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WHERE HAVE ALL THE YOUNG BELIEVERS GONE?

The church is seen as boring and irrelevant by most young people. "All right for those who know . . .", "a waste of time . . .", "It was just, you know, just the boredom of it . . .", "Well, I suppose there might be something in it, and there again there might not." These are some of the comments of young people about religion and religious education found in a recent report, "A Kind of Believing", published by the General Synod Board of Education.

The booklet is a discussion document looking at the results of two sociologists who were invited by the Church of England Board of Education to research into the beliefs of young people. A Consultative Group of churchmen from different denominations and with different experience of youth work and education discussed the research and its conclusions. A hundred young people were interviewed by a group of professional interviewers who specialise in depth-interviewing techniques. The questions were open-ended so that important areas of belief could be raised (or not) by the young people themselves. They were selected from an agreed age range of 13 to 24, and a variety of social class and urban or rural areas. The booklet admits that the survey is too small to be confidently taken as representative, but the results are most revealing.

Church Bleak and Boring

The overwhelming conclusion was that young people had no clear beliefs at all. Different kinds of belief were expected to emerge, but the interviews almost all showed the difficulty of finding anything that could be called belief. Church was considered dull and unrelated to people's lives. Youngsters' image of the church as a building was of an unattractive place—"grey, cold, empty, or alternatively full of boring middle-aged, respectable people all listening or pretending to listen to boring sermons from

the 'vicar'." The feeling of being talked at was disliked: "There's no discussion, there's just one bloke talking. You just sit there and you're told. It's just like having ten cups of tea at the same time."

Sunday School was sometimes remembered as a pleasant experience as a small child, but from eight onwards it was usually seen as boring. Church-going stopped around the age of 12 to 14 for most people, for it was in no way a normal part of an ordinary adolescent life.

Religion Not Relevant

The researchers summed it up: "they tread the wobbly and doubtful line which separates agnosticism from some vague and woolly version of Christianity." There was a fairly common consent to some very vague idea of God. "I believe there is a God, but I don't know much about him . . . It doesn't do any harm not to worship him." A belief in Jesus as divine was even less common. Even where beliefs existed "hardly any of our respondents regarded it as having any *social* relevance at all."

The writers of the discussion paper tie themselves into knots over the use of the word "belief". An assumption that belief implies religious belief is not surprising in a Church report, but the underlying idea that Christianity presents a coherent belief system at all, brings problems into their analysis of inconsistencies in the findings. As was made very clear in the book by a former Protestant pastor, Joachim Kahl, *The Misery of Christianity*, Christianity is not one belief system but several overlapping and sometimes contradictory ones. Also, as we so often see in the history of the changing ideas by which Christianity presents itself, the response to the sign that people have no belief at all is a comment

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about "the need to redefine the boundaries of belief."

It is surely, however, clutching at straws to take comfort from the fact that someone would think it rude to take part in something she rejects. "Is her sensitivity about 'rudeness' to something she doesn't believe in a sort of mark of respect for a faith she says she rejects?" A less contorted explanation would be to say that it shows a mark of respect for other individuals.

Another characteristic of young people's approach to belief was found to be an emphasis on open-mindedness and tolerance. Commonly repeated phrases were "I like to have an open mind" and "Everybody's got the right to his own belief." This is linked with belief being seen as a private matter, not affecting one's daily public life. This so-called "privatisation" of belief has been described by other sociologists. The writers of the report obviously have reservations about this phenomenon. It is likely to weaken religious beliefs if they are merely a set of private assumptions. This is supported by quoting from Owen Chadwick's book *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*: "The vast majority of mankind live by commonplace, half-truths to which they become attached and accustomed and which without thinking they suppose to be true. Unlimited freedom of thought means that all these commonplaces are cast into a cauldron and men no longer have stable principles to guide their moral beings." The principle of "Every man his own Aquinas" is, according to the writers, likely to leave people lost and prone to turn to more primitive superstition.

Half-Baked Superstition

A prevalent belief in half-baked superstitious ideas was found. A girl who was thoughtfully sceptical of Christianity claimed that a flat she had shared with two friends had been haunted by a poltergeist and that only a room containing a Bible and cross had been unaffected. She consulted a medium who read tea leaves and had her exorcise the spirit. An inconsistency was seen in the fact that this kind of semi-superstition was linked with a "simplistic scientism". Scientific facts were often seen as a reason for rejecting Biblical literalism, but other fantastic ideas were accepted if wrapped up in scientific or science fiction jargon. (The occult clap-trap that clutters the shelves of many bookshops would support this.)

To a humanist the report was heartening in that qualities of open-mindedness seem to be growing. The report also admits that some young people show a more caring and altruistic attitude than previous generations. (This can hardly be due to their religious upbringing on the evidence presented.) Freedom of thought and speech is also seen as an essential value by the young. The booklet suggests that the young have learnt the lesson of John Stuart

Mill *On Liberty*: "The great writers to whom the world owes what liberty it possesses have mostly asserted freedom of conscience as an indefeasible right and denied absolutely that a human being is accountable to others for his religious belief." But the suggestion of the writers that "one of the deep religious values is freedom" is surprising. Religion has frequently been a force of repression and intolerance throughout history. A similar confusion arises from one youth's statement: "You could say virtues were a religion. Honesty—yeah, honesty and sincerity—but again I haven't thought about these much. I'm trying to get through life—to be happy." The absurd idea that moral values, such as honesty, necessarily have any relation to religion remains curiously pervasive.

The Future of Religious Education

For just this reason the idea of moral education and religious education should now be separated. The comments on the ineffectiveness of religious education found in this research confirm this. Referring to religious education the booklet reads: "If one could choose just one summary word for our interviewees' response it would be BORING in capitals with six underline strokes." RE lessons in school were seen by almost everyone asked as an excuse for rioting and doing no work. It is an opportunity to flick paper, do crosswords, wonder what is for dinner. There was much ignorance: one boy described Mary as "God's wife", another confused the Red Sea and the Nile. Some thought that RE would be better if taught by someone who "really believed", others that it should be an exam subject "you have to work for." But this was coupled with a common view that it was essentially irrelevant as a subject. Even discussions about drugs, sex, capital punishment and so on, while found enjoyable, were not thought to be much connected with religion. Youngsters said strongly that RE should be taught so as not to indoctrinate belief, but so that people can "make up their own minds." A firm conclusion of the report was that "it will not be helpful to redouble our efforts in the present mode of religious education."

This is just what could happen though if some current strident suggestions about restoring RE were carried out. As an example, Sir Frederick Catherwood recently addressed a meeting of public school headmasters calling for the Christian faith to be taught in our schools, which might help stiffen the standards which held our society together, even if it did not make Christians. (Sir Frederick, who is chairman of the British Overseas Trade Board, also lamented the greed and material standards of today.) At an even more lunatic level a survey by the Family Welfare Committee of the Order of Christian Unity has claimed that 89 per cent of head

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Paedophiles—Are we Dodging the Issues?

ANTONY GREY

A Paedophile Information Exchange meeting held at Conway Hall resulted in indignant and violent demonstration from the public and outraged headlines from the press. It is not surprising that people should react to the subject of paedophilia (sexual attraction towards children) in an emotional way. But it is not reasonable to react to an emotional subject by attempting to suppress discussion. The Roman Catholic Church put pressure not to attend the meeting on the Rev Father Michael Ingham, who was to have addressed PIE; some members of South Place Ethical Society are demanding a more prohibitive letting policy at Conway Hall.

It is in the belief that unpopular, even distasteful, aspects of life should be discussed reasonably and calmly that we publish this article about paedophilia by the former director of the Albany Trust.

Neither the public nor the press should congratulate themselves over the hysterical hullabaloo which has lately been focussed upon a tiny group calling itself the Paedophile Information Exchange. The idea of adults seeking sexual relations with children may well turn the stomachs of most of us—but must we really vomit so publicly and collectively as to sidestep the moral obligation to apply ourselves as rationally as we can to serious consideration of several important issues?

While I do not claim more self-control than most of my neighbours, I have endeavoured, in my former capacity as Director of the Albany Trust, to listen over a period of several months to what PIE and other paedophiles (whom PIE does not necessarily represent) were saying, and to evaluate its validity. While not accepting all their assertions, I find myself still pondering over a good many questions which were raised during these discussions.

First, is the public's image of the paedophile as being always and without exception a "dirty old man" who is a "child molester" accurate? The answer is without doubt no. While there are, of course, some sexual psychopaths who molest, assault and sometimes even murder small children, they do not comprise the majority of paedophiles, who feel as much if not more revulsion at such atrocities as the rest of us.

If, then, the public is wrong in believing all paedophiles to be evil, malevolent people, should we not take a fresh and more critical look at what happens to those who are apprehended for having illegal sexual relationships with children? Anyone who is at all aware of what happens to alleged sexual offenders before, during and (most of all) after trial

would almost certainly answer "yes". The treatment frequently meted out to imprisoned sex offenders, not least by their fellow prisoners, is a national disgrace. Social ostracism and discrimination outside prison is also often cruelly inhumane.

But even if not all paedophiles are sinister or aggressive people, are they not, nevertheless, bound to endanger a child who becomes involved with them? Here there is no simple or straightforward answer, but a good deal needs to be said from various points of view. Perhaps most members of the public, and nearly all parents, would instinctively say the answer must always be "yes". Paedophiles would maintain that it is usually "no"—and that indeed such relationships can even be beneficial to the children in various ways. Psychiatrists, while having a much greater understanding of and sympathy for paedophiles than the average person has, would mostly maintain that such contacts are bound to have some damaging effects, given our society's current attitudes, if only because of the furtive secrecy in which they must take place if undiscovered, and the traumas of disclosure if unwanted discovery occurs.

My own view is that social attitudes towards children's sexuality would have to change so enormously before such relationships could cease to be perceived as damaging that the proposition that they *need* not be damaging will remain academic for the foreseeable future. However, some researches which have been published in various countries indicate that paedophile relationships are not inevitably or always harmful to the children involved.

The equation of childhood's innocence with sexual ignorance, and consequent attempts to prolong the latter, strike me as misconceived. I do not believe that we should flinch from attempts to become better informed about the facts, as opposed to the myths, about children's sexuality. It is, I hope, common ground that we are all sexual beings from birth, even though we do not usually become fully aware of our sexuality, or much preoccupied with it, until adolescence.

Significance of Puberty

While some paedophiles would deny that puberty is a significant event, I cannot bring myself to believe this. Indeed, I think that it is crucial to an intelligent and responsible consideration of the subject to make a clear distinction between pre-pubertal childhood and post-pubertal adolescence; and paedophilia relates to the former, not to the latter. And, since it is possible to question the emotional or economic readiness for sexual relationships of at least some of those in their 'teens who have passed

puberty, it is surely far more difficult to postulate convincingly the pre-pubertal child's readiness for sex; still more so his or her comprehension of what a sexual relationship with an adult involves for either of them.

I think we should, nevertheless, contemplate the possibility that it might on balance be healthy if society became somewhat more accepting of, and less alarmed by, childrens' explorative sexual curiosity at the onset of puberty, and certainly less vindictive towards those adults who may become involved with a child at this stage. For, as the Dutch Speijer Report pointed out nearly a decade ago, "a society which seeks to eliminate seductive situations will not encourage public moral welfare . . . a normal development requires broad possibilities of introduction, experiment, contact and initiation."

Morals and Law

In a famous essay, Lord Devlin once discerned the obscure roots of the tangled relationship between morals and law in what I still regard as a most unholy trio of emotions: intolerance, indignation and disgust. In urging that these are bad guides to either good law or good morals, where sexual behaviour is concerned, I am by no means saying that there should be no moral standards or no laws whatever. But at least let us try to make those laws and standards which we do uphold in the latter decades of this century as rational, humane and well calculated to attain commonly desired ends as we can make them. Above all, in discussing paedophilia and other emotionally loaded topics, let us consciously strive from now on for more light and less heat in our debating.

WORLDWIDE

EGYPT

President Sadat has made an impassioned plea for sanity between religious factions in Egypt. The conflict between Christians (Copts) and Muslims was worsened by a proposed decree to make apostasy from Islam punishable by death. This is part of a campaign to make Quoranic law the sole source of jurisdiction in Egypt. Such a decree could mean that a Christian who had adopted the Muslim faith for reasons of marriage, or even commercial benefit, would not be able to revert to his original faith without fear of capital punishment.

Fanatical cliques and demands have been increasing on both sides. There have been marches, counter-marches and the burning down of a church. President Sadat has attempted to adopt a conciliatory role, but the revival of militant Islam fundamentalism in the Arab world and the fate of Maronite Christians in Lebanon have led to great fears in religious minority groups and have fed the forces of religious extremism.

INDIA

The Indian Home Secretary, Mr Charan Singh, has alerted security agencies about the activities of a sect known as the Anand Marg. The organisation calls itself Universal Protest Movement as well as Anand Marg, meaning path of eternal happiness.

The sect has been making threats of sabotage and assassination. A brick with a threatening note was thrown into the India Board Tourist Office in London. The Indian Embassy in Canberra has been burned down by the Marg's supporters.

The Marg was founded 22 years ago and its beliefs and organisation remain enigmatic. The attitude towards the Indian Government is thought to be related to the imprisonment of their founder, Mr P. R. Sarkar. He was sentenced to five years in prison for complicity in the murder of five of his own disciples, who were said to have challenged his authority and revolted against him.

ITALY

The leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Mr Enrico Berlinguer, has published a reply to an open letter from the Bishop of Ivrea. The political leader says of his party "We remain open and welcoming towards Catholic values, but we do not want a 'Christian' society". He admits that in Communist states in eastern Europe there is severe discrimination against religious groups, though the position is in his view changing, if slowly and with difficulty. The PCI wants to see a secular and democratic state "which would not be theistic, not atheistic, nor anti-theistic".

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The California Appeal Court has ruled that parents cannot be given temporary custody of adult children so that they can be "deprogrammed" from weird religions. Earlier a court had given custody to parents of children aged 21 to 26 years to give them the opportunity to wean them away from the Rev Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. There was evidence given in court that the Unification Church's "indoctrination", which has been described before in *The Freethinker*, involved subjection to isolation, poor diet, interrupted sleep and intense emotional pressure. The court said that the lower court's orders had violated the children's rights to religious freedom under the First Amendment of the Constitution. Even though many would find the beliefs of the Rev Moon's Church "incredible, if not preposterous", the First Amendment did not specify one type of religion.

A workmen's discussion on a Waterloo-Bournemouth train included this thought for today: "The trouble with Catholics is—they take religion too seriously. It's not a hobby, like with Protestants."
The Times Diary

Gnosticism

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

Secularists find the idea of a beneficent God and a world full of pain contradictory. But many religious groups have believed in a malevolent God or gods. The idea that human beings have been trapped into the material world by an evil force in a cosmic battle between good and evil was essential to the Gnostic heresies, which are here discussed.

Probably the most formidable heresy ever encountered by Christianity was Gnosticism—a generic title for a vast number of philosophico-religious cults that had already begun to appear by the beginning of the Christian era. As Christianity fought to establish itself, it had to contend with the spirited opposition and the cogent arguments of the great Gnostic heresiarchs—names like Basilides, Valentinus, Carpocrates, Marcion, Tatian, Mani, to name but a few. Even the fall of the Roman Empire in the West did not put an end to the Manichees, one of the major Gnostic sects; as late as the seventh century, a Pope was horrified to discover that some of his attendants were practising Manichees! In the Byzantine Empire, the same period saw the rise of the Paulicians in Armenia and Asia Minor, a neo-Manichaean group that was heavily persecuted, but seemed to be strengthened precisely because of official opposition. The Paulicians may have contributed to the development of the Bogomils, a form of Gnosticism which captured the hearts of the fierce Bulgars—a creed which believed that work, procreation and obedience to temporal authorities were all equally objectionable.

Many of these heretics appear to have emigrated to Western Europe, their influence perceptibly increasing as the years passed, until we have the last great flowering of Gnosticism in Europe, the Cathars. Appearing in Southern France towards the middle of the twelfth century (though with fore-runners elsewhere), they established seminaries in many places, recognised the spiritual authority of their own Pope, and were the victims of a particularly sanguinary and discreditable episode in the soiled history of the papacy—the Albigensian crusade. After numberless atrocities (often encouraged by the fanatical Dominicans), this last manifestation of Gnosticism was destroyed, and, since then, Gnosticism has been merely a name to be read in books, rather than a living tradition. (Perhaps the sole contemporary representatives of a semi-Gnostic outlook are the Hare Krishna people. They say we have literally fallen into matter through forgetfulness of God. Our true home is in the "spiritual sky", where life is "eternal, blissful and full of knowledge".)

So, what was it that could lead to a faith that managed to withstand Christian persecution and vilification for centuries? What was it that made Manicheism so powerful that it could spread from Persia to all parts of the Roman Empire, and even as far afield as India, China and Central Asia? What was it that enabled Cathar "Perfecti" (the heretical equivalent of clergy) to suffer the agony of the stake rather than convert to Catholicism?

Perhaps we should look to Persia—the land that gave two virtually forgotten religions to the world, Zoroastrianism and Manicheism. The Persians were racial kinsmen of the Indo-Aryans, those barbarous nomads who destroyed the cities of the Indus valley culture and (probably through assimilating much of the older, indigenous culture) then laid the foundations of what we know as "Hinduism". These Indo-Aryans, after becoming accustomed to their new home, began to philosophize, and many of them seemed to move in the direction of Gnosticism. The fundamental idea of the heresy is that we are not originally products of this material world, but are eternal beings that have somehow been seduced into this melancholy realm of pain, conflict and lust. The Persians, also speculating along dualistic lines—antagonism of light and darkness, good and evil, material and spiritual—produced the teacher Zoroaster. According to him, the sole reason for the existence of the world was as a spiritual "front-line" against the forces of darkness. The Devil and his assistants had corrupted the world, but there would eventually be a great cosmic battle inaugurated by the "Saoshyant" ("Coming Saviour"), evil would be neutralised, Good would triumph, and the world be transformed into a paradise where there would be no pain, no death, no need to eat and no need to reproduce (though the faithful could still mate with their wives, who would be eternal but sterile—contraception courtesy of God!)

Trapped by an Evil God

Zoroastrianism deeply influenced Mani, the third century founder of one of the most radical forms of Gnosticism. He claimed that the material world was the work of an evil God, that we had been trapped into the material world, that the Good God desired our liberation, that we should relinquish attachment to material things, particularly marriage, procreation, meat-eating and alcohol. This missionary faith spread far and wide, and even St Augustine was a Manichean layman for nine years. Arguing with irresistible logic, the Manichees asserted that a cruel and imperfect world must necessarily be the deliberate creation of a cruel and imperfect God. The soul alone is not the creation of the God of this world, and will only be truly happy

when it is restored to the realm of Light, Love and Bliss, which is the Abode of the True God.

At the same time as Manicheism was making inroads into the Roman Empire, another teaching, founded by a man named Marcion, was also threatening Catholicism. Marcion, noticing the difference between the Old Testament God (vindictive, dictatorial) and the New Testament God (gentle, forgiving), had concluded that there were two Gods. The Old Testament God was the creator of this world, in complete ignorance of the purely spiritual deity (the "Stranger God") who was to be proclaimed by Jesus. Marcion was the only Gnostic to claim that the Evil God had created both the body and the soul. The spiritual God, distressed by the miserable condition of beings in this world, commissioned Jesus to come to earth and teach men to despise material things—which means (principally) government, war, money, possessions, marriage and procreation. Procreation was indefensible because (apart from being intrinsically callous) it represented the dutiful perpetuation of the Devil's kingdom. At one time, the organised church of Marcionism numbered many large congregations, and we must remember that there were other Gnostic teachers as well who all imparted their own idea of what constituted the liberating "Gnosis" (knowledge).

Ferocious Persecution of Heretics

Apart from the mass movements of the Paulicians and the Bogomils in the Byzantine Empire, Gnosticism as a definite religious and cultural influence in Western Europe seemed to go into eclipse until the later centuries of the medieval period. We then see the Cathars in Languedoc, claiming that those who worship the God of this world are revering a being of limitless cruelty and depravity. Pope Innocent III, alarmed by the increasing popular success of the Cathars (indicated by the fact that St Bernard, preaching in Toulouse Cathedral, could only attract a congregation of just over 30!), announced a crusade against the heretics. This naturally attracted every fanatical priest, threadbare mercenary, dissolute and rapacious baron who could make their way to the rich and tempting lands of the South of France. (The Papal Legate had been murdered in 1208, after delivering an ultimatum to the heretic-protecting Count Raymond of Toulouse. Consequently, the Pope felt it his Christian duty to launch a crusade against those misguided enough to reject the temporal and religious authority of Rome.) The campaign that followed resulted in the countryside being transformed into an unproductive, corpse-littered wilderness, cities razed to the ground, and acts of such ferocity that even hardened military men on both sides must have occasionally felt utterly sickened by the whole ghastly business. Finally,

in 1244, a force of Crusaders distinguished themselves by capturing the Cathar stronghold of Montsegur and throwing 200 elderly Cathar religious into an escape proof pit, so they could relish the edifying spectacle of a mass burning. Although isolated pockets of Cathar resistance managed to hold out a little longer, the final result—the forcible imposition of Catholicism on previously heretical areas—was a foregone conclusion.

It is usually assumed that one is either an atheist or a theist, that is either someone who accepts a natural explanation of life and the universe, or else someone who has philosophical and emotional recourse to the quaint hypothesis of a being of supreme Love and Reason, who (for some inexplicable reason) created the cosmos ex nihilo. Yet, for many centuries in many lands, there were people who found themselves unable to accept either of these outlooks. For them, the suffering of life was not the unfortunate result of a witless evolutionary process, nor was it something introduced into a hitherto perfect world by the disobedience of the first human couple—rather, the evil and misery in the world appeared to them as proof positive that the world had been made by a being characterised by totally demonic qualities (particularly spite and brutality). So, against both materialism and theism, they accepted bi-theism (the antagonism of two Gods, the Evil one of Matter and the Good one of Spirit) and called themselves "Gnostics". Whilst the secularist would say that the idea of a malevolent creator is as much a product of the pathetic fallacy as is the opposite view, we can at least sympathise with those hundreds of thousands of resolute folk who stuck to their principles, scorned the Church, and were even prepared cheerfully, bravely, to die for what they believed to be a valid explanation of existence. It is, perhaps, somewhat ironic that the very aspects of existence which secularists see as proof of God's non-existence—pain and evil—are the very things which prompted the Gnostics to say there was a creator of the world. They concluded that "Operari sequitur esse", and accordingly saw this Cosmic Architect as a kind of transcendental Marquis de Sade.

GOOD GOD!

by BARBARA SMOKER

A "string of verses to tie up the deity"

95p plus 12p postage

National Secular Society

702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

The Humorous Humanist

EDWARD BLISHEN

Barbara Smoker recently published an entertaining book of verses, "Good God" which demolish a wide range of arguments for the existence of God. Here Edward Blishen, well-known as a writer and broadcaster, offers his comments on "Good God".

"You cannot", sometimes say the nicest people, "be one of those." Vaguely they mean you can't be associated with bands or leagues of humanists or rationalists. "They're so humourless." A statement that always strikes me as, in itself, a failure of humour. It is not so much po-faced as po-minded to assume, with no effort to check your assumption, that strong conviction and proper earnestness are the enemies of laughter. Anyone who had actually checked must almost at once have encountered Barbara Smoker, who, as she will certainly forgive me for saying, is not physically made for solemnity. Amusement, always slightly amazed, is her common approach to the causes that she embraces with, of course, great seriousness.

Good God! is an emanation of that amusement: and mostly a crisp and witty emanation. I've just been struggling to write about my childhood, and think I recognise the charge that gives force to this "string of verses to tie up the deity." Barbara Smoker was born a Roman Catholic, had an "intense convent education", and early determined to become a nun. It was wartime service in the WRNS—mostly in Ceylon, where religions are many—that made her think again. *Good God!* has the fierce and playful animosity with which a childhood hero, all heroism gone, might be remembered. It is 93 verses, mostly quatrains, of almost companionable demolition of character. There's an anchor verse to which, with small variations, the poet returns, like a triumphant boxer to his corner between rounds:

Good God! Of him, I recollect,
in youth I had no doubt.

First Cause! the cosmic Architect!

But then I found him out.

Back to the centre of the ring, after each of these repetitions, and the God-battering continues. It seems to me that Barbara Smoker wins nearly every round: but not, in fact, by battering. It is the wrong word. She is, much of the time, sharp and stylish, and says much in little—and with witty precision. She raps her opponent with the stinging knuckles of rhyme. Thus:

What is "divine intelligence"?

It is, on all the evidence,
eternal chance, not skill;
not learning from experience;

not systematic inference—

thus, God's IQ is nil!

The philosophical points made are familiar enough: what is less common is the skill with which they are reduced to their most laconic form. You have to live with ideas for a long time to be able to telescope them so tightly.

A reviewer can perhaps best do what many readers will do: point to favourite moments. For example:

To be forgiven, God would need
the one condign defence:
if he means well, then he must plead
divine incompetence.

That—unless the very language in which it is all to be discussed is one withheld from us, in which case the charge must become one of divine deceit—is surely true. Or the telling point is made, tellingly, that the story of the creation contains an elementary illogicality:

Suppose that Genesis were true:
our global population
would, it seems, be stuck at two,
had Adam spurned temptation.

Joyce Harpur, who provides the illustrations, imagines the scene: Adam, unfig-leaved, disdaining Eve's persuasions—and so, in the simplest way, reducing the Bible to a leaflet. As for the Bible itself, it's pointed out that for a fundamental guide to human existence it was remarkably inexact:

It taught man naught of irrigation,
medication, vaccination—
as a means of education,
Scripture is a loss:
the substance of its 'revelation'
is, that God's the boss.

What Barbara Smoker is best at is expressing, with honest force, that sense of anger many have felt at the simple though quite breath-takingly huge inequity of the divine scheme: which makes one want to say that if these are the rules of the game which must lead to the damnation of many, then one would not sink to being saved.

A God of Love I cannot square
With Hell—not fact, nor in the air—
nor yet with hell-on-Earth . . .

I think that once or twice God escapes with nothing worse than a bruised grin. Not all the knots are perfectly tight. Barbara Smoker won't mind: she can't wish to down such an opponent finally, and there an end. Though as I say this I think again of the dedication, to J. W. Gott, virtually destroyed in 1922 by the experience of imprisonment for blasphemy, and reflect that the good God should not base too much hope on the humanist's possession of a sense of humour.

Many people turn semi-flippantly to their "stars" to see what the horoscope in the columns of their favourite paper predicts for the coming days. As entertainment this may be relatively harmless—if silly, but if taken seriously it can lead to foolish decisions and unnecessary anxieties. You would not expect the *Observer*, with its tradition of offering respectable intelligent Sunday fare, to take the lead in furthering this trend. But the Colour Supplement of the *Observer* has begun a monthly astrological column. "We're neutral", says the italicised heading, "but we think that there are many believers who will welcome our monthly horoscope."

This is followed by a long article by Colin Wilson justifying astrology. This obsession with the occult leads him these days into increasingly bizarre spheres. (For example, *Men of Mystery*, edited by Colin Wilson, to be reviewed by Audrey Williamson in the next issue of *The Freethinker*.) Wilson refers to the statistical researches of Michel Gauquelin and Professor H. J. Eysenck, which suggest some correlation between birth signs and personality traits. While authorities are still arguing about the validity of these statistics, it is recognised that so many factors combine in the development of personality that any conclusive research of this kind will be very difficult.

Colin Wilson becomes even more speculative when embarking on possible explanations of the mechanism whereby configurations of planets affect our lives. He suggests that subtle, low-intensity electric fields, which permeate the universe and "organise" life, are at work. This unclear argument is further confused by the obligatory mention of prehistoric monuments like Stonehenge and Avebury, where such forces apparently abound. Imagination and atmosphere are strangers to Wilson's vocabulary, if not to his speculations.

However, the professional astrologer who is to compile the *Observer's* column will not lack for words. Astrologers, who claim to be professional, themselves admit the impossibility of casting generalised horoscopes for newspaper readers. This does not deter them. The *Observer*, as could be predicted, casts its prognostication in high-flown language: "The eclipse on the twelfth, with conjunctions of powerful Pluto and communicative Mercury, fall into your partnership house, and portend a regeneration or remaking of a partnership." None of your simple: "Good time for love life."

The ability to foresee the future is no guarantee, however, that you can avoid a penniless fate. A clairvoyant, Mr Simon Alexander, recently found himself in Chesterfield bankruptcy court. He claimed to be the seer who predicted, within 18 days, the date of the arrest of the Black Panther, and had "almost caught the Cambridge rapist"; he was con-

sulted by crowds of people, whom he failed to charge for this service. Yet, he had not foreseen his own bankruptcy, maybe because, as he said, "This isn't bankruptcy; it's a fight with the taxman."

Never mind, his fortune may return to the ascendant: "My business sense has let me down, not my God-given clairvoyance. I am now going out to Australia to see what the prospects are there."

FRONT RESPECTABILITY

The National Front has been attempting to gain respectability and publicity by describing the involvement of some churchmen in the organisation. It would be quite unfair to condemn any group for its lunatic fringe, as are any racist clerics, and it is worth applauding the firm stand taken against racialism by church leaders such as Dr Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark. But the fact that some people have found it possible to link religion and the National Front needs noting, and no opportunity to oppose the repulsive attitudes of the National Front should be missed.

Five or six Church of England clergymen and a number of Free Church ministers, together with active laymen, are known to be members of the National Front. Mr Martin Webster, organiser of the National Front, has also confirmed that a Roman Catholic monk is an active member. Mr Webster made the extraordinary statement that he had been brought up in Catholic schools and had never been taught that racialism was wrong. He said that he intends to write to see if members who are clergymen would allow their names to be revealed.

A chaplain, the Rev Terry Spong, has left his job as a prison chaplain after his membership of the National Front was publicised. Mr Spong had been assistant chaplain at Brixton since August. He is reported as saying: "My Christian ideals are that I am proud to be white and British. I am appalled by what has happened to the country of my birth." His reason for resigning was that he was worried that when Dr Mervyn Stockwood discovered his views his license to work at Brixton would be removed.

Dr Stockwood is among a number of leading churchmen who have condemned the National Front, declaring that membership of the organisation was incompatible with Christian views. The Right Rev Hugh Montefiore, whose outspoken views have meant that his appointment as Bishop of Bir-

AND NOTES

mingham was very controversial, has also criticised clergy joining the National Front. He said he was "saddened but not wholly surprised, remembering the precedent of the German church."

Secular humanists will be pleased to join with church leaders in condemning the racist views of the National Front, and also remember that a National Front Policy would favour capital punishment, anti-gay attitudes and greater censorship.

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

A militant atheist and a flamboyant Baptist minister have been touring the United States of America with a road show in which they fight out their beliefs with all the glitter and dazzle of showbiz. Madalyn O'Hare, who is described as "America's number one atheist", is a lady of 50 who played an important part in the 1963 Supreme Court ban on prayers in public schools. "Big" Bob Harrington is a Baptist minister with the voice and skills of a ring-master.

They are both heavyweight debaters and neither pulls any punches in their public matches, which take place in theatres and cinemas. Each performance is based in a pulpit on either side of the stage. Big Bob will snatch the microphone and pound out that he is going to stop this "demon-directed damsel", who is "against God, country, church and home." Madalyn O'Hare can produce audience whistling, hissing and booing with her hard blows: "I'll show you that Bob Harrington is stupid—just like all other preachers and Christians." Audiences become frenzied with chants as the match continues. A blasphemous thrust from O'Hare will cause Harrington to wrestle the microphone from her.

Their motives are purely polemical, they both claim not to be making much money. Madalyn O'Hare is said to operate from a £250,000 office block in Texas. Harrington, who travels in a bus given to him by pornography publisher Larry Flynt, is thought to take £100,000 a month in contributions and sales of records and books.

"We wanna put on a nationally televised debate and call it *The Superbowl of Soul*." It should bring in an enormous minestrone of beliefs—and dollars.

Dr Mervyn Stockwood and Barbara Smoker will debate the motion "That Christianity is a dying creed" at the Oxford Union early in November. There is no indication that they will be taking to the road at any later stage.

Freethinker Fund

The total this month is disappointingly low. It is through the contributions to this fund that we are able to keep the price of *The Freethinker* as low as possible, so that no-one can be deterred from buying it for financial reasons. The support for the fund is not only very much appreciated, but vital to the continuance of the journal. The total for last month 21 September to 17 October was £29.48.

Thanks are expressed to: Anon. £5; J. G. Burdon, 50p; Mrs D. M. Carter, 50p; Mrs P. A. Forrest, £5; S. P. Harvey, 25p; Erica Haslam, 75p; F. C. Hoy, £2.25; A. Huxtable, 65p; J. R. Hutton, £1.25; E. C. Hughes, £1.48; E. J. Hughes, £1; J. Knowles, £1.25; N. Leveritt, £5; J. Little, £1.60; K. K. Moore, 25p; Miss A. M. Parry, £1.25; W. N. Ramage, 25p; J. F. Robin, 25p; P. R. Smith, 25p; J. Thompson, 75p.

A pupil at a fee-paying convent school has been expelled for reading a sexy book. Anne Letten, aged 14, bought "Sensuous Woman" at Paddington Station to read on a train ride with her parents to school. The book was later passed round the class and after it was discovered by one of the nuns Anne was expelled. The mother superior accused the girl of being a corrupting influence and is reported as also saying that she had "killed her chances of having a happy marriage".

NOTICE

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
THE LIBRARY, CONWAY HALL
RED LION SQUARE, LONDON WC1
SUNDAY, 4 DECEMBER — 2.00 pm

(NSS members only)

A devout Sikh has killed his daughter because she rejected the idea of an arranged marriage. According to the prosecution, at the trial of Jaginder Singh Gill of Wolverhampton, the man's daughter defied the Sikh tradition by choosing her own boy friends. Singh was sentenced to life imprisonment at Birmingham Court on 12 October. In his anxiety to protect the honour of his family Singh had brought disgrace upon himself, said Mr Justice Cusack.

VARIETIES OF UNBELIEF: ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS IN ENGLISH SOCIETY 1850-1960 by Susan Budd. Heinemann, £9.50.

Who would have imagined 15 or 20 years ago that the history and sociology of unbelief could become trendy academic studies? The incredible has however happened. Perhaps unbelievers should echo the words of Tertullian on the Incarnation: "It is certain because it is impossible."

Having crossed swords a few times in *The Freethinker* with Susan Budd while she was working on the doctoral thesis on which *Varieties of Unbelief* is based, and having received a number of adverse reports on the book before it reached me, I opened it with considerable misgivings. First the good news. It reads considerably better than the average doctored [*sic*] thesis, and the general reader who wants only an overview of the subject will find it interesting—even stimulating. Though individual freethinkers have always been the best critics of the freethought movement, some supporters could learn from comments and criticisms in the book. At certain times there has been: (1) a secularist tendency unduly to glory in the role of outsider and invoke Bradlaugh's name or appeals to militancy; (2) a rationalist tendency to scientism (especially among those without scientific training) and to regard the acceptance or rejection of religion simply as an intellectual matter; (3) an ethicist tendency to claim an influential role in socialist politics, when all one could accurately say about socialist and ethicist ideas was that they were equally inchoate. The whole movement strikes outsiders as being too concerned with debates on labels (though innocent-sounding new labels have often been used tendentiously) and too unappealing to women and children. There are good accounts in the book of developments in concepts of tradition, authority, progress, utopianism, Darwinism and Social Darwinism, psychoanalysis, class, communism, ritual, relativity and other influential themes of the last 100 years, though almost all these accounts seem to be derivative.

Unfortunately, the bad news is more impressive. The book abounds in errors of fact concerning dates, biographical details and spelling of names, though it falls far short of the record for inaccuracy set by Professor W. S. Smith in *The London Heretics*. While not as given to simplistic class analyses of various wings of the movement, which characterised Dr Budd's earliest writings on the subject, the book goes only some of the way towards a more profitable analysis in terms of attitudes to authority or the absence of it, as set out in her article on "Living without authority" in *New Humanist* (November/December 1976). Another fundamental complaint against the work is that,

though it purports to be about the period 1850 to 1960 while being published in 1977, it has been updated to about 1965—a time of acrimony caused by a few dissidents within the National Secular Society and of rising publicity and membership within the British Humanist Association. Quite soon thereafter—and years before *Varieties of Unbelief* went to press—the upheavals within the NSS died away and the membership figures of the BHA peaked and began to plummet. What is more, these developments should have been obvious in 1965 to any impartial observer with a modest talent for futurology, but Dr Budd seems to have based her thesis on discussions with dissidents within the NSS but leaders within the BHA. Like other commentators before her, she also seems to have drawn large conclusions from fleeting visits to public meetings sponsored by humanist organisations without due reflection on whether those present are representative members or even members at all. These deficiencies are particularly disturbing since the blurb makes much of the fact that the author was "working largely from the minute books, journals and letters of the movements and attendance at their meetings."

Let me illustrate a general tendency to faulty organisational analysis by reference to pages 78 to 80, which particularly concern myself. Dr Budd suggests that before my presidency in 1963 the NSS was a mass working-class, anticlerical organisation based on a network of branches, but that after 1963 the society's executive repudiated these great traditions and, to assist it in its nefarious purpose, set about dismantling the branch structure. The truth is very different, if less Miltonic. In neither a Marxist nor a non-Marxist sense had secularism ever been a distinctively working-class movement, much less a mass one. Naturally, in the nineteenth century when the majority of the population lay within the working classes, the bulk of NSS membership had the same origin; and the society was historically an heir to Owenism and Chartism and a strong supporter of the right to form trades unions, secure better working conditions and achieve reforms of particular interest to the working classes. But the philosophy and central activities of the society have nothing to do with class at all, and all classes have been represented in its membership.

Historically, again, branch structure had once been important in a society which began as a national federation of previously autonomous local societies, particularly strong in Lancashire and Yorkshire. But all this had changed long before

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1963. There were few active local branches. Such as there were tended not to seek lecturers locally but to expect the parent body to fund visits by secularist speakers from London. This was equally bad for the society's finances and the social role of each branch in its own community. Further, in centres where there was a branch, society members were expected to be members of the branch, whose secretary was supposed to collect dues and remit a capitation fee to headquarters. If the secretary was lax or there was a hiatus of secretaries, members tended to get lost. If a branch's membership reached a certain (very modest) level, it was entitled to nominate a representative on the national executive. The upshot was that certain unscrupulous dissidents tried to stack branch membership or form bogus new branches in adjoining suburbs. Meanwhile, many new humanist groups were forming up and down the country, and a lot of them were more sympathetic to secularist than to ethicist traditions. It was doubtful if in high theory, they could even affiliate to the NSS, and if they did they had a lower status than branches, many of which were less active in the cause. To redress all these anomalies, the branch structure was abolished and all local groups and ex-branches became affiliated bodies. Using this new influx of support and a more sophisticated approach to propaganda, the society was soon able to carry its anticlerical and humanist message to far wider audiences, and far from having lost its proper role, gained an enhanced one. While it is more difficult for an outsider than an insider to gain this sort of knowledge of organisations, a careful researcher could easily have established the foregoing facts and thereby given an accurate account.

The NSS isn't the only humanist body to suffer from faulty analysis in the book. Rationalists are unwarrantably credited with unified views of an "arid intellectual" complexion. All the societies in the movement are supposed to be rent by issues like whether members should know one another outside meetings, what form meetings should take and what literature should be sold at them. In my time only South Place Ethical Society has worried about such questions, and even it probably abandoned them years ago. Though in one place the BHA is described as flourishing. The movement is also supposed to be in crisis because of conflicting aims and an absence of agreed actions and authorities. But what movement could stand the sort of probing of a Susan Budd? It would not be difficult by such an analysis to make the Roman Catholic

Church look about to disintegrate because of controversies over Papal Infallibility, the Tridentine Mass, the intercession of saints, Mariolatry, images, Lourdes, family planning, women's rights, abortion, divorce, priestly celibacy, the ecumenical movement and a thousand other issues.

A final word. Whatever view one takes of propositions in this book, it abounds in interesting quotations. Many of them one might like to use. Alas, in all too many cases the attribution is ambiguous or non-existent. DAVID TRIBE

MAHATMA GANDHI AND HIS APOSTLES by Ved Mehta. Andre Deutsch. £4.50

Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps the only Asian who is commemorated by a statue in a London Square (Tavistock Square)—apart from Jesus. An extraordinary many-faceted personality, there are reportedly about 400 biographies of Mahatma Gandhi and the English edition of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* is expected to reach no less than 80 volumes. Ved Mehta's "interpretation" of Mahatma Gandhi's life is therefore a highly welcome publication. It is well-researched and highly readable, sometimes moving and always absorbing.

Mahatma Gandhi's work in the Freedom Movement in India is fairly recent history, and therefore well-known. Less well-known are his student days in London, his association with the Vegetarian Society, the Theosophical Society and so on. Mehta depicts a fascinating picture of this extraordinary Indian student in London in the late Victorian period. He also writes at length about Gandhi's work in South Africa, where he first tried out his ideas of passive resistance in the early years of this century.

The book, however, is not only about Mahatma Gandhi but also about his "apostles"—some of whom lived a community life with him and are now dispersed all over the sub-continent. Mirabehn, or Miss Slade, the daughter of an English Admiral, was traced to Austria and found devoting her time to Beethoven who fills the void left by the departure of Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi's obsession with celibacy and sexual abstinence are well-known to students of Indian affairs. What is not so well-known is the fact that this obsession led him to strange experiments which involved sleeping naked with some of his young woman disciples to prove to himself he was pure in heart and above sexual feelings. He was over 75 then. Some of his close associates protested, but he was convinced that he had to carry on this experiment in celibacy. This was not public knowledge in India at the time (1946-47) and it is not good manners in India to talk about it, as it involves the "Father of the Nation". Ved Mehta interviewed people who had first-hand knowledge about the mat-

ter and it is very instructive to see how closely guilty feelings about sexuality are related to the religious frame of mind.

The Hindu view of life, not being based on a single book or dogma, does admit of very different attitudes to sexuality. On the extreme "left" the Tantric school of thought equated sexual ecstasy on earth with heavenly bliss and so legitimised sexual activity which included group activity as depicted on some temple carvings. The middle of the road view was for celibacy during studenthood and full acceptance of sexuality in marriage on a far more positive basis than the Pauline views in Christianity. On the extreme "right", as it were, was the ascetic suppression of sexuality, in other words life-long celibacy. This naturally meant renunciation of marriage. However, Mahatma Gandhi went one step further to the "right" by advocating abstinence even in marriage, if the family was completed, or if the women had reached the age of infertility or even as a step good in itself because of the supposed spirituality or meritoriousness of abstinence. Behind it all there lurked the strong traditional belief that seminal fluid is a distillate of proportionally far greater value than even blood and that the retention of seminal fluid somehow provided the fuel for spiritual or noble and elevating thought and action. The absurdity of it all led in Mahatma Gandhi's case to experiments to prove that at the age of 75, he could sleep naked with a naked young woman, without penetration, without erection and without any desire for either, but with the consciousness that none of these three things were happening. "Big deal!" as the say in America.

Ved Mehta has sifted an enormous amount of evidence, from individuals who knew Gandhi, to illuminate his life. The book makes fascinating reading.

G. N. DEODHEKAR

PRAYERS FOR PAGANS AND HYPOCRITES by Peter De Rosa, illustrated by Haro. Collins, £2.50.

Peter De Rosa is also, under the name Neil Boyd, author of the best-selling anecdotal memoir about hearing confessions, *Bless Me, Father*—which, though diverting, milks every situational laugh just a little too much, in the manner of a stand-up comedian with ten-minutes-worth of material and quarter-of-an-hour to fill.

In this latest book, his material is stretched even thinner by the fashionable ploy of making a few hundred lines of text into a hard-cover book, at a hard-cover price, by the use of thick paper, large illustrations, and more white space than print. That said, however, it must be conceded that the result is an attractive gift-book, greatly enhanced by Haro's skilful line-drawings, and that the text (what there is of it) has some well-observed, humorous, and sometimes witty, comments on human failings at absurd variance with impossible religious ideals.



Lord, You are the first one who ever accused me of being a *miserable sinner*.

Of the two or three hundred "prayers", I noted a dozen well worth quoting. Here are just two of them, with a harder edge than the general tone of the book: "Last night, Lord, I dreamed I made a world and put *You* in it", and "I know I was drunk, Lord, but why threaten me with eternal fire for it when the police only put me in the cooler for the night?" And, as an expression of the impracticality of biblical injunctions for modern situations, I also liked "When that maniac ran into the back of my car I had to swear at him, Lord, or else he would have claimed it was my fault."

However, as make-weights, there are some ordinary wisecracks written in the form of prayer—such as "I didn't just marry George for his money, Lord, I also fell madly in love with his possessions." And some rather time-worn aphorisms: "Granted, Lord, money doesn't bring happiness but it does make misery distinctly enduring."

This book came out the same week as my own little book of cynical verses about God, and—as often seems to happen with books published at the same time—there are some quite close parallels between them. For instance, De Rosa's "Heavens, You mean the prayerbooks have got it all wrong and You *don't* like flattery?", and my "Why seek his 'all-wise' mind to change, /by begging him for favours? /Obsequious hymns of praise? How strange /if flattery he savours!"

The great difference between us is De Rosa's unwillingness to accept the logical conclusion. Although no longer a priest, he remains within the RC communion. In order to keep the faith while seeing through it so clearly, he has to stand everything on its head—beginning with the book's title. The accuracy to which he aspires would rule out *Prayers for Pagans and Hypocrites* in favour of some such title as *Prayers Without Hypocrisy*.

Paganism does not come into the matter at all, the book being entirely for and about Christians. As for Hypocrisy, the very "point" of these prayers is to puncture it and dispel devotional hot air. As one of the prayers expresses it, "Lord, I admit I'm a hypocrite, so I can't be *all* bad."

The only hypocrisy manifest is in the author's Introduction, where he pretends that by publishing this book he runs "the risk of being labelled a kill-joy" since the prayers he has composed are "deadly dull", in contrast to "traditional religious frivolity" which makes the clergy "comedians in disguise".

If he followed his observations to an honest conclusion, Peter De Rosa would have to leave the Church and join the Freethought movement. But then he would no longer be able to have his cake and eat it too, plus royalties. Perhaps, for the sake of his book sales, he is postponing apostasy—in emulation of the famous prayer of Saint Augustine, which he quotes (with approval): "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet."

BARBARA SMOKER

THEATRE

MAN AND SUPERMAN by Bernard Shaw. Savoy Theatre.

Often considered the most philosophical of Shaw's plays, *Man and Superman* is also remembered as the play with the third act set in hell and involving not the characters so much as their mythical/legendary prototypes in an extensive philosophical debate. Since that act is omitted from most productions, including the present one by the Royal Shakespeare Company, what we are left with is more of the "comedy" and less of the "philosophy" that Shaw used to describe his dramatic treatise on the human condition.

The play consciously evokes Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and other nineteenth century radical thinkers. Shaw set out to create a modern Don Juan, fashioned more after Hamlet than Byron's romantic libertine. His hero, Shaw states in the Preface, should be "a devout believer in hell."

Well and good. But John Tanner, MIRC (Member of the Idle Rich Class), author of *The Revolutionist's Handbook* and professed sceptic, turns out to be something of a sham. His Golden Rule may be,

"Do not do unto others as you would they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same." And he may well vilify the Common Book of Prayer as easily as he hands his hat to the maid and launches straight into a diatribe against convention. When it comes down to it, he is the living example of his own maxim that men are more or less fated to do exactly as their fathers before them had done. The action serves to bear this out.

The real ancestral claimants to Shaw's ideal superman are more likely to be Henry Straker, Tanner's chauffeur, the self-styled man of science, and Anne Whitefield, Tanner's ward, with her unscrupulous method of getting everything she wants (including Tanner) by making it seem as though she is merely carrying out the wishes of others. Together these two provide the play's pivotal moments: Straker by reversing the master/servant relationship with the efficiency of his much-touted polytechnic training, and Anne by revealing Tanner's true romanticism to the world at large and, most painfully, himself. The moment in the second act when he realises she has tricked him into taking her away from her family on a marathon journey to Africa is such an anguished epiphany that everything that follows suggests stage machinery, and Tanner's subsequent rhetoric hold as much bite as the straight lines of a comic routine.

With every Shaw revival, we are made to see how really contemporary was his vision. Already familiar is his concern for the economic blight that besets post-Victorian Britain. But, first this summer with *Candida* and now *Man and Superman*, early/middle period Shaw offers us a perception of twentieth century women that is unique among dramatists, certainly for his times. His heroines are very far removed from the bitch-goddesses of Strindberg and even Ibsen's agonised matrons. Shaw presented the New Intellectual Woman to complement Scientific Man. She is a threat to his superiority, and her amorality makes her, in Shaw's conception, a Don Juanita. 50 years on from this play she was to confront the New Man of Science head-on, not in a Shaw play, but in *Look Back in Anger*. Thus the author was writing for posterity when he conceived this woman and set her down beside the still waters of Richmond.

This production is uneven in places and takes a good while to get going. The first act, though quite the longest, seemed nearly as long as the other two put together. It demanded strong central performances, and Richard Pasco as Tanner and Nicky Henson as Straker made the most of their respective parts without over-acting or becoming mannered. Pasco, who created the role of Aleister Crowley in *The Beast* two years ago, is well-familiar with demonic heroes, and Henson's ability to deflate pretention with a gesture makes their scenes together the high point of the evening. Susan Hampshire's

performance as Anne is equally controlled. She makes the character feminine without being feline and manages to dominate while she retains our sympathy. Shaw above all meant us to vindicate his devil's disciple. We may not approve her behaviour, but we end by admiring our own even less.

JAMES MACDONALD

THE FIRE THAT CONSUMES by Henry de Montherlant. (La Ville dont le Prince est un Enfant.) At the Mermaid Theatre, London, till November 12.

Mary O'Malley's *Once a Catholic* (Wyndhams), reviewed in these columns recently, is about sexually repressed Catholic schoolchildren. So is *The Fire that Consumes*. I say this in defiance of the theatre's programme, which devotes a whole page to quoting Teilhard de Chardin on the cosmic power of love. It is very French, this tendency to elevate our feelings to the draughty realms of abstraction, where grubby fingers cannot prod and caress. The play, I say, is about sexual repression, guilt, lack of honesty, and—impiously to misquote from it—" . . . all that unbridled religious passion and its power utterly to destroy the individual."

O'Malley's comedy is set in a girls' school in Witley in the fifties. De Montherlant's mirthless tragedy unrolls in a Catholic boy's college on the outskirts of Paris, just before Easter. The date is inter-war, but it could conceivably be today, thanks largely to Vivian Cox's admirable translation, neither stilted, nor modish. A teacher, de Pradts, and one of his 17-year-old pupils share a furtive love for a younger boy, the "black sheep" of the college. De Pradts engineers his rival's disgrace and expulsion, only to be hoist by his own petard. He is forced by the Father Superior quite literally to search his own soul, and to renounce his love for the boy. Human love is as unacceptable in the battle for souls as respect for human life is in trench warfare.

Now I know why so many modern French dramatists remove their plays to classical Greece, or to Hell. Heirs of Racine and Corneille, they allow no silliness or domestic bustle to reduce their play's stature. Contemporary man, or child, looks a trifle foolish in those marble halls. As though to compensate, the older boy is rehearsing *Andromaque*. The early scenes in this play are functional, enlivened only by a sense of impending doom and, in Bernard Miles's excellent production, a totally believable study by Adam Bareham of the older boy's betrayed tenderness and hope. This is a slow-burning fuse of a play, but it builds up to a mighty detonation—the great confrontation between de Pradts and his Father Superior (David William). Mr William, far from wheeling out the stock fanatic, gives us a man who has lapsed into a kind of weary cynicism (the Adam Bareham character in later

life?) As befits a man who advocates divine rather than human love, and who believes that there can be no generosity without sacrifice, he has the practised pulpit manner: measured delivery, uplifted eyes, the head held stiffly to prevent his mask from slipping. Nigel Hawthorne as de Pradts is, quite simply, magnificent; a deeply thought-through and lived-through portrayal of a man's fall from amused testiness to utter desolation.

This is a production which more than does justice to the play. VERA LUSTIG

LETTERS

Peter Cadogan states categorically (Letters, October "Freethinker") that the Kirkup poem that was the subject of the "Gay News" trial "was not about homosexuality . . . [but] about necrophilia". Would he also say, for instance, that "Hamlet" is about the Danish royal family?

The poem uses the centurion's sexual fantasy of homosexual necrophilia as an expression of the Christian doctrine of the salvation of sinners through Jesus's love and sacrificial death. How ironic it is, therefore, that most of those who have opposed its publication have been Christians while most of us who have spoken out for its right to be published have been atheists! BARBARA SMOKER

If Peter Cadogan would take the trouble to read a bit more carefully and think a bit more clearly, the long-suffering humanist movement would be spared at least some of the nonsense he repeatedly inflicts on us.

In his letter about James Kirkup's poem "The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name" ("The Freethinker, October 1977), he says I told him that "the author of the poem has disowned it in the sense that it will not appear in any future collected works." The impression that I gave him some inside information is false: I merely referred him to the relevant item in the "New Humanist", reporting that Kirkup had described it to us as "an old poem, part of a series of erotic works which I no longer wish to preserve" because "it is not aesthetically a successful work" (November/December 1976, p.152). So what? When writers get into trouble, they often deny, disown, distort or destroy their writings. Voltaire pretended he hadn't written most of the works which are the basis of his fame; Shelley expurgated "Laon and Cythna" and repudiated "Queen Mab"; Auden rewrote many early poems and suppressed "1 September 1939". If we must consider what Kirkup says in disparagement of his poem, we should also consider what he says in defence of it (see the "New Humanist, May/August 1977, pp.29-30).

Cadogan adds misunderstanding to misinformation by saying that the poem "was not about homosexuality. It was about necrophilia." On the contrary, it is not "about" homosexuality or necrophilia; it is a literary and not a literal work, an exploration of the idea of Christ's love for all men, in the form of a fantasy of making love with the dying and resurrected Lord, in the tradition of Judaeo-Christian sexual mysticism. As someone who is so much concerned to impose religious symbolism on the humanist movement, Cadogan is remarkably insensitive to the use of symbols in this religious poem. Would he say that the Communion service is "about" ritual cannibalism, or that the Cruci-

fixion is "about" sadistic murder? Can't he see that if the poem is "about" anything, it is not dying but coming (in every sense) to life? My own objection to the poem is that it drags sex down to the level of religion, spoiling a healthy activity with unhealthy ideas, in the manner of the Bible and the wedding service, of D. H. Lawrence and Peter Cadogan.

When Cadogan says that "necrophilia is obscenity and a poem about it an ultimate exercise in bad taste", he gives away half the argument for freedom of expression to its enemies. Why should the semen of Jesus be more obscene than the blood of the Lamb? Why is physical love in worse taste than spiritual love? Don't homosexuals have the right to interpret the doctrine of Atonement in their own way? Even if sex were offensive, is necrophilia really the ultimate? I should have thought that rape of a living body is worse than dreams about a dead one. Cadogan is just regurgitating traditional tabus in an irrational way. Read the poem, Peter, and think about it.

Finally, Cadogan protests against giving Mary Whitehouse "endless front page publicity for free." No doubt he would like to have it himself, but the publicity is actually for the endless attacks on freedom of thought, speech and the press, which can be answered only by public protest and debate. Unfortunately for Cadogan and other like-minded humanists, the religious fanatics won't just go away. We have to fight them all the way, even if they include some members of the humanist movement.

NICOLAS WALTER

NATIONAL FRONT REVIEW

Was your reviewer of Martin Walker's book "The National Front" simply being provocative in asserting that the Front "has no future"? If not, then he is alarmingly complacent about the political state of our nation.

I would not on the other hand want to be too gloomy about the recent local successes of the NF (the NF have achieved some high percentage figures in this year's local elections in a few areas). But I think your reviewer overlooks the peculiar danger of an organisation which deliberately tries to appeal to the irrational in us and plays upon our anxieties around personal and social identity.

The themes—persistent in the NF propaganda—of attack from outside and engulfment are calculated to exploit the insecure and bewildered. The NF know all about the universal psychological phenomenon of scapegoating and use it fully.

Martin Walker refers in his book to the conscious use made by John Tyndall, in particular, of this kind of manipulation:

"For Tyndall, emotion was the source of loyalty and the source of conviction. Rationality, and the process of the intellect, were subordinate factors—'In the last analysis, reason simply builds on a foundation that fooling supplies in the first place.' Therefore in Tyndall's politics 'Colour and pageantry are as important as speeches and articles.'" (p.145).

Again, Walker quotes Tyndall referring to the NF's need to recruit members by devices, which "are recognised as being among the things that appeal to the hidden forces of the human soul."

I am not suggesting that other political organisations do not consciously appeal to the emotions. The kind and degree of appeal to the primitive and irrational psychological forces in us, however, marks out the NF as distinctive and, given a situation of social and economic dislocation and deprivation, the NF could be dangerous.

GERRY HORNER

FAIR COMMENT

Thank you very much for the copy of "The Free-thinker" (September) which included a review of "The Myth of God Incarnate", and for your suggestion that I might comment on the part of the review which concerned my contribution to the book.

I am not sure that I have anything much to say beyond "fair comment", except perhaps this: Margaret Knight says about me "he chooses his words carefully, doubtless not wishing to affront his colleagues", and, so far as it goes, that is perfectly true. I do, however, have a more important reason for choosing my words carefully and that is that I am doubtful whether it is now possible to recover the historical Jesus as fully as Margaret Knight apparently thinks it is. There is no "parti pris" in that; I made the same point in a review of the late C. H. Dodd's very laudatory account of Jesus as I do about Margaret Knight's less sympathetic one. It is simply that the longer I have studied the gospels the more I have come to realise the truth of the words with which my old tutor R. H. Lightfoot closed his Bampton Lectures in 1934: "for all the inestimable value of the gospels they yield us little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways". Even when allowance is made for the fact that those words are almost a quotation from the Book of Job and, in the light of their context there, not perhaps quite as extreme as they might seem, they are, I believe, a salutary warning to Margaret Knight and any others who believe themselves able to offer us a detailed picture of Jesus, whether flattering or the reverse.

DENNIS NINEHAM

Young Believers

teachers agreed that children should be taught the long-term benefits of chastity and the health hazards of pre-marital sex.

There are ominous signs that any attempt to produce a more reasoned approach to RE are receding. In the Education debate at the Conservative Party conference in Blackpool, Mr St John Stevas, Shadow Education Minister, after having delighted his audience by telling the remaining grammar schools "Hang on, help is coming", introduced a demand that next year greater emphasis be placed on restoring standards in moral and religious education. He used the phrase "moral and religious education" several times without a hint that there should be a distinction between the two. He said this emphasis was particularly important to preserve what he proudly declared were the proven "middle class" values, and warned of the danger of a "Clockwork Orange society." He also introduced a curious suggestion that society might become amoral and ruthless with pornography and not religion as the "opium of the people." (Would Mr Stevas, who writes a regular column in the *Catholic Herald*, see religion as the "opium of the people"?) His pontification having produced a standing ovation, Mr Stevas stood to acknowledge the applause with a raised hand. "Goodness", said the television commentator, Robin Day, "I thought he was about to give a blessing!"

(Continued over)

Young Believers

As well as this plea for a re-emphasis of the traditional aspects of RE, a more specific case has raised the possibility of conflict over how RE should be taught. The dismissal of an RE teacher, Mr David Watson, and the failure of an industrial appeal to uphold his appeal have been widely reported in the press. Mr Watson was a former head of RE at Rickmansworth Comprehensive School and he had insisted on teaching the book of Genesis as a literal and not a mythical account of man's history, in contradiction with the guidance of the Agreed Syllabus.

The Association of Christian Teachers has described the tribunal's findings as "very serious", since the whole issue concerned failing to take note of an Agreed Syllabus composed in 1926 and last revised in 1954. Although freethinkers would deplore a teacher presenting so antediluvian a picture of man's origins, this should not cloud the deeper question of how far a teacher should be bound by an Agreed Syllabus. If one teacher can be dismissed for being too fundamentalist could another be asked to leave for offering too liberal a view and even encouraging children to approach such subjects with open, questioning minds?

An open, if somewhat confused and perturbed, mind is sustained by the writers of the discussion paper *A Kind of Believing*. They take little comfort from the idea of "Christian educators . . . enunciating certainties which apparently cannot be received by those to whom they are addressed." About the only positive evidence which they can find to comment upon is "the majority of young people have some idea of an 'otherness' about life which is difficult to define." Difficult indeed. If that is all that Christianity is hanging on to, it won't be hanging on for long.

A Kind of Believing is published by the General Synod Board of Education at 50p.

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 Whiteabbey 66752.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Rose Hacker of the GLC: Marriage Guidance. Sunday, 4 December, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Bristol Humanist Group. "Gay—the problems of homosexuals", Sunday 13 November, 3.00 pm. 6 Redland Park, Bristol. Inquiries, Derrick Hunt: Bristol 504163.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. "The Work of Amnesty International". Tuesday 8 November, 7.45 pm. Swarthmore Education Centre, Woodhouse Sq. Leeds.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Jim Herrick: "Humanism and the Arts". Thursday 24 November, 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford.

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.)

Merseyside Humanist Group. Rev D. Mills: "Unitarians". Wednesday 16 November, 7.30 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Inquiries: Anne Coombes 051-608 3835 or Marion Clowes 051-342 2562.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. Mr and Mrs P. Soper: "The Situation in Rhodesia". Wednesday 16 November, 8.30 pm. 46 Windemere Road, N10.

Oxford Humanist Group. Antony Flew: "The Right to Die". Tuesday 29 November, 8 pm. Queen's College.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square London. Sunday morning meetings, 11.00 am. 6 November, Peter Heales: "Russell and Wittgenstein: A Crucial Dilemma". 20 November, Jasper Ridley: "The Influence of Calvinism in Britain". 27 November, W. H. Liddell: "What is Hell Today?". 4 December, Lord Brockway: "Sex, Religion and Socialism". Tuesday Discussions: 6.30 pm, 1, 8, 15, 22, 29 November. Theme for the month: "What the Future Holds".

Sutton Humanist Group. John Ruler: "The work of a Local Paper". Wednesday 9 November, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton.

Tyneside Humanist Society. T. Dan Smith: "The Church in Prison". Wednesday 16 November, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Forum, Geoff Pope: "New Motivation in Industry". Friday 18 November. John Seymour, ecological farmer: "Escape from the Nursery". Friday 25 November. Both at 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Page Street, Swansea.

THE FREETHINKER

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