken place under cover of darkness, when, during the early hours of that morning, bricks were hurled through the windows of the organisers of the counter-demonstrations. It is a deliberate tactic of the NF (as of pre-war Fascists) to provoke their opponents to violence while preserving their own image of martyred innocence. All the more foolish of the Socialist Workers Party *et al* to play the part assigned to them.

Whether or not racist marches should be banned is a tricky problem—but we see no reason why the police should not re-route them so as to avoid the streets populated mostly by black immigrants. After all, they often used to re-route anti-war marches, on the flimsiest of excuses.

LESS FREE SPEECH

Is England becoming a more hostile place for free-thinkers and all defenders of free speech? Some people might consider yes, after reflecting upon several cases—of varying severity—which have taken place quite recently.

Speakers Corner at Hyde Park is world famous as a forum of free-speech. Here ideas and attitudes of all colours spark together. Len and Eva Ehury have held outdoor freethought meetings in Hyde Park and sold literature, including *The Freethinker* just outside at Marble Arch for many years. They

S AND NOTES

have occasionally been asked to move by a constable on duty on the grounds of obstruction, and have always done so. On Sunday 7 August, literature (including the Blasphemy issue of *The Freethinker*) was on sale as usual. A constable, without requesting them to move at all, asked who was in charge and, when Eva Ebury said she was, he arrested her. She was charged with obstruction and her case has been adjourned until 7 September.

Heckling is a fine art at Speakers Corner. Ken Wright, a National Secular Society member, was the following Sunday enjoying his right to heckle with the more sanctimonious and nonsensical religious speakers. After heckling for some time he was asked by a constable to leave the area because of interrupting a religious meeting. He at first refused to leave, then refused to give his name and address. He was arrested and at Bow Street Magistrates Court the next day was given a conditional discharge for failing to comply with a direction to leave and fined £2.00 for refusing to give his name and address.

Free speech has been challenged in other ways. The allegedly blasphemous poem *The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name* (which would probably have been consigned to the tiniest footnote of literary history months ago but for the *Gay News* trial) has been reprinted several times recently by journals such as *Freedom* and reprinted in leaflet form. Under the heading *Publish and Be Damned* it was printed as a leaflet by Coventry Anarchist Group and distributed by Roger Grenville and some friends one Saturday morning in Leamington Spa town centre. It had previously been distributed in the precinct in Coventry with no complaint, but some members of the public (three out of over 400) complained to the authorities and the distributors were taken for questioning. The remaining leaflets were confiscated. No charges have been made to date.

The same poem was involved in charges made against Bill McIlroy, former Secretary of the National Secular Society. As was reported in the last issue of *The Freethinker*, he sent copies of the poem through the post to some individuals known to favour increased censorship, and has been charged with sending "obscene or indecent" literature through the post. His case was adjourned at Highbury Magistrates Court on 2 August and will be heard at the same court on 19 September.

Four cases, all quite different, perhaps none of them of obviously major importance—but taken all together are they a sign of the times?

HUMANIST RESPONSIBILITIES

Lord Fenner Brockway has called upon humanists to face up to their responsibilities to do something about the great issues of the day. He did this while proposing a motion on behalf of the Enfield and Barnet Humanist Group at the Annual General Meeting of the British Humanist Association, held on 31 July. "As humanists", Fenner Brockway said, "we have a terrible responsibility, for we believe we have to do things for ourselves and to make a contribution to a better world . . . We must face up to the great issues of the day." These issues, he said, were the near-starvation of half the population of the world, the existence of nuclear weapons which could destroy all life, and the denial of basic human rights by some 80 countries in the world today. The motion urging a greater effort by humanists in such issues was overwhelmingly passed.

Among other motions passed were one deploring the privileged position given to Christianity by the broadcasting authorities, one condemning the use of the criminal law of blasphemy, one asking for a pardon and reimbursement of defence costs for *Gay News* and its Editor, and one reaffirming support for abortion on request.

Derek Marcus concluded the AGM and conference weekend by commenting on his period of nine years on the Executive committee of the BHA, twice acting as chairman for a year. He welcomed new blood on the committee and pointed to recent events showing how vital the work of the Association remained.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ANNUAL EXCURSION

LEEDS CASTLE AND STONEACRE

A medieval castle and grounds, and an Elizabethan house in Kent

SUNDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER, 1977

Coach leaves London at Charing Cross and North and South London

Cost £2.50

Further details and booking form from
NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

Telephone: 01-272 1266

BOOKS

THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE edited by John Hick. SCM Press Ltd, £2.95.

In the 1960's, the BBC stood by the principle that all Christian religious bodies in Great Britain were entitled to broadcasting time in proportion to the size of their membership. The right extended even to such fringe sects as the Plymouth Brethren—but not to the Unitarians, who were held to be “outside the main stream of the Christian tradition.” If this principle still holds today it will surely soon have to be modified: for now seven leading theologians of the Established Church have issued a manifesto announcing that they no longer believe in the Incarnation—which means, in effect, that they have been converted to Unitarianism.

They do not, however, put it that way; indeed the author of the opening essay, Professor Maurice Wiles, is at pains to draw a distinction between the “non-incarnational Christianity” that he and his colleagues advocate, and what he calls “old-fashioned Unitarianism which the main body of the Church in the past has rejected.” But, so far as I can see, his exposition of “non-incarnational Christianity” contains nothing from which a Unitarian, “old-fashioned” or otherwise, would wish to dissent.

The seven essays that compose the book differ considerably in style and quality, and are apparently addressed to different types of reader. Two at least of them, couched in what Philip Toynbee has described as “the full blast of theological jargon” are clearly only for specialists. But Humanists need have no qualms about skipping them, since the closely-packed pages of biblical exegesis and patristic quotation, lavishly garnished with words like “kerygma” and “soteriology”, serve only to establish the conclusion that Humanists (and today probably most nominal Christians also) have long accepted—namely that Jesus of Nazareth was a human being, and that there is little ground for supposing that he ever claimed to be anything more.

The contributors, however, with one exception, are not prepared to follow the evidence all the way. Most of them take it for granted that though Jesus was not God, he was in some sense a unique human being—unique in his moral perfection, and unique in having been destined by God “to establish the community of selfless love in the world” (p.60), to be “men’s Lord and liberator” (p.182), to be “[a] saviour from sin and ignorance and a giver of new life” (p.178), to provide “a breakthrough into a new and better quality of existence” (p.172). I have never understood the rationale of such claims. What facts can be adduced in support of them? Were the writers thinking of the small community of early Christians, or of Christendom after the conversion

FREETHINKER

of Europe? And if the latter, do they really regard the cruel superstitious and bloodstained Ages of Faith as an improvement on the civilisation of Rome and Athens? It is surely arguable that (to quote H. J. Blackham) “Humanity would have been infinitely better off, saner, happier, more fraternal, if Christianity had perished with other Mediterranean cults, and the virtues and values of the Classical world had survived.”

The two concluding essays are among the most readable in the book. In “Jesus and the World Religions” Professor John Hick argues that the change from traditional to “non-incarnational” Christianity should produce a more open-minded attitude towards other world faiths. God’s revelation of himself, he says, was bound to take different forms in different parts of the world, since “a single revelation to the whole earth has never in the past been possible, given the facts of geography and technology.” What price divine omnipotence?—but though Humanists may not be impressed by the argument they will certainly not dissent from the conclusion, which is that we should finally abandon the earlier, futile attempts at the mass conversion of adherents of other religions to Christianity. “If, selecting from our Christian language, we call God-acting-towards-mankind the Logos, then we must say that *all* salvation, within all religions, is the work of the Logos and that under their various images and symbols men in different cultures and faiths may encounter the Logos and find salvation. But what we cannot say is that all who are saved are saved by Jesus of Nazareth.” (p.181).

But the most radical, and to Humanists unquestionably the most convincing, contribution is the Epilogue by Dennis Nineham. Alone of the seven contributors, Nineham questions the assumption of the moral perfection of Jesus. He argues convincingly that so long as the founder of Christianity is regarded as a divine being, belief in his moral perfection follows almost by definition. But once it is accepted that he was a man among men, his personality must be assessed in the same way as that of other historical figures, by study of his words and actions. And these, as reported in the Gospels, by no means support the view that he was entirely free from human failings.

Nineham chooses his words carefully, doubtless not wishing to affront his colleagues, and his point could reasonably be made in much stronger terms. The Gospels depict Jesus as a complex and often inconsistent personality, who extolled loving-kindness and meekness but whose practice, as so often,

REVIEWS

fell short of his precepts. He did, it is true, show warmth and affection towards his disciples and towards those who took him at his own valuation. But to those who were unimpressed by his teaching, or who questioned his Messianic pretensions, he could be savagely vindictive and harsh. "Woe unto thee, Chorazin . . . it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee" (Matt, xii, 21, 24). "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt xxiii, 33). This can hardly be called loving one's enemies.

In my book *Honest to Man*, in a passage which infuriated some clerical reviewers, I wrote that "Jesus, in fact, was typical of a certain kind of fanatical young idealist: at one moment holding forth, with tears in his eyes, about the need for universal love; at the next, furiously denouncing the morons, crooks and bigots who do not see eye to eye with him." It is very natural and very human behaviour. But could "non-incarnational Christianity" ever come to terms with a Jesus as human as this?

MARGARET KNIGHT

JESUS by Michael Grant. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £6.

This well-known historian bases his account of Jesus on the following principles:

1. Prophecies made by Jesus (e.g. that the end of the world would be coming very, very soon) and recorded by evangelists who knew they had remained unfulfilled, must be authentic. (I have argued my case against this in *New Humanist*, vol 92, November-December 1976, and will not repeat myself.)

2. Statements ascribed to Jesus which are "alien to the thought" of his time must be authentic—as if no one other than he were capable of innovating or reforming ideas!

3. Statements which in any way suggest that Jesus was unsuccessful would not have been invented by reverent evangelists; e.g. the statement that, after he had driven about 2,000 demons from a man (so that they fled into a herd of pigs which promptly ran into a lake and drowned), the locals "begged him to leave the district" (Mark 5 : 17).

But the evangelist is here surely painting Jesus as a figure of great power who inspires fear. There is no suggestion that he wished to continue preaching in the area and was frustrated in his intentions. Again, Jesus' submission to baptism from John was, according to Grant, too embarrassing to have been

invented (p.49). Grant seems unaware that (and why) some theologians take a different view (see, most recently, Prof Enslin in *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol 66, 1975).

4. Miracle stories have a non-miraculous basis of fact in Jesus' life. He did not feed 5,000 but "must have done something" (p.42, author's italics—in this case he was "acting out a parable, giving a practical demonstration of a spiritual truth").

Grant sees Jesus' relevance today in his insistence on absolute standards. Jesus "demonstrates (sic) . . . that standards are not so relative after all, that some things are good and some are bad" (p.149). Grant would thus not agree that political and other measures draw their virtue or viciousness from the circumstances of the time. And so, in the upshot, a—to my mind—mythical figure is made the anchor of a highly questionable ethical attitude.

G. A. WELLS

THEATRE

THE BELLS OF HELL by John Mortimer. Garrick Theatre.
ONCE A CATHOLIC by Mary O'Malley. Royal Court Theatre.

An irreverent picture of religion today and 20 years ago provides the substance of two enjoyable new comedies. At the Garrick Theatre John Mortimer's farce *The Bells of Hell* presents trendy clerics and clerical trends in a thoroughly Anglican atmosphere. *Once a Catholic*, set with period precision in a convent school in 1956, offers a heady and humorous concoction of sex and sin amongst adolescent schoolgirls. Mary O'Malley is drawing, with an atmosphere of authentic accuracy, on her own schooldays in a convent school in Harlesden. Perhaps Mr Mortimer was able to expand his acquaintance with clerical idiosyncracies by meeting witnesses prepared to defend the Editor of *Gay News* in the notorious blasphemy trial (from which Mr Mortimer slipped occasionally to watch rehearsals of his play).

In *The Bells of Hell* Gavin Faber is a clergyman "into" encounter groups, the new theology, and therapeutic meetings for rainwear fetishists in the rectory snuggery. One of the pleasures of the evening is Peter Woodthorpe's performance as the liberal rector, contorting himself in and out of uncomfortable situations, from his joyous gyrations to rock music to the embarrassed twisting of his toes (expressive feet, these) as he faced the consequences of his own religious vagaries.

The consequences are considerable when a locum curate "of riper years", with an endless supply of military metaphors and a determination "to knock sin for six", arrives to assist the rector. Sin is a concept not given undue importance in the parish,

for as the rector says to a young couple seeking advice on not getting married—"You supply the sin and we'll supply the tolerance." Another delight of the production is to watch the rector's downtrodden wife, played by Phyllida Law, shiver with an erotic thrill as the new curate warns her that sex is a grave sin, while flirting with her: "Hell—I haven't heard that word since I was courting", she says, her eyes alight with desire.

The Bishop of the diocese, Martin Spottiswoode, completes the gallery of clerical types as a media-conscious bishop dropping in for a bite while on his way to the studio to record *Epilogue*. The farcical plot revolves round a "miraculous" appearance of loaves in the bread-bin and fish in the fridge. The bishop has undisguised enthusiasm for Gay Liberation, his arty pendant cross, and his own performance on the media, but he draws the line at a miracle in the diocese. His plausibility at putting across down-to-earth Christianity, with a God's-right-inside-you approach, would be ruined by such untoward events. Trevor Baxter zestfully plays a bishop who knows as well how to angle his profile for the camera as to slant his theology for the moment.

The complications of a miracle in the parish provide much humour, including candles on the fridge as it begins its role as a shrine; but the dénouement was a little laboriously worked out and it began to show that it was an extended one-act play. Yet, the confrontation of Old Time religion, in the form of A. C. Bulstrode (played with panache by Tony Britton), and the latest brands of clerical chic produced surprises and witty lines up to the final "miraculous" conception.

It is possible to imagine a dog-collared coach-party enjoying *The Bells of Hell*, since the satire remains good-humoured and cosily Anglican, but it would be difficult to envisage a party of nuns being anything but shocked by the delicious blasphemies of *Once a Catholic*. The girls in 5A at the convent school are taught by Mother Peter, whose beginning of term advice to the girls in her form includes choosing their own saint to get results at O-levels and insisting on wearing Our Lady of Fatima long black knickers. Mother Peter, for all her erratic harshness and determination that no girl in her form should miss the Easter pilgrimage, becomes in Pat Heywood's warm performance an almost endearing character by her enthusiasm and sense of drama.

Mary Mooney is the class innocent, whose naivety always leads her into trouble. She is the only one innocent enough to ask how the sperm gets into the female while a rabbit is being dissected, or to shock Father Mullarkey by asking what is the sin of Sodom during a catechism class. Her forlorn hopefulness is retained through the confiscation of her Bible with the dirty bits underlined and an en-

counter in the dark with a randy Teddy boy, up to her final plea to Mother Aquinas to allow her to fulfil her deep ambition to be a nun. Jane Carr gives a shining, buoyant performance in the part.

Sex and purity do, I suppose, form a strong theme in the life of such enclosed institutions. Two contrasting boy-friends have to cope with problems of their girl-friends' fear of committing a mortal sin, such as passionate kissing. The Teddy-boy, given a gauche spivishness by Daniel Gerroll, begins what might become a life-long marital argument when he gets engaged to Mary McGinty. He rails against the idea that Catholicism is universally right, in a sane if fine angry comedy. The more sophisticated Cuthbert persuades his girl that sex is not a grave sin, bedding her early in the evening so that he can get up in time to serve at the altar the next morning, and teaches her the intelligent use of hypocrisy which ensures that the headmistress will offer her a place in the academic sixth-form.

The play is richly comic, with just a hint of sadness in the plight of poor Mary Mooney, whose religious vocation is thwarted at the very last chance when she is wrongly supposed guilty of adorning a crucifix with a long phallus. The ingrown narrowness, spite and blindness of the teachers suggest deep feelings of protest. The string of eccentric characters, including the apoplectic Father Mullarkey and a sad ancient music teacher, have the sure feel of people clearly remembered. The school-girls are all delightfully acted. The play will perhaps particularly appeal to those with vivid memories of repressive (and religious) schooling in the fifties, but the breadth of the comedy and force of the exposure of Catholic education should ensure a deserved success.

JIM HERRICK

WORLDWIDE

INDIA

It is no secret that astrology plays an important part in Indian politics. Astrologers are often consulted concerning political decisions. It is now revealed that sorcery and black magic also play their part in the life of top political people.

The casual arrest of Mr Kapoor, for allegedly travelling on a false railway pass, has brought to light the purpose of his journey—to practice ancient magical rites on behalf of the Indian Home Minister, Charan Singh. This help was apparently needed to counteract efforts at voodoo on the part of another unnamed Cabinet minister. A number of well-known figures, including Mrs Gandhi, had been using the magical services of Mr Kapoor. These and other rumours about the use of black magic in the Cabinet have not been denied.

LETTERS

One can't win with Antony Grey! Certainly I said in my book "a letter was sent to me from Harold Haywood, OBE, Chairman of the Albany Trust." Antony Grey told me so, didn't he? And since copies of the said letter were then distributed to a number of people, he really must not be surprised if I became aware of the contents of it!

MARY WHITEHOUSE

Antony Grey comments: "What interests me, and I am sure many other "Freethinker" readers, is not the precise manner in which Mrs Whitehouse became aware of the Albany Trust's letter (which I know was posted twice to her Colchester address—the first time by recorded delivery), but whether she is capable of producing any satisfactory answers to its contents. If not, she should publicly apologise for her original speech."

If Mrs Whitehouse has the honesty to either substantiate her original allegations or to comment on the Albany Trust's reply to them, she is welcome to do so in the columns of this journal.—Editor.

Peter Cadogan will, I hope, forgive me for pointing out misinterpretations in his long review of my "Artists and Writers in Revolt: The Pre-Raphaelites".

I am one of the least romantic and most objective of writers and my passage on Swinburne is based on a theory about his virility held by most previous biographers, and psychologists, on the available evidence. In any case, whatever is "romantic" in this connection? I suggest Mr Cadogan has been misled by his knowledge of my sex. For shame, in "The Freethinker" of all journals!

I make quite clear that Morris did not "give up" his Marxism in 1893: although partly for health reasons he ceased to take much physical part in politics, he continued to write on the subject, including the pamphlet "Communism" published in 1895 the year before his death. It was socialism's compromise in putting up candidates for Parliament, instead of advocating the sweeping away of the whole system, that he refused to endorse, to the end, in principle.

Finally, I most certainly do not myself "retain an old-fashioned faith in socialism", especially as it is practised today. What I do write is a chapter, "Ruskin, Morris and the Socialist Legacy", which traces, with extracts, the lines of thought from More's "Utopia" to Morris' "News from Nowhere", including the more old-fashioned paternalistic socialism and anti-capitalism of Carlyle's "Past and Present" and Ruskin's "Unto This Last" which first influenced Morris and which he later moved away from. In this I was, I believe, unique among authors on Pre-Raphaelitism. I certainly prefer Morris' outlook to that of Carlyle, Ruskin, Hyndman and many Fabians, and Morris was definitely not "an old-fashioned" type of socialist. But in fact this is an objective, historical study of a period a century ago, with very different needs and abuses to those today. My own politics do not enter into it.

Incidentally, my book is not a collection of essays but multiple biography and critical study. The subjects are taken more or less chronologically as they entered the movement, but with inevitable interrelations that bring out new facets in different chapters. To my mind this is really the only way to deal with them for a book to have any continuity and show the movement's development. I am sorry Mr Cadogan

ITALY

Christian crusaders and a local bishop have thwarted a theatrical production by a touring drama group. The Teatro di Roma was planning a performance in the small village of Anguillara Salazia. The performance should have taken place in a cultural centre, converted from a fifteenth century church, whose building has recently been restored. The church was deconsecrated and became state property in the nineteenth century, and had been used as a granary until recent restoration of the building. A local parish priest had recently obtained permission to use the ex-church for occasional confirmation and communion services.

The theatre group were intending to present *Pluto* by Aristophanes. But the nearest bishop complained to the mayor that legal action would be taken if the play was performed, since it was not in keeping with the sacredness of the temple. Shortly after the play began a group of crusaders stopped the play by shouting "Shame, shame . . ."

The play's theme is the ancient protest against the unjust division of wealth. The church was originally dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, who is supposed to have abandoned all his wealth.

JERUSALEM

Religious zealots have seriously damaged the home of Mr Mizrahi, who lives on the edge of an ultra-orthodox area of Jerusalem. Windows were shattered and property was smashed by a group calling itself "Warners of the Sabbath". His offence was to use electricity on Friday night and Saturday, when orthodox Jews refrain from any work, including flicking switches.

The Mayor of the city, Mr Teddy Kollek, has condemned the violence, saying "Religious extremism is growing and it may result in a reaction from secular elements". Noting other extreme acts by orthodox fanatics, the *Jerusalem Post* commented that there was a widespread feeling that "anything goes that is covered with the cloak of piety."

Freethinker Fund

It is not easy to sustain small journals in a time of inflation. We are therefore most grateful to contributions to this fund. The total for last month from 20 July to 22 August was £52.08.

Thanks are expressed to M. Armstrong, £1.00; D. Batten, £1.25; I. Barr, £2.25; J. B. Burdon, 50p; W. Beninson, 75p; D. Fyfe, £1.00; Dr W. R. Gray, £2.35; F. R. Griffin, £1.25; E. J. Hughes, £1.00; S. E. Johnson, £20.00; Mrs B. A. Lamb, £1.50; Mrs C. J. Monrad, £3.00; T. Murphy, £1.25; V. K. Myhill, 50p; A. Oldham, £5.00; R. B. Ratcliff, 75p; K. C. Rudd, £1.25; Miss M. R. Rayment, £1.00; P. Somers, £2.25; J. E. Sykes, £1.25; N. H. Sinnott, 98p; A. E. Smith, £1.75; B. Vogel, 25p.

does not mention the poetry and literary criticism produced by the movement; but he is right, perhaps, that I should have dealt more with Christina Rossetti, even though she seems to me rather outside the main stream of Pre-Raphaelitism, especially in religious outlook. The publisher's limitation of 70,000 words made this difficult: more important aspects would have had to be omitted or compressed. This is, alas, a more serious effect of the economics of modern publishing than the lack of colour in illustrations, for colour reproduction of these paintings still often gives a false impression of them.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

HUMANIST HOUSING ASSOCIATION

A few of the tenants living at Rose Bush Court are becoming frail and would welcome help with shopping and small jobs, e.g. sewing and mending for those with impaired vision. Because the assistance given by the statutory Social Services is reduced by cuts in public expenditure, we appeal for voluntary help from members living in the vicinity. Anyone who could give say one or two hours help occasionally, preferably on a regular basis if only once weekly or monthly, is invited to contact the Warden, Mrs Margaret Bryson, by telephone—586 1899—or by calling at Rose Bush Court, 35/41 Parkhill Road, London, NW3 2YE.

OBITUARIES

MR G. KIRK

Geoffrey Kirk, who has died at the age of 71, was President of the Leicester Secular Society from 1952 to 1972. His charm and vast range of knowledge enabled him to fill the post with distinction. He will be remembered as a veteran rationalist and cyclist. His body was left for medical research.

MR A. MILLAR

Alexander Millar, who was brought up a Catholic but outgrew his childhood faith, has died aged 61. A non-religious committal was held at St John's Crematorium, Woking.

A party was held in July to mark the retirement of Mr W. McIlroy as Secretary of the National Secular Society and to welcome his successor, Jim Herrick. It was a tribute to Bill McIlroy that the event was so widely attended by many who admired his years of campaigning. He urged those present to continue to support the NSS, and said that he was pleased "The Freethinker" was in good hands but was afraid that it did not get into enough hands and hoped everyone would encourage more people to read it. Although he was leaving the NSS, his campaigning days are not over, and he mentioned that he had that day received a summons from the police for sending a copy of the notorious blasphemous poem, "The Love That Dares to Speak

Its Name", through the post. His case has been adjourned to September 19. He has since been involved in starting a campaign to prevent the expansion of blasphemy laws (see p.130).

Blasphemy: Reaction Assessed

tion against minority groups and is to be thoroughly deplored. In practice such a dividing line cannot be drawn and so the anachronistic blasphemy laws should be repealed as soon as possible if the interests of justice and civil liberties are not to be further damaged."

By this stage Whitehouse was again forced to take up a pen against her critics. It was becoming patently clear that support from her camp was not forthcoming. Scribbling illegible signatures on one of her anti-obscenity petitions is one thing; standing up in public to be counted is quite another. To *The Times* she complained: "I have been reminded, many times, on reading your correspondence on the recent blasphemy case, of a game we used to play as children. Called 'Pass it on' it began with one person whispering a message to the next, and so on, the last one shouting out loud what he had heard. That this bore no relation to the original, that it was often, as it passed round the circle, deliberately embellished and distorted was all part of the fun. Only it hasn't been so funny this time.

The sight of the homosexual/intellectual/humanist lobby at bay has been at times an intimidating spectacle, but may I, before some of the wilder flights of its imagination become the established mythology of the case put the record straight as far as I am free to do so?

"I am not, and never have been, involved in a campaign against homosexuals . . ."

She then demonstrates what many homosexuals would see as a profoundly "anti" attitude, quoting herself: "I am not against homosexuals as people, but believe homosexual practices to be wrong. I am conscious of the inadequacy of that declaration. Homosexuals have as much right to be fully understood, to be treated with compassionate love as the rest of us . . . Society to its shame once hurled that word at the homosexual. In our crazy, value free society the 'shame' is now attached only to those who dare say that homosexuality is less than 'gay'. Such an attitude is as dogmatic, doctrinal and restrictive in its own way as was the fearful silence and sniggering scorn of earlier decades." After stressing that she had no responsibility for the distribution of the poem before and after the trial, she claims that if "millions now know something of the nature of the poem" then ". . . If the publicity given to this case has profoundly shocked a public and a Church, not to mention a Government, which has been unwilling, by and large, to face the degree of corruption within our culture,

(Continued on back page)

PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE

- The Dead Sea Scrolls**, John Allegro. 95p (15p).
The Humanist Outlook, Ed: A. J. Ayer. 95p (26p).
Religion in Modern Society, H. J. Blackham. £1 (29p).
The Longford Threat to Freedom, Brigid Brophy. 10p (7p).
Thomas Paine, Chapman Cohen. 15p (7p).
Woman and Christianity, Chapman Cohen. 5p (7p).
Must We Have Religion?, Chapman Cohen. 5p (7p).
Women's Rights: A Practical Guide, Anna Coote & Tess Gill. 60p (19p).
Pagan Christmas, R. J. Condon. 20p (7p).
Origin of the Species, Charles Darwin. 60p (22p).
Bertrand Russell's Best, Robert E. Engar. £1.00 (26p).
Fact and Fiction in Psychology, H. J. Eysenk. 65p (15p).
The Bible Handbook, G. W. Foote & W. Ball. 65p (19p).
Ten Non Commandments, Ronald Fletcher. 13p (7p).
The Presumption of Atheism, Antony Flew. £3.50 (26p).
The Nun Who Lived Again, Phyllis Graham. 5p (7p).
Bertrand Russell: A Life, Herbert Gottchalk. 25p (12p).
The Humanist Revolution, Hector Hawton. 95p (19p).
Controversy, Hector Hawton. 95p (19p).
Ri and Surveys, Maurice Hill. 5p (7p).
Middle East Mythology, S. H. Hooke. 90p (12p).
Speakers Corner, an Anthology, Ed Jim Huggon. £1.75 (26p).
Oration on Paine, R. G. Ingersoll. 15p (7p).
Rome or Reason, R. G. Ingersoll. 10p (10p).
The Psychology of Superstition, Gustav Jahonda. 30p (12p).
The Little Red School Book, S. Jansen. 30p (12p).
Honest to Man, Margaret Knight. £3.75 (26p).
A Humanist Anthology, Margaret Knight. 95p (15p).
Christianity: The Debit Account, Margaret Knight. 3p (7p).
The Case Against Church Schools, Patricia Knight. 20p (7p).
Introduction to Politics, Harold Laski. 50p (12p).
Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality, John Lauritsen. 20p (10p).
On the Nature of the Universe, Lucretius. 75p (15p).
The Vatican Billions, Avro Manhattan. £3.00 (33p).
The Absurdities of Christian Science, Joseph McCabe. 12p (7p).
How Christianity Triumphed, Joseph McCabe. 12p (7p).
Phallic Elements in Religion, Joseph McCabe. 12p (7p).
The Arts in a Permissive Society, Christopher Macy. 75p (12p).
The Futility of Belief in God, Joseph McCabe. 12p (7p).
Anarchy, Erricho Malatesta. 25p (12p).
The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, Roger Manvell. £5.95 (29p).
Witchcraft and Sorcery, Max Marwick (Ed). £1.25 (19p).
An Introduction to Secular Humanism, Kit Mouat. 45p (10p).
- Poems of an Angry Dove**, Kit Mouat. £1.20 (19p).
What Humanism is About, Kit Mouat. 60p (29p).
Not in God's Image, Julia O'Faolain (Ed). 50p (22p).
Humanism and Moral Theory, Reuben Osborn. 60p (22p).
Rights of Man, Thomas Paine. 75p (22p).
Common Sense, Thomas Paine. 60p (15p).
Secret History of the Jesuits, E. Paris. £2.50 (22p).
The Vatican Versus Mankind, Adrian Pigot. 20p (19p).
The Magic of Uri Geller, Randi. 65p (15p).
Sociology of Religion, Ronald Robertson. £1.25 (19p).
Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief, Edward Royle. £1.00 (15p).
Freedom versus Organisation, Bertrand Russell. 50p (22p).
On Education, Bertrand Russell. 65p (22p).
Why I am Not a Christian, Bertrand Russell. £1 (15p).
Unpopular Essays, Bertrand Russell. £1 (15p).
Marriage and Morals, Bertrand Russell. 55p (15p).
 (Other titles by Bertrand Russell available.)
The Tamarisk Tree, Dora Russell. £5.95 (54p).
Life, Death and Immortality, P. B. Shelley. 10p (7p).
Abortion Counselling, Madeleine Simms. 50p (10p).
Joseph Symes, the "flower of atheism", Nigel Sinnott. 50p (10p).
Humanism, Barbara Smoker. 50p (12p).
The Cost of Church Schools, David Tribe. 20p (7p).
Broadcasting, Brainwashing, Conditioning, David Tribe. 25p (7p).
Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society, David Tribe. 90p (22p).
President Charles Bradlaugh, MP, David Tribe. £4.00 (66p).
Questions of Censorship, David Tribe. £4.75 (66p).
100 Years of Freethought, David Tribe. £1.50 (54p).
The Rise of the Mediocracy, David Tribe. £4.95 (29p).
Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare, David Tribe. 15p (7p).
A Chronology of British Secularism, G. H. Taylor. 10p (7p).
Housing: an Anarchist Approach, Colin Ward. £1.25 (26p).
Way of Zen, Alan Watts. 60p (19p).
Origins of Christianity, G. A. Wells. 20p (7p).
The Jesus of the Early Christians, G. A. Wells. £2.95 (36p).
Did Jesus Exist?, G. A. Wells. £5:80 (36p).
Thomas Paine, His Life, Work and Times, Audrey Williamson. £5 (54p).
Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty, Audrey Williamson. £4.95 (54p).
The Right to Die, Charles Wilshaw. 25p (7p).
Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic, Alan Wood. 50p (15p).
The Freethinker Bound Volume 1976, Editors William McIlroy and Jim Herrick. £3.00 (36p).
Objective, Fair and Balanced (a new law for religion in education), BHA publication. 40p (12p).
Wider Horizons (Suggestions for school readings). 30p (12p).
Against Censorship, Various authors. 25p (10p).

Figure in brackets denotes postage charge; any overpayment of postage will be credited.

TO: G. W. FOOTE & COMPANY, 702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL

Please send copies of (and enclosed list)

I enclose (Cheques and postal orders payable to G. W. Foote & Company)

Name Address

Blasphemy: Reaction Assessed

then that is a good thing, not a bad one."

She ends by dissociating herself once again from the Festival of Light. If she chooses to dissociate herself "officially" from that organisation, she can hardly be surprised that such a rift should be unclear to the public, in view of her long and frequent links with their platform. Has she noticed the virulently anti-homosexual pamphlet *The Truth in Love* (published by the Festival of Light)?

Finally, in her third letter which was highly critical of the *Evening Standard's* "emotive support for *Gay News*" in an editorial, Whitehouse again seeks to justify her action in bringing a private prosecution against the homosexual paper. "The blasphemy law performs a very important function. Its role, or one of them, is to ensure that such material, the publication and dissemination of which could cause 'a breach of the peace' is controlled. Far from repealing the law it should surely be extended to cover the other religions which now exist in our society."

Whitehouse then delivers what I assume she regards as a trump card by triumphantly stating: "And finally, your readers might be interested to know that I have received support for the action I took from people who themselves are homosexual." She would have done well to leave that unsaid, for one is instantly reminded of the fact that there were Jews who supported Hitler. Doubtless there were homosexuals who supported the Nazis too to avoid the pogrom and the pink triangles. They are called, I believe, cowards and their "support" is worth absolutely nothing.

JOSEPH SYMES

the "flower of atheism"

A booklet by NIGEL SINNOTT

50p plus 10p postage

G. W. Foote & Company

702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

THE FREETHINKER

Editor: JIM HERRICK

702 HOLLOWAY ROAD
LONDON N19 3NL
TELEPHONE: 01-272 1266

UK ISSN 0016-0687

The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor.

"The Freethinker" was founded in 1881 by G. W. Foote and is published mid-monthly. Material submitted (including Letters and Announcements) must reach this office by the 20th of the preceding month.

SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Inland and Overseas: Twelve months: £1.75 Six months: 90p
U.S.A. and Canada: Twelve months: \$4.50 Six months: £2.25

Please make cheques, etc, payable to G. W. Foote & Company. (Foreign subscriptions by cheque or International Money Order.)

"The Freethinker" can also be ordered through any newsagent.

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Meetings on the second Thursday of the month, 8 pm. 8a Grand Parade, Castlereagh. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co. Antrim, telephone White-abbey 66752.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove. Sunday, 2 October, 5.30 pm. Pat Sloan: "The BHA and the Economy, The Report Criticised".

Harrow Humanist Group. The Library, Gayton Road, Nr Harrow-on-the-Hill station. Thursday, 15 September, 8.00 pm. Barbara Smoker: Blasphemy in 1977.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Corner of Squirrels Heath Road and Gubbins Lane. Tuesday, 20 September, 8.00 pm. Ted King: "Industrial Relations".

Humanist Housing Association. Rose Bush Court, 35/41 Parkhill Road, NW3. Saturday, 8 October, 10.00 am to 12 noon. Bring and Buy Sale.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. 7.45 pm. "Why I am a Humanist"—A symposium of members.

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

London Young Humanists. 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8. Sunday, 18 September, 7.30 pm. Gillian Tindall: "How I Write". (Non-members 30p.)

Merseyside Humanist Group. Inquiries to 248 Woodchurch Road, Birkenhead. Tel: 051 608-3835 (4-6 pm).

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. Thursday, 15 September, 8.30 pm. (At 35 Finsbury Park Road, N4) Expressionism in Painting. Thursday, 22 September, 8.30 pm. (At 40 Chandos Road, N2) Nutrition—Positive or Negative.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 25 September, 3 pm. Annual Re-union. All Humanist groups. Speaker James Hemming.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road. Wednesday, 14 September, 8 pm. Assistant Director for Social Services. (Books welcomed for a book sale on 15 October, Contact Mr Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton.)