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"A SAD DAY FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH" SAYS GAY NEWS EDITOR AT NSS DINNER

"Yesterday was a sad day for freedom of speech," said Denis Lemon, editor of "Gay News", after the Court of Appeal upheld his conviction for blasphemous libel. Mr Denis Lemon was speaking as Guest of Honour at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society. "Blasphemy law," he stated "was obsolete because Obscenity and Public Order Acts already protected people adequately."

On the previous day Justice Lord Roskill delivered the judgement with dry formality in a courtroom packed with lawyers, journalists and as many of the general public as could be squeezed in. The appeal of both Mr Lemon and *Gay News* failed, but Mr Lemon's suspended sentence was quashed on the grounds that this had been a test case. *Gay News'* fine of £1,000 and Denis Lemon's fine of £500 remained. The appeal costs will be paid from public funds, though the judge warned that it could not be assumed that this was likely to be the case with all private prosecutions. *Gay News* and Denis Lemon were given leave to apply to the House of Lords to bring a further appeal.

Intention Irrelevant to Blasphemy

The two main points on which the judge dwelt, as a result of the submissions from Denis Lemon's counsel John Mortimer and *Gay News'* counsel Geoffrey Robertson, were how far "intent" and "attack" were essential ingredients of blasphemy.

The judges ruled that the intentions of the editor or author were not relevant and that for conviction it was sufficient to show that Christianity had been treated in an immoderate and scurrilous fashion without attacking the entire edifice of Christian beliefs.

The judges said that they were conscious that there had been a great deal of public interest in the case

and emphasised that their task was not to comment in any way upon the existence of blasphemy law or the poem "The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name" by James Kirkup, but only to consider the conduct of the trial. They had necessarily delved with much care into the history of blasphemy law and there were references to the nineteenth century trials of G. W. Foote. Mr Nicolas Walter, editor of *New Humanist*, was thanked for providing a copy of *The Freethinker* report of the trial of J. W. Gott.

Denis Lemon said that he was disappointed with the result, though personally relieved at the removal of the suspended prison sentence. He hoped for success with an appeal to the House of Lords and had been advised by his lawyers that he had a good chance.

The House of Lords itself debated a Bill to abolish blasphemy law earlier in February (see p.54). Following that debate George Scott's BBC4 phone-in radio programme *Voice of the People* looked at blasphemy. The humanist viewpoint was forcefully expressed by Kit Mouat, a former editor of *The Freethinker*. After the *Gay News* appeal, the BBC television religious programme *Everyman* examined the result, the history of blasphemy law, and a variety of attitudes including those of Nicolas Walter.

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The Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society took place at the Pavlovs Arms on Saturday, 18 March:

Denis Lemon was the Guest of Honour on the day following the trial. There were just under 130 guests at the occasion, which was chaired by the Society's President Barbara Smoker. A toast was proposed to Denis Lemon by Maureen Duffy, novelist biographer and poet (and contributor to *The Freethinker*).

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Maureen Duffy said that she could not insult members of the NSS by offering up light gobbets of humour on this evening. "We are gathered to mourn and like Cassandra to predict disaster. For intolerance is a disaster and, as in Northern Ireland, can only lead to greater disasters particularly where tinged with religion."

She spoke of the irony that we should be toasting someone who published a piece of Christian propaganda. "We have reached a truly ludicrous state where atheists have to try to stop one religious faction from pounding another, while at the same time we are accused of destroying that strange substance the nation's moral fibre. This substance, the nation's moral fibre, I have always seen as a kind of potting compost in which luscious weeds of persecution, repression and sanctimoniousness can be nurtured."

The poem was published, she said, because Denis Lemon knew that many Christian homosexuals were struggling with the dilemma presented by conflict between their repressive religion and their sexual orientation. He could not have known that he would fall foul of the blasphemy law.

But the beliefs of atheists were not protected by law. "You and I are atheists and may be accused of wishing to smear the streets with ordure, in one noble Lord's phrase in the House of Lords debate on blasphemy, and of destroying society and we must not be offended. If, however, we cause a certain lady to stamp, the law will give her weapons to deal with us. If indeed another Christian presents her with the unacceptable face of Christianity the law gives her redress."

Behind all this, Maureen Duffy stressed, lay intolerance and specifically sexual intolerance—for the poem was not just blasphemous, but homosexually blasphemous. She doubted whether the poem would have been prosecuted if spoken in the person of Mary Magdalene.

Forces of Reaction Abroad

"Not yet, at least", she added. "But give them time. And this is why I say we are here to mourn, for the forces of reaction are abroad in the land, the law and order boys and girls, the bring back capital and corporal punishment gang so close to the send home the blacks and prosecute the queers and porn shops mob. In other words those who would reverse the few halting steps we have taken towards a more tolerant society, and who since the days of the inquisition, the witch burnings and heretic huntings have used the law to dig deep into the murkier recesses of the human psyche and let loose fear and hysterical intolerance."

Maureen Duffy concluded by pointing out that Denis Lemon had been made into a martyr unwillingly—"and we must toast him as a victim of all those intolerances that this Society seeks to abolish."

Denis Lemon, having declared that the failure of his appeal was a sad day for freedom of speech, said he thought the decision was quite unsatisfactory. He was particularly dissatisfied with the comments of the judges on intent, since intent was an inevitable part of the decisions which editors had to take. The trial had been inadequate because of lack of expert theological and literary evidence. He felt the decision to publish the poem had been right—right for Christians as well as humanists.

According to Mrs Whitehouse the poem had re-crucified Christ—"but there was an irony in the title of her autobiography *Who Does She Think She Is?* Who, indeed, does she think she represents? Is it people like the Vicar in Neasden, the Rev E. Gaunt, who claimed that 'homosexuality is contrary to the laws of nature and of God'? Does she represent those intolerant members of the House of Lords anxious to preserve blasphemy law? The fanaticism of such people is parallel to the dishonesty and hypocrisy which led to the crucifixion of Christ."

More Prosecutions to Come?

"Should we now expect prosecution," Denis Lemon asked, "for all those who had re-published the poem? . . . We must abolish the blasphemy law and not put freedom of speech in jeopardy or allow a small minority to dictate to the whole of society."

Mr W. McIlroy proposed a toast to the Society. The former editor of *The Freethinker* and Secretary of the NSS, he was introduced as "a martyr to the Post Office Act", recalling his own prosecution for sending a copy of the "blasphemous" poem through the post.

In his introductory remarks W. McIlroy said that his involvement with the Society had been so close for so long that he never expected to be proposing such a toast—which would earlier have seemed a kind of incest. He had been conscious of the NSS banner as he was speaking in Trafalgar square at a rally in defence of *Gay News* and noticed that it was the only visible support from the organised humanist movement. NSS support was appropriate since it had been fighting blasphemy law since its foundation 112 years ago.

Secularists had always opposed such laws—not just when they were demonstrated to be bad (as recently with *Gay News'* conviction) but also while they were gathering dust and easier left alone. When the statutory laws of blasphemy had been removed in the 1960s, secularists had warned that the common law offence of blasphemy should not be left, but the warning was not heeded.

The Society had been concerned with almost every struggle for progress. It had been and would continue to be "persistent, consistent, awkward and

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The Malthusian League from Bang to Whimper

NIGEL H. SINNOTT

Prompted by reading a recent history of the Malthusian League, Nigel Sinnott here gives an account of the rise and fall of this society devoted to birth control reform. He particularly looks at the important part which secularism played in the nineteenth and twentieth century struggle to gain acceptance of social reform in the field of contraception. Nigel Sinnott's researches into freethought history resulted in the production last year of two pamphlets: "Joseph Symes, the 'flower of atheism'" and "Joseph Skurrie's freethought reminiscences".

As readers of *The Freethinker* cannot now fail to know, the Malthusian League was formed with a bang in London in 1877, basically from the ranks of those who had subscribed to the defence fund for Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, prosecuted in that year for issuing their own edition of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*. (Bradlaugh had himself tried to form such a society in 1861, but at that time it got no further than the pages of the *National Reformer*). Its founders and early members were pre-eminently secularists—Bradlaugh, Mrs Besant, George Standring (at one time secretary of the National Secular Society), the Swaagmans, Touzeau Parris, Edward Truelove, William Reynolds, Robert Forder (another NSS secretary), Joseph Symes and W. J. Ramsey—with an admixture from the radical ranks of the medical profession (members of the Drysdale family), from South Place Chapel and Institute (in the person of its leader, Moncure D. Conway), and a token clergyman who could always be depended on to come to the aid of freethinkers in distress (no prizes for guessing this one!), that most delightful old Anglican ritualist maverick, the Rev Stewart Headlam.

On the basis of this information, and the fact that the Malthusian League led, indirectly, to the formation of the Family Planning Association, I have long had a rather romantic notion of the League and the birth control movement generally (to the amusement of some of my relatives): I can remember taking a working party to Brookwood Cemetery (near Woking, Surrey) to clean up the grave of Charles Bradlaugh—and then including the nearby Drysdale grave for good measure. However, after reading Rosanna Ledbetter's much-needed and valuable history of the League* a large quantity of gilding has been stripped from my preconceptions, and I must state, with a certain sadness, that the Drysdales (with the exception of George, author of *The Elements of Social Science*, and Alice Vickery's feminist side) have fallen off

the pedestal they once occupied in my historical pantheon.

If the secularists were the midwives of the Malthusian League, those who led it through infancy, maturity and old age were the Drysdales. Of the energy and dedication of two generations of the family there can be no doubt: first Charles Robert and Alice Vickery, then their son Charles Vickery and his wife Bessie Ingham devoted an enormous amount of their time to it. The American pioneer, Margaret Sanger, referred to the "noble tradition of the Drysdale family—this quiet, unceasing service, this loyalty to an ideal".

Dynasty of Drysdales

But a dynasty such as that of the Drysdales was a double-edged sword. If they did much to keep the League going through lean years when support was scanty, there can be little doubt that they alienated it from what one would expect to be its natural areas of support and recruitment, namely the libertarian left. With the wisdom of hindsight we might expect the League, once its umbilical cords were severed, to have got down to the task of disseminating practical contraceptive information to all and sundry, but instead its output, until 1913, was very largely the inexorable, inflexible and doctrinaire economic theories of the Drysdales, of a type which may have been liberal in the 1850s, but which were antiquated by the '70s and were seen as increasingly reactionary thereafter. For years the Drysdales' energies were expended on involved and repetitive ideological slanging matches with their equivalents in the political far left, to the increasing weariness of all who occupied the middle ground between.

The Drysdales had "an almost Messianic" faith in Malthus's law of population and in what was called the wage fund theory, the latter being an economic doctrine to the effect that an employer could only expend a fixed percentage of his capital on wages and that to exceed it meant either unemployment or industrial ruin or both. The working classes, according to this theory, had to compete with each other in a limited wage "pool", therefore the larger their numbers, the greater would be overall poverty; but if they decreased their numbers their average income would rise and the pressure of competition lessen. Trade unionism and social welfare schemes were impotent in the face of this alleged law of nature, to question which was like denying "the heliocentric theory, or the law of gravitation, or the circulation of the blood". The Drysdales derived much of their economic

theories from the utilitarian philosophers particularly J. S. Mill, but as Dr Ledbetter points out:

“ . . . The Drysdales . . . took from Mill only what supported their position and ignored what appeared to contradict it. Mill pointed out, for example, that society could redistribute wealth in an attempt to alleviate poverty if it chose to do so.”

When John Maynard Keynes gave the wage fund theory its last rites in 1922, this made no difference.

The Drysdale theory—that poverty was the result of the feckless overbreeding of the workers and could not be alleviated by redistribution of resources—was naturally anathema to the Social Democratic Federation whose spokesmen saw this as a philosophy to salve the consciences of the middle class, and the proposed remedy, a lowering of the birth rate, a red herring to distract the workers, weaken them politically, and delay social change and political revolution. Allegedly immutable laws of nature could also be countered with the socialists’ “iron law of wages” which stated, just as plausibly, that in a capitalist economy real wages tended to follow minimum family subsistence levels: in other words, if the workers started to have smaller families, their employers would use this as a pretext to pay them, on average, proportionately less.

Contraception and Eugenics

The interminable theoretical debate on the population question also meant that the League as an organisation gave virtually no practical information on how to limit families; the Drysdales gave lectures to working men’s clubs, but, as Dr Ledbetter says, it soon became apparent “that what the members of those clubs wanted was practical information on how to prevent conception, not a rehash of increasingly unpopular economic theories.” Charles V. Drysdale answered most public appeals for detailed contraceptive advice with the bogy of possible prosecution (not without some cause, it is true). Indeed, it was not until 1913 that the League could be persuaded to publish its own practical *Hygienic Methods of Family Limitation*. When the Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907, C. V. Drysdale at first—to his credit—roundly denounced the new and distinctly unsavoury cult of “positive eugenics”, but in the end his élitist and paternalistic nature could not resist the blandishments of the new doctrine. By 1928 he regarded “better eugenic selection” as “more important now than greater restriction of the total birth rate.”

There were, of course, members of the League who did not share the Drysdales’ *laissez faire* economic views: Edward Truelove and George Standring, for example. Standring opposed the Drys-

dales’ advocacy of fines for those who produced large families; he established a short-lived *Birth Control* which “stressed the health and financial benefits to be gained by individual families when they practised family limitation” as an alternative to the League’s official theoretical *Malthusian*; and in the same year, 1919, he offered to set up an alternative society to promote birth control plain and simple. Support was insufficient.

Outmoded Vision Survives

The failure of the dissidents in the League to control its policies says something for the extraordinary tenacity of the Drysdales. C. V. and Bessie Drysdale did resign in 1923, and the (renamed) New Generation League enjoyed a brief resurgence. By 1925, however, the Drysdales, the former name, and Malthusian economics were reinstated almost without resistance. In 1927 Dr C. V. Drysdale “declared the work of the organisation complete” and the League ceased activities apart from meetings of its council and publication of its journal and the pamphlet first produced in 1913. The remains of the vision of 1877 were kept in an almost macabre state of animation by the Drysdales until 1961 when R. G. Morton decided to distribute its assets. He could not find enough members even to call a meeting!

If the official activities of the League make, on the whole, depressing reading, the activities of the individual members and enthusiasts who tried to do something practical in the way of disseminating birth control knowledge are quite fascinating. Standring, lecturing in the snow from the tail-board of a van in Lambeth; the eccentric retired academic, T. Owen Bonser, who went on walking tours throughout the country “talking to the peasantry and distributing Malthusian tracts en route” (the League’s secretary could plot Bonser’s movements by the subsequent arrival of inquiry letters). Then there was Joseph Williamson who was, quite literally, “a strolling minstrel ardently convinced that Malthusian doctrine was correct or that pamphlets advocating family limitation would sell” (one’s chances of prosecution were evidently not diminished by accompanying tracts distribution with violin playing). Rosanna Ledbetter’s account of Williamson’s mission to Ireland is superb. The neo-Malthusian movement also enjoyed the support of Guy Aldred and Herbert Cutner, names that will still be remembered by older readers of this paper. Mention must also be made of the tragic story of two of the League’s propagandists, Henry and Caroline Loader: they were unusual in being also ardent Christians.

The book also contains an interesting chapter on “The Neo-Malthusians Abroad”. I would like to have seen a little more detail on the United States

(where secularists such as D. M. Bennett were well to the fore); Australasia and Australians appear in the form of W. W. Collins and Dr Norman Haire, and while the author can hardly be expected to have come across the Australian work of Joseph Symes, the Andrades and Bessie Smyth while going through American and British sources, she might well have picked up the Sydney prosecution of Thomas Walker, as it was almost certainly written up in the *National Reformer* for 1885.¹ Dr Ledbetter's account of the Nieuw-Malthusiaansche Bond in the Netherlands is of particular interest as this was a spectacular success, while the parent British League became increasingly bogged down in the mire of Drysdalian theory!

A History of the Malthusian League, is on the whole, a most rewarding volume. The print is clear, the binding and layout are good, and typographical errors are very few and far between. The index, however, could have been better done—no entries, for example, for *Birth Control* (journal) and Swaagman, which appear in the text. The author also uses clumsy phrases which will grate on British readers, such as “one pence” (instead of a penny), “a young oriental student” (she presumably means the Japanese researcher, Miss Tomoko Sato²), and I am not sure she has got the meaning of “onanism” right in terms of actual *usage*. Dr Ledbetter quotes Hyndman to the effect that Bradlaugh was “more than a little of a bully and a despot” (Hyndman, mark you!), and then herself trots out the hoary old nonsense about Bradlaugh's parliamentary struggle being caused because he would not take an oath (when in fact he took it on several occasions before 1886). She has evidently not seen Tribe's (1971) biography of Bradlaugh, but this is no excuse as the facts are clearly set out in the biography by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson (which Ledbetter cites). I get the impression, in fact, that the publishers have left the author's typescript to collect dust before setting it up. They should have given her a chance to update it before printing.

Secularism and Birth Control

In the pages of this paper I must, of course, take issue with the author's suggestion, echoing Marie Stopes, that the Malthusian League may have slowed down popular acceptance of birth control because of its secularist associations (p.161). This can only be described as turning the workings of social history up-side down, for, with the strong religious backing of pro-natalist opinion in England in the nineteenth century, I do not see how a viable birth-control organisation could have been launched without the experienced, determined heterodox ideological base that the secularists gave it. The vicious treatment meted out to the Loaders

in no way suggests that Christians would have had greater success. Dr Ledbetter points out that “not until after the Malthusian League's official demise in 1927 did the Anglican bishops issue a limited but significant resolution in support of family planning.” But the real watershed, in terms of respectable support, came in 1921 when the royal physician, Lord Dawson of Penn, spoke in favour of contraception at the Birmingham church congress—and the League was still going. One must never underestimate the powers of endurance of grovel-dom and hypocrisy in Anglo-Saxon society: it is worth noting, in passing, that by 1911 Church of England clergymen, “whose fertility 40 years earlier had been above average, were now almost 30 per cent less fertile than the population as a whole.”

During the First World War the Gordian knot of Malthusian economic debate was cut when *birth control* was coined by Margaret Sanger (a free-thinker whose father was an ardent Ingersoll supporter). In 1921 Marie Stopes opened the first British family planning clinic, forcing the League to follow suit with one of its own. Dr Stopes's open contempt for the work of Bradlaugh and the secularists, and her eugenic views (quite as nasty as those of C. V. Drysdale), had little to do with her success: her clinic was what Sanger and various Malthusian dissidents had advocated for years. Once the clinics became known, and that established by the Malthusian League became independent of its parent (1923), the League itself rapidly withered away as a pathetic irrelevance.

It is doubtful, apparently, if people ever learn from history; but if they do I can only say that there are a wealth of lessons to be gained from perusing Rosanna Ledbetter's book, particularly the perils of pussyfooting! Despite the vagaries of the British Malthusian League, the freethought movement has been very much the handmaiden of widespread acceptance of birth control. The successful adoption of contraception, and the added dimension this has given to the lives of millions of women and their families, is one of the great and heartening social success stories of modern times.

**A History of the Malthusian League 1877-1927* by Rosanna Ledbetter. Ohio State University Press, \$12.50 US (£10.00).

NOTES

1. See also Peter Coleman, *Obscenity, Blasphemy Sedition* (Brisbane, 1961; Sydney, 1974).
2. See, for example, T. Sato, “Feminists and *The Reasoner* in the 1850s”, *The Freethinker*, 22 July 1972.

“I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold that there is no sin but ignorance.”

The Jew of Malta: Christopher Marlowe

Lords Defend The Lord's Name

A Bill to abolish blasphemy law was put forward by Lord Willis in the House of Lords on 23 February 1978. The Bill was withdrawn without a vote, after strong opposition from their lordships, like "the baying of distant wolves".

Lord Willis, when he rose to move the Blasphemy Bill, said: "I am a humanist and I take very great pride in my association with the National Secular Society, which has a long and very honourable and very gallant record in the battle for freedom of thought and expression in this country. It was, in fact, only 100 years ago, give or take ten years, that a freethinker named Charles Bradlaugh, although democratically elected to another place, was evicted and thrown out, because he wished to affirm rather than take the Oath."

He continued by pointing out that rights, such as the right to affirm, had not been won without sacrifice and struggle, in the teeth of prejudice and opposition. "They are, in my view, part of the heartland of our democracy, and anything which threatens those rights of free speech and free expression threatens that democracy."

Blasphemy cases in the nineteenth century were referred to by Lord Willis—most of them, he explained, of a private nature. William Harcourt, when he was Home Secretary in 1882, had been asked to prosecute Charles Bradlaugh, but had replied that "... more harm than advantage is produced to public morals by Government prosecutions of this kind". The names of leaders of groups such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice were now forgotten, while the people who had been persecuted, such as Tom Paine, Shelley and Charles Bradlaugh, were "honoured in our history".

It had been thought that the law of blasphemy was a dead letter "having about as much significance for the latter half of the twentieth century as the law—which is still on the Statute Book—which lays down that our taxis should have a bale of straw on the roof to feed the non-existent horses". Unfortunately a new group had arisen to take the place of the Society for the Suppression of Vice—the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, led by Mrs Mary Whitehouse. Referring to Mrs Whitehouse as an "aggressive Christian" and "a superb publicist", Lord Willis said "I sometimes think that had she been present at the Battle of Jericho it is very doubtful whether Joshua would have had either the need or the opportunity to blow his trumpet."

He referred to a repellent feature of the first

trial—the report of Mrs Whitehouse and her supporters kneeling in prayer in the corridors of the Old Bailey, and hoped that Jesus if he existed would "respond to the ascending prayers" by "weeping for the foolishness and prejudice of mankind".

The case for the Bill rested on several counts. The old law had withered and died and there were adequate statutes relating to obscenity, indecency, incitement to racial hatred, or conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace to deal with this. The law was unfair and unjust and its working left too wide a field of interpretation to the individual judge. Also it applied only to Christians and to extend the law to take in other religions would be treading on "very marshy ground". The law was illogical since no possible supreme being would need a man-made law of protection.

The case for the Bill was concluded with a strong objection to the idea that one small section of the community needed special protection for "there is no place for privilege in the English legal system . . ."

The Earl of Halsbury moved an Amendment so that the motion would be taken six months hence (in the summer recess and therefore bound to fail). His view of blasphemy was that it "is an act of violence to the mind and spirit and deeply spiritual feelings of very large numbers, millions and millions, of people capable of entertaining such feelings."

In a rhetorical phrase, which he repeatedly used, the Earl of Halsbury defended religion, morality, the family, those to whom religion was a comfort: "Religion should not be mocked or smirched with ordure. It is not right, it is not fitting." Although he did not favour laws which were unenforceable, he felt the common law was different: "It can hang over the wrongdoer as a vague, numinous threat, including caution, a reminder that there are limits, that one can go too far in affronting the deep feelings of one's fellows and that a jury may so find. That is how I would like to leave it."

The usual voices of clerical obfuscation were heard in opposition to the Bill. The Bishop of Leicester had been glad to walk along Downing Street together with Mrs Whitehouse, and the Bishop of Norwich was convinced of the curious fact that "deep in the heart of most people there is, however unformed it may be, a reverence for God" and hoped that the nation would "discover itself again to be one nation under God . . ." The Bishop of Truro feared that "the most significant things in human life and in our civilisation" could be "destroyed overnight".

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JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

"If belief and conduct accord with the New Testament, it's Christianity. If they don't it isn't." With those words—reminiscent of "Wayside Pulpit" banalities—a gentleman of the cloth, the Rev G. E. Diggle, concluded a lofty rebuke following my reference to "Christianity's appalling record" which was recently published in a local newspaper.

Time was when all Christians regarded "the good book" as being divinely inspired from the first letter of Genesis to the last dot of Revelation (including the naughty bits). There was no nonsense about picking and choosing agreeable parts. But Christians in retreat are cynically abandoning superstitious clutter—including a major portion of the scriptures—which they previously venerated.

Its ignorance, atrocities and inhumanity have made the Old Testament something of an embarrassment to modern Christians. So although there has been no revelation from On High regarding its lack of validity or authority for believers, the OT has been quietly slipped to the bottom of the pile like an out-of-date telephone directory.

Christian apologists are now promoting the New Testament as the storehouse of wisdom, virtue, moral teaching and compassion. This whitewashing exercise has been successful even with non-Christians. But a careful reading of the New Testament reveals it as a repository of hatred, sadism, superstition and intolerance.

The reader will search the New Testament in vain for a creditable philosophy or social ethic. The horrors and absurdities of the Old Testament are not condemned or rejected; they are confirmed.

No condemnation of slavery will be found in its pages. (Opponents of the abolition of slavery, the Young Men's American Bible Association, published an annotated edition of the New Testament as an anti-abolitionist tract.)

Woman occupies a position of inferiority as much in the New Testament as in the Old. Jesus regarded women as religiously "unclean". Paul ordered that they should "keep silence" and be subordinate.

Jesus decreed that to qualify for discipleship a man had to "hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters . . .," while Paul told the Galatians that if anyone preached a contrary gospel "let him be accursed".

But perhaps the most depraved sections of the New Testament are those concerning the doctrine of eternal punishment. The demented rantings of

Jesus, Paul and St John the Divine on this subject have inspired countless religious fanatics to all manner of sadistic fantasies which have terrorised millions, young and old. The entire Christian bible could, with good cause, be sub-titled *The Sadist's Handbook*.

The Rev Mr Diggle is welcome to his opinion that if belief and conduct accord with the New Testament, it's Christianity. Certainly the fanaticism, cruelty, and intolerance which abound in its pages are reflected in the historical record of Christianity.

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The Court of Criminal Appeal's decision to set aside the suspended prison sentence on Denis Lemon was one satisfactory result of the proceedings. Even Mary Whitehouse is reported to have said that she did not want the Editor of *Gay News* to go to prison. It's a relief to know that Mrs Whitehouse is not demanding that the courts should obey her vengeful deity's instruction that "he who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death."

Still, it might be as well if we kept a weather eye on the capital punishment lobby!

Sad Day for Freedom of Speech

forthright". It had been accused of fighting old battles over again—but "there was nothing wrong with this if the battles had not been won."

Bill McIlroy concluded: "The religious zealots put faith before human welfare and don't give a damn about the social consequences. The National Secular Society doesn't give a damn about religion, so long may it flourish."

The response from the Society came from the treasurer, G. N. Deodhekar ("Dev"), who concluded the speeches wittily and forthrightly.

During the Annual Dinner Brigid Brophy intervened to protest at the National Secular Society's affiliation to Amnesty International. Brigid Brophy objected strongly to Amnesty's involvement with animal experiments and spoke of how the religious view had been that man held dominion over the animals, but Darwin had demonstrated man was among the animals. She then burnt her NSS membership card in protest.

The "Church Times" has reported a notice from a parish magazine: "The Vicar's holiday. I shall be away for the next few Sundays. During my absence preachers will be found pinned on the church notice board. All Marriages, Births and Deaths must be postponed until I return."

EDUCATION FOR HAPPINESS

Mr Nicolas Walter, editor of "New Humanist", spoke on the same platform as Mrs Mary Whitehouse at a conference on values in education chaired by Mr Norman St John-Stevas, MP. According to "The Times" reporter, his views were received with greater applause than those of Mrs Whitehouse, although nearly two thirds of the audience maintained that they were regular churchgoers.

The conference in Birmingham was the first of a series being organised by the Conservative Party on religious education and moral standards in schools. Mrs Whitehouse said that "Value-free education, whether in or outside school, negates the existence of right and wrong and leaves everyone free to indulge his whim and his passions without regard to the law of the common good. It is a blueprint for anarchy."

Nicolas Walter agreed that a sense of right and wrong was important, but suggested that Mrs Whitehouse had not confronted the problem that we do not all agree about what is right and wrong. There was a need for morality, but it could be non-religious or even anti-religious. "I am not a moral bankrupt", he said "but I do not need a religious crutch to be a committed moral being."

He quoted the words of William Godwin from an essay on education—"The true object of education, like that of any other moral process, is the generation of happiness". Schools should develop moral attitudes likely to generate the greatest happiness. He warned against the danger of identifying morality with religion, since when young people rejected the latter they might reject the former as well.

Mr Norman St John-Stevas, opposition spokesman on education, repeated his call for a national inquiry into the teaching of religious education and the formation of a national advisory body to advise the Secretary of State on religion and moral education. This was a call which he had made at an earlier conference on religious education organised by the Human Rights Society at Caxton Hall. On that occasion the humanist perspective had been presented by Dr Harry Stopes-Roe, Chairman of the British Humanist Association. A forceful extract from Dr Stopes-Roe's speech was broadcast on the BBC radio religious affairs programme *Sunday*.

Despite the publicity given to the views of Nicolas Walter and Dr Stopes-Roe, educationalists and politicians may be veering towards a campaign to preserve the religious education clause in the 1944 Education Act and to increase the propagation of "Christian standards" in schools. Both the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition sent sympathetic messages to the conference at Caxton Hall. Mrs Thatcher, writing "above all as a Christian and parent", said she was concerned that religious edu-

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cation should be taught in all schools as provided for by the 1944 Education Act.

Mrs Shirley Williams, Minister of State for Education and Science, has repudiated a report that the government was planning a new Education Bill in which the legal requirement for religious education was removed. In a letter replying to Lady Lothian, Chairman of the Order of Christian Unity, she said that there were no plans to change the law in this respect. She agreed that "a social science or ethics course would not constitute a religious education. Christianity must continue to play a major part in religious education."

In an article in the *Telegraph* entitled "God's Place in the Classroom", Norman St John-Stevas was contemptuous of too general a religious education: "To take them (young people) on a rubber-necking tour of the religions of the world, as though they were visiting a spiritual supermarket, is likely only to confuse." He favoured giving greater emphasis and strength to the subject: "... maintaining the law on the Statute Book is not enough: the threat to religious education today is not so much assault from without as decay within. Behind the statutory ramparts the subject is dying."

The arguments will go on, but it is perhaps that undeniable decay within religious education which will be most important in bringing change. Secular humanists must seek to influence the direction in which change takes place, for religious education could move backwards, to more old-fashioned indoctrination, as well as forwards to a more rational and undocinaire approach.

JEAN'S WAY

The television company responsible for the Sunday evening ITV programme *Credo* must be congratulated on their courage for the particular documentary in this series put out on March 12. Based on Derek Humphry's book *Jean's Way* (published a few days later by Quartet Books at £4.95), it told how three years ago, he fulfilled a promise to his wife, who was dying from bone cancer, to help her end her life at a time of her own choosing. During the programme he said quite explicitly that she had no religious belief or illusions about personal survival, but chose to die while she still retained her mental faculties and human dignity rather than let her life drag on through the last distressing weeks of the disease that ravaged her body.

It has been reported that the Wiltshire police

AND NOTES

have obtained a transcript of the programme and referred the matter to the Director of Public Prosecutions. Mr Humphry says that, if prosecuted, he will plead Guilty and ask for the mercy of the court. Although in theory he could get up to 14 years' imprisonment, it is usual for such cases to result in an absolute or conditional discharge. However, it is to be hoped that Derek Humphry's frank disclosure will help to get assisted suicide in such circumstances within the law.

Both the programme and the (more detailed) book, written in collaboration with his second wife, constitute an eloquent plea for a person's right to die how and when he or she wishes.

CONVERTING CHURCHES

A letter by Barbara Smoker to the *Church Times* on the subject of redundant churches was reported in *The Freethinker* (March 1978). Following the publication of her letter, the Secretary of the Church Commissioners wrote to the *Church Times* commenting on the administration of funds obtained from the destruction of redundant churches. Barbara Smoker was quick to reply with the following letter:

"Sir, I stand corrected by the letter from the Secretary, The Church Commissioners, refuting my allegation that the funds administered by the Commissioners benefit directly from ecclesiastical reluctance to have redundant churches of architectural merit preserved for new secular uses. My error should be ascribed to the natural ignorance of an atheist with regard to the identity of the Church's various purse-string-holders. But I should have guessed that the size of the C of E purse demands a complex skein of purse-strings, in different hands, rivalling the mathematical complexity of one-in-three and three-in-one.

"However, the fact that two-thirds of the proceeds of church-site sales go to diocesan, not central, funds ("for new churches, parsonages and stipends") has little bearing on my main argument. The Church, though not the Church Commissioners, still has a fiscal interest in the argument that churches are generally unsuitable for conversion to alternative uses; and the report to that effect put out by the Friends of Friendless Churches (which prompted my previous letter) with the additional doctrinal argument of "sacrilegious", cannot escape the suspicion of mercenary (or at least mixed) motives.

"As is so often the case in ecclesiastical controversy, the real division of opinion is, apparently, not so much between believer and atheist as between believer and believer."

NSS PUBLIC MEETINGS

SUSAN BUDD

BECOMING A SECULARIST

Monday, 8 May 1978, 8.00 pm
Library, Conway Hall

(With Freethought History Society)

VOLTAIRE
BI-CENTENARY MEETING

Tuesday, 30 May 1978
Library, Conway Hall

(With BHA, RPA, SPES)

Further details to be announced

Freethinker Fund

A very good total this month, and we offer thanks to the following kind contributors: Anonymous, £2.60; Brenda Able, £8.75; A. Ashton, 60p; F. A. R. Bennion, £5; R. D. Birrell, £2.60; A. G. Brooker, £1.25; Mrs V. D. Brierly, £8; J. W. Buck, 60p; D. C. and M. F. Campbell, £10; E. Cecil, 59p; G. H. Childs, £1.60; W. H. Dean, 60p; Mr and Mrs De-laurey, £1; W. Donovan, £1.60; Mrs H. Eckersley, £3; R. Fennell, £2.60; Mrs P. A. Forrest, £1.40; L. Goldman, £2.60; W. J. Glennie, 60p; Phyllis Graham, £7.60; Mrs O. Grubiak, £2.60; W. C. Hall, 60p; P. Harding, £3.75; E. J. Hughes, £2; In memory of William Ingram, £2; J. M. Joseph, £5; F. W. Jones, £1.60; A Kendall, 60p; Mrs P. Knight, 60p; Dr H. Levon, £9.10; C. W. B. Lovett, £1.60; E. McGlie, £5; C. J. Morey, £5; Mrs M. O. Morley, £1.60; C. A. Newman, £1; G. Orchard, £5; R. G. Peterson, £2.38; F. Pidgeon, £3; R. H. Scott, £7.50; W. G. Stirling, £1; T. Stevenson, £1; Winnie Standfast, £1.60; J. L. Taylor, £1; N. Toon, £1.60; R. K. E. Torode, 60p; J. Vallance, £3.60; Mr and Mrs Van Duren, 60p; E. Willis, £5; D. Woods, £2.60; I. Young, £1. Total for the period 18 February to 17 March 1978: £142.12.

THE LONG SEARCH by Ninian Smart. British Broadcasting Corporation 1977. £7.25.

The television series and the book that accompanies it represent a Herculean labour in world travel, filming, photography, human contacts, literary output, above all in personal study of human ideals and beliefs staggering in their variety, multiplicity and complexity. Out of all this Ninian Smart has patiently woven a comprehensive view of extant religions, including a résumé of their origins and histories, and drawn therefrom a synthesis of their significance and value in our turbulent contemporary world.

After an exhaustive inquiry into the five main religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, he explores the religions within Hinduism, the many manifestations of faith "Beyond the White Frontier", i.e. the estimated 250 million people in small groups lying outside the major world religions and outside secular societies, and finally the mainstreams of China and Japan. China being an odd combination of Mao and Tao, with survivals from Confucius and Lao-Tzu; Japan an age-old interaction of Shinto and Zen Buddhism, and, as he says, "bound in the present world to be one of the, if not the, main witnesses to the Buddha on our planet."

The final section discusses "The Meaning of the Search", under the symbol of the triangle in which "the beliefs and feelings of men operate": the apex being "the universe", the right-hand "other people", the left-hand "I", the self. I was happily surprised to find Science at the apex. "Science is awesome . . . we are still doubtless only skimming the surface of the ocean of mystery which constitutes the apex of our world. Nevertheless it is vital to relate our lives to the new knowledge. And although the content of science may often disturb religion, the structure of science causes it to converse with spirituality." (p287).

Here follows a long dissertation which he labels "a distillation out of the writings of such men as Karl Popper who have contributed centrally to the debate." There is a certain persuasiveness about his arguments, which may comfort some distracted souls, but which remain, as all such efforts must, inconclusive. Still, it shows goodwill and doesn't attempt to evade the problem with the usual fatuities. I note, too, that Mr Smart is by no means squeamish about the large dose of myth in his own cherished religion when dealing with Christianity, which he does at great length. (Scottish Episcopalian by upbringing and conviction he is probably endowed with more canniness than some.) On p.107 under the heading *The heart of the faith* he wraps up the whole Bible story of Man's creation, Fall,

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Redemption through Jesus, and final Last Judgment in a neat mythical bundle. "And of course", he states calmly, "whether Jesus is saviour is not so much a matter of history as of sacred drama or (to use another term) myth." How are the mighty fallen!

But I am compelled to make one sharp criticism of an extraordinary omission in a book dedicated to "The Long Search" by all types of mankind. It concerns the author's nonchalant attitude—or non-attitude—to what he dismisses, in just under ten lines, as "British Humanism". (Why "British" only? Humanism thrives in most parts of the globe, as he must know.) We Humanists have the doubtful honour of being singled out among "those forces which challenge its" (religion's) "traditional expression", since "it is necessary to have a perspective on modern sciences, together with such unruly offspring of Western faith as Marxism and humanism." (p.12.)

Well—! It takes one's breath away. "Offspring of Western faith" indeed, with a small 'h' and a coupling with modern Marxism! How embarrassing to remind a scholar that (in the words of another) "Humanism derives from a far older tradition than Christianity." As Margaret Knight continues: "The great classical civilisations of China, Greece and Rome were rooted in Humanist values; and though these values were obscured in Europe during the long night of the Dark Ages they shone forth with renewed brilliance at the Renaissance, and have gathered fresh strength today in alliance with the mighty power of Science."* If Mr Smart has somehow missed out on Renaissance Humanism, maybe I should call his attention to what might be taken as the Birth of Humanism (though not then "christened" such) way back in the sixth century before Christ, in a galaxy of glorious names of which Thales was the first. Shall I remind him that the golden age of Greece saw the marriage of science and humanistic thought consummated for ever? And what of Epicurus whom he does not even mention by name? "Epicureanism" gets one and two bits of a line on p.17 of the Introduction . . . If ever a man were a pure personification of the Humanist ideal, that man was Epicurus (342-270 BC).

His followers, and they were many, formed a practical, influential school of thought and life-conduct that spread throughout the Roman Empire and survived for 700 years. (Until crushed by the victory of Constantine and buried thereafter in the mud of Christian calumny, which lingers even today in the noble word *Epicurean*.)

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And why, pray, "unruly"? This adjective appears again in the (nearly) ten lines already referred to (p.155), now as "another of Christianity's unruly children, though a much more polite and harmless one in the upshot of Marx's theories." What *can* be the thought behind that? Soothing, insulting, or darkly sinister? Actually I have never heard of Humanists smashing windows or throwing Molotov cocktails. Possibly they are just too "polite and harmless", quietly engaged in their lifework of trying to promote human happiness, social and individual, mainly by persuading governments to abolish or reform inhumane laws, and in their own "Long Search" for that spark of intelligence in man that responds to Reason and Reality. But Humanism is at a disadvantage, for it will never persecute. It is not in its nature to enforce ideas on other minds. It possesses a substantial and satisfying life of its own, unified with past, present and future human history, yet independent of conflicting ways of thought around it—though deeply aware of all, and respecting whatever is deserving of respect. It does not seek, or desire, any kind of deity, but only the real good of mankind. (I apologise to Mr Smart for the trumpet-blowing—but he will doubtless make excuse for the "unruly offspring".)

I'm afraid, though, I haven't finished yet. I cannot omit one other "honourable mention" (though intended, obviously, as a warning) in the very first—italicised—section of the introduction. "There are atheists and rationalists who see nothing but are atheists and rationalists, and they can too easily be led" (by whom or what?) "into thinking therefore that the exploration of religion is unimportant. This is an absurdity, since what moves men, whether it be foolish or wise, justified or unjustified, good or evil, must wholly concern us if we wish to understand men's various responses to life."

My dear Mr Smart, do you honestly believe that we Humanists, atheist and rationalist as we most certainly are, having decided (many of us with considerable suffering and loss) to opt for objective scientific truth in lieu of the conflict of uncertainties that goes by the name of religion, could have left unexplored the mental-spiritual territory we finally abandoned? Do you really think that we who dare to call ourselves Humanists are unconcerned with anything—but *anything*—vital to humanity?

It is true that we see "folly in religion", which is precisely why we have abandoned it for the "more excellent way", seeking scientific truth, i.e.

objective reality in place of subjective speculation. But it is by no means true that we see nothing else. We are fully aware of religion's vital role in the formation of societies and individuals from the earliest gropings of primeval man to the incredible complexities of religious experience, through the ages to the present day. We acknowledge, fully and freely, what religions of many types have accomplished in the building of the great human family, as well as their negative influence in retarding its mental and *true* spiritual progress.

But today is today, and the present world is ragged and unkempt with the relics of discarded beliefs and the hotch-potch of new-fangled versions of Jesus-idolatry. The last quarter of the twentieth century belongs to the triumph of scientific truth: *magna est veritas et praevaluit!* Let those who wish cling to the ancient—and genuinely held—beliefs of mankind: let them die happy in such knowledge of truth as their creed affords. For no "atheists and rationalists" worthy of their convictions will deny that religions have supplied hitherto (though imperfectly) the spirit that could elevate man above his mundane limitations, even at times inspiring him with visions of beauty, temporary reprieves from the necessary sordidness of earthly existence.

We only maintain that change must come—as indeed it *is* coming, slowly, erratically according to man's inherently conservative nature, his dread of the demands of a new vision of life, an altogether fresh era of human experience. (Though indeed prefigured, 26 centuries ago, by the glories of Ionic wisdom already mentioned.) Your book, like the television series, was entitled merely *The Long Search*—for whom or for what it did not specify. Men naturally search and strive for self-fulfilment and happiness, and seek them in any form they personally desire. To some the notion of a god or gods is abhorrent, while others consider it the highest good. Of all the (literally) millions of gods worshipped, past and present, not one has ever provably appeared on this Earth. The game of hide-and-seek is fine for children, but hardly satisfying—or suitable—for adults, and even children grow peeved if their quarry never turns up.

But all men know, to an approximate degree, what constitutes their well-being; beyond this fundamental need lies the quest for happiness, the right of every individual in every kind of society. On p.298 it is written: "Part of the importance of the search lies in the fact that religions are vitally relevant to human happiness and welfare." Examine this statement and you find it ambiguous. Relevant they are, and always have been, in the dictionary sense of "bearing upon" human lives and human societies; no one doubts their power and their influence, even if only behind the scenes. On the whole, especially when and where religion is dynamic and politically powerful, it makes—and has definitely made

*Humanist Anthology, Introduction p.xiii.

in the past—for suppression of natural human happiness and neglect of vital human welfare. History is crammed with the cruelty and injustice caused, or deliberately meted out, to unfortunate victims of religion's indifference or hostility to "human happiness and welfare."

There is only one "religion" worth the Search, and its name—some day in a future epoch, if nature permits us to survive—will be *Humanitas*. Until that hypothetical era we shall have to be content to "search" through archaic records and contemporary crazes, to glean what we can from the good intentions and mystical ideals of the spiritually ambitious. (Or be content with active and contemplative Humanism.) In my view, the nearest thing to hope for the sanity of religious-mindedness lies in the depth and serenity of Buddhism, permeated, as it strangely seems, with concepts of contemporary science, and in its purest form essentially atheistic. For "it does not demand belief in God" and "the Buddha was very insistent on the dangers, both intellectual and moral, of belief in the soul." This is because the key to his Enlightenment is the central idea of Impermanence, the continual shifting and changing of the constituents of the universe and of all life; it is thus in accord with modern science, "for physics sees the apparently solid and durable . . . as a cloud of short-lived events." (p.73) Modern Buddhists, a growing number, "see in their ancient tradition a great anticipation of modern science." All this has profound implications for the idea of re-birth and reincarnation, the doctrine of Karma, so commonly misunderstood. The human identity does *not* survive . . . what "reincarnates" are, presumably, the indestructible properties of matter in some other form: *we* should say, as nature, or chance, happens to arrange them; the metaphysical aspect of Karma is not our affair as Humanists. Yet the physical process, correctly understood, could rest on a scientific basis without doing violence to the principles of objectivity.

As the author admits, the Western world is "increasingly fascinated by the richness of Buddhist psychological and spiritual training, and by the splendours of Buddhist art." I think many of us who ended up as Humanists have gone through a love affair with the Buddha, and still retain the memory, perhaps also the influence, of that profoundly wise and tranquil presence. Even Mr Smart portrays the "faith" of Buddha with sympathy, understanding and appreciation. His portrayal comes immediately before that of Christianity, and the contrast is striking between the calm, beauty, and close kinship with contemporary science engendered by the Buddhist ideal, and the feverish (frequently cruel) zeal, ugly intolerance, and rejection of scientific values so characteristic of Christian arrogance. His concluding thoughts stem from a visit to California where he was giving a lecture on Buddhism.

California seemed to him "the wave of the future": home of the Counterculture, where men "shop around for faiths", and also the citadel of science and intellectual research. "In a way the predicament of modern man is summed up." Can "the achievements of the intellect" and "the offerings of faith for the soul and the feelings" be brought together? Without knowing—or acknowledging—Mr Smart gives the Humanist answer. "The pluralism of religion is all part of the open society, in a plural world . . . No culture, now, is an island." Men of different faiths can learn from each other. "In brief", he sums up on p.298, "there are virtues in being eclectic."

The Humanist agrees, though he cannot but find god-worship and its (often bizarre) accompaniments distasteful, to say the least. Some of us may dream of that future we shall never see, when *Humanitas* unifies the children of men.

At the end of the long, long search I found myself sighing with relief: "Thank Evolution I'm an atheist!"

PHYLLIS GRAHAM

ETHICS: Inventing Right and Wrong by J. L. Mackie.
Pelican Books, £1.

All good rationalists will be pleased to hear that this book starts off by refuting the idea of an absolute morality, and says that all values are subjective. Not much new here, though it is good to see this moral philosopher, like the great majority nowadays, putting paid to any theological ideas on morality. And the final chapter points out that even a theist cannot use his belief to bolster up such a morality since, for sound logical reasons, the existence of God is irrelevant to the existence of absolute moral values.

There are interesting overlaps at certain points with the book by Jonathan Glover reviewed in the March issue of *The Freethinker* (p.43). For instance, they both spend some pages discussing the Catholic doctrine of double effect: the doctrine that one can carry out an action—say, the giving of a pain-killer—with the certain knowledge that this action will kill the patient. This is permissible, if one concentrates on the motive of pain-killing, and puts to the back of one's mind the secondary effect (that your action will kill the person). This doctrine is regarded as an article of faith by the Catholic Church and the British Medical Association.

Mackie's reasons for finding the doctrine unconvincing are slight and pedantic: they boil down to saying that the distinction seems artificial. It is Glover who gives the best refutation of it by an example. If, as a political protest, I throw a bomb into a football crowd and kill several people, I could justify this on the principle of double-effect. After all, the purpose of my protest is to affect the match, and it is only as a side-effect that I kill people.

The doctrine is not simply implausible; in action it can be found to be ridiculous.

Yet it is Mackie and not Glover who points out why the doctrine of double-effect was invented. It is a consequence of the adoption of absolute moral rules. Given the number of absolute rules found in an absolute morality, they are bound to conflict on some occasions, and if an agent is equally responsible for all the consequences of his actions, he would thus be breaking one of his "absolute" rules. So the only reason for the invention of the doctrine was to try to bolster another religious dogma cracking at the seams.

The chapter I found most thought-provoking was Mackie's attempted refutation of utilitarianism. He first makes the usual distinction between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism, and we may agree with his objections to the former: people do not attempt to calculate the possible effect on happiness of every single ethical act they do. There will be many such actions they do either because they have been brought up to do them without thinking, or because, in general, similar actions are more likely to have a good effect than any alternative.

However, Mackie thinks that even rule utilitarianism can be refuted, by pointing out irremovable practical difficulties in implementing it. He starts with some "awkward" questions. For example, "Do we include non-human animals in our evaluation of pleasure and pain?" Yes, of course we do. "Does our evaluation include future generations as well as the present?" Yes indeed—for one of the striking features about the recent debate on Windscale is the consideration by the public of the dangers such a project would hold for future generations, far more than the present.

He also asks how we would distinguish between actions, one of which would substantially increase the happiness of a few, and another of which would marginally increase the happiness of many. There is an answer to this, but it is a complex one. First, an individual is not often confronted with such alternatives. But in policy terms, these are precisely the kind of considerations which government is constantly confronted with. Should one spend thousands of pounds on one heart transplant, if the same money could provide relief from pain for ten sufferers from arthritis? Up till now, such thoughts have rarely surfaced; decisions have normally been taken on the basis of a certain amount of money being available for a particular department at the right time. But it is surely right that greater attention in the future should be shown to the criterion of producing the greater happiness of the greatest number. Mackie, however, having given his reasons for dismissing utilitarianism, has other ideas.

They are best seen in the chapter entitled "Practical Elements of Morality", which is the least satisfactory in the book. It draws some very broad con-

clusions, and admits they are probably superficial when one is dealing with such complex issues as abortion or euthanasia. For instance, he suggests that such issues should not be discussed in terms of slogans such as murder (quite true) nor, he says, in terms of trying to increase human happiness, but in terms of the "values, rights and dispositions involved." But talking of rights or values will really not get us far. Compare the "rights of the mother" versus the "rights of the foetus"—who is to judge which takes precedence? And in the context of the criteria for operations we mentioned above, Mackie would presumably suggest we should investigate, in isolation, the value of a piece of research or the disposition of the surgeon. Yet one can only achieve a truly rational policy by examining the present situation, and the effect on it if different policies were to be carried out. And such policies should be evaluated on the basis of maximising human happiness. But policies will remain irrational if one simply tries to adjudicate between "rights".

However, there is certainly no religious dogma clouding the issues in Mackie's book, and for those interested in discussing the basis of morality in the very broadest terms, it can be recommended.

NICHOLAS REED

THEATRE

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY? by Brian Clarke. Mermaid Theatre.

If one were to apply the terms "daring" and "likely to shock" to *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, an audience might go along to the Mermaid expecting to see the latest all-nude revue or a further attack on the monarchy. There is no nudity and not one four-letter epithet is uttered throughout the entire two hours. Yet in an age when we avoid the mention of death as gingerly as we once covered piano legs, these terms are precisely applicable to a play which makes a full-frontal assault on the notions of the sanctity of human existence and the doctor's right to preserve life at any price.

Ken Harrison, a sculptor, has survived a serious road accident, only to regain consciousness in a hospital bed, completely paralysed from the neck down, unable to feed himself or scratch an itch on his nose. The whole of the hospital staff (doctors, nurses, a dowager social worker) respond as though Ken were their only patient and do their utmost to jolly him along. The nurses feed him coffee through a straw and tuck him up morning and night; the consultant takes particular care to monitor his "progress". The matron even tells him to look on Dr Emerson as a father figure. She receives Ken's reaction to this pastoral concern with something less than amusement. In fact she is frankly amazed.

"If I can't be a man", he tells the good doctor, "I've no wish to be a medical achievement". He wishes to opt out, to "cash in his chips", and he asks to be released from hospital in order to end his days alone, with dignity.

The plot revolves round this singular effort to confound the medical industry and secure a release. And Ken has no easy job of it, whatever he does. The doctors will try to prove him incompetent to judge his own case. They maintain he is mentally unbalanced due to depression, and will be forced to remain under the terms of the Medical Health Act, if necessary.

Ken is indeed depressed by his dilemma. His argument rests on the fact that it is unreasonable not to be. He is, he claims, already dead, and he wants the establishment officially to recognise this.

So the play is really a form of challenge: one man's fight against the odds, with this time not death hanging in the balance, but continued existence, a "life sentence", in fact.

Tom Conti's infectious stage presence has never worked to better effect than here as Ken Harrison. He not only succeeds in engaging the audience's sympathy; by the end he has conquered the most hard-bitten bureaucrat on stage. The play is not dramatic in the sense of setting up opposing attitudes. What the author does is reveal his character's torment to the cast and the audience as a whole. We are made to feel exactly what it is like to face such a prospect as Ken's. One doctor (Jane Asher) even admits that if forced to by circumstances, she might very well leave the fatal tablets on the bed-side table overnight. Her subsequent point that Ken seems to have regained his will to live at the advent of winning his case seems lame when she realises that, whatever professional ethics might dictate, she cannot put herself in the patient's position and that, if he is intelligent enough to decide, then, yes, it is his unassailable right to choose.

Brian Clarke has written extensively for television, and the production has a documentary feel about it that suggests the author's personal experience. Whether or not the play is autobiographical, Tom Conti's performance is so convincing, one thought for a moment he might take the curtain calls from the hospital bed. A play well worth the price of admission, and a theme urgent enough in these enlightened times to provoke repercussions outside the theatre.

JAMES MACDONALD

LETTERS

William McLroy ("The Freethinker", February 1978) writes of a "distinct possibility" of "an alliance between the puritan right and the racist right." I would contend, as did Reich in his "The Mass Psychology of Fascism", that there have always been close links

between religious mysticism, sexual repression and fascism. To give some examples: in his last work the late A. K. Chesterton (pre-war blackshirt and founding member of the National Front) devotes a whole chapter to what he calls "The Amok Run of the Sexologists". In an earlier book he asks "Is the Conspiracy Jewish?" and gives an affirmative answer. The magazine "On Target", which supports the activities of Mrs Whitehouse (articles from it are reprinted in the National Front's "Spearhead") has as the first point in its policy statement "to promote loyalty to the Christian concept of God." In the wake of the trial of "Gay News" have come physical attacks by people wearing NF badges in a pub used by gay people and verbal attacks by NF leader Tyndall on "queers" and "fairies".

It is not only ethnic minorities but also sexual minorities who are the targets of fascism. Humanists should therefore expose the activities of fascism and its overt and covert supporters and prevent it becoming a serious threat to democracy and liberty. If, together with other democrats, we do not, Nazi Germany shows us what can happen.

TERRY LIDDLE

WOODWORM IN THE PULPITS

In connection with your comment on redundant churches ("The Freethinker", March) it was only recently that the Archbishop of Canterbury said in Synod: "Prayers have been going up for decades, now the answer is coming, young men are flocking in to become clergymen. In fact we are getting too many."

The Wheels of God grind slowly, we know, but it really is tantalising of Him to delay answering the prayers until the church fabrics are in ruins: beetles in the roofs; woodworm in the pulpits; the decayed churches up for sale—and so many aspirants for soul-saving on the dole.

E. EBURY

SCIENCE FICTION?

Mr Geoffrey Webster seems to think there is some truth in Von Däniken's space stories ("The Freethinker", March). He should look more closely at one of the photographs in his books, taken in South America, which according to Von Däniken is obviously an astronaut. The figure of a man is sitting in a chariot, he is wearing only a loin cloth and a head-dress, his body is completely exposed. It would be interesting to know how this "astronaut" got from one universe to another in such a primitive contraption. Naturally Von Däniken doesn't tell his readers, any more than he tells readers, including Mr Webster, where these advanced space-people came from.

J. H. MORTEN

SUNDAY TRADING

I am collecting information on Sunday Trading, and would be very grateful if readers in various parts of the country could send me:

- Whether or not the laws on Sunday Trading are being enforced in your area. (Enquire from your Trading Standards Department.)
- Reports of any examples of Sunday Markets or Hypermarkets which are opening on Sundays.
- Any press cuttings of relevance to Sunday Trading.

DEREK MARCUS
82 Westpole Avenue
Cockfosters, Barnet, Herts EN4 0BA

FREETHOUGHT ACTION

Your readers must have observed that the church-going Jesus-ites get about as much publicity on television as the rest of the country combined. That is the chief reason for the shape of things in Britain today. While most school-teachers are endeavouring to educate their pupils, the whole ecclesiastical machine—"the spiritual arm of the status quo", as a prominent clergyman critic of his brethren in Scotland recently called it—is operating to standardise the public's credulity at the level current 2000 years ago.

It is as true as when Victor Hugo wrote it that in every community there is a man, the dominie, who is trying to light a lamp, and a person who is bent on blowing it out, the priest.

We get this religious propaganda first thing in the morning; we get it the last thing at night. We get it all day every Sunday. Why don't freethinkers do something about this? Can they not unite to beat this minority? I am sure that the best service your journal could do for Freethought would be to assist in the formation of a Union of Freethinkers operating in the political field, and through all parties, to defend and advance the Freethought cause.

We have heard of Catholic Action, and there is plenty of Protestant Action too, although the Protestants do not call it that. When are we going to get some Freethought Action?

BILL COMRIE

COMMON OFFENCE

Denis Cobell says in his review of the 1977 "Freethinker" bound volume that the paper "was itself prosecuted under the old Blasphemy Laws in 1883" (March). In fact the paper was prosecuted under the common law, like "Gay News" and virtually every other victim during the past three centuries. Indeed the leading authority on the subject—G. D. Nokes: "A History of the Crime of Blasphemy" (1928)—says of the old law that "there appear to have been no convictions for any offence under this act", and everyone who has been doing research in connection with the "Gay News" case has come to the same conclusion.

NICOLAS WALTER

The lack of support for the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association from the Belfast Humanist Group was referred to in the January 1978 issue of "The Freethinker". This comment was based on reports in two issues of the Belfast Humanist Group's journal "The Realist". (The editor has since resigned.) We have received communication from the group's secretary stating that, although the Belfast Humanist Group has been deeply divided on this question, they have passed a majority resolution in favour of bringing the laws relating to homosexuality, divorce and abortion into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Membership enquiries to the
General Secretary
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

OBITUARY

I. YETTRAM

We regret to report the death of Isaac Yettram, an old NSS member and *Freethinker* subscriber. Born into a poor East End Jewish family in 1900, he became a top-quality tailor, determinedly breaking away from both poverty and religion. He was a link with the foundation of this journal, having been in his youth a close friend of G. W. Foote's niece. He also knew Chapman Cohen. Always a devoted family man, he spent his retirement with his son's family, to whom we extend our sympathy. The secular funeral took place at Breakspear Crematorium, Ruislip, on March 3, with Barbara Smoker officiating.

JOSEPH SYMES the "flower of atheism"

A booklet by NIGEL SINNOTT

50p plus 10p postage

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SCIENTOLOGY SET BACK

The Church of Scientology, founded by former US Air Force pilot Ron Hubbard, had its worst legal setback ever in February, when a French court found, at the close of a case lasting seven years, that the French branch of the "Church" had extorted money from its adherents and intimidated many of them who voiced the slightest criticism. This verdict (which is open to appeal) is without precedent in the attitude of the French judiciary to the various new religious and quasi-religious sects.

Hubbard, who has lived for many years on a perpetually cruising yacht, was sentenced in his absence to four years' gaol and a £4,000 fine. Two other leading Scientologists were also sentenced, to shorter terms of imprisonment, in their absence.

In Britain, which since 1968 has banned the entry of foreign Scientologists into the country, a recent Home Office memorandum describes the Church of Scientology as an organisation set up to make money and, perhaps, to gain power. The memorandum refers to a prison reform group called Criminon, which is sponsored by the Church of Scientology. There is apparently now growing pressure from Scientologists to remove the 1968 ban.

Other opponents to Lord Willis's Bill were the Earl of Ferrers, who had little doubt that the "so-called 'gay' freethinking lobby would deliberately set out to assault the feelings of others . . ." and Lord Macleod of Fuinary, who was horrified by the "harbingers of moral chaos and the certain break-up of our civilisation." Lord Macleod felt that their lordships did not appreciate the implications of the Bill: "If it became law we should devise further legislation to declare the United Kingdom a secular state." (Amen)

It was notable that many of those who opposed the Bill spoke of the need to re-consider the law so that it might be extended to cover other beliefs.

Although the Bill has fallen, clear arguments were offered in support of Lord Willis. Viscount Norwich distinguished between sin and crime and commented on the difficulties of defining blasphemy; he quoted a poem "New Approaches" by Kingsley Amis, which he said "strikes far more deeply, far more insiduously, far more dangerously and tellingly at the heart of the Christian religion than the rather sad, touching poem" by James Kirkup. Lord Soper did not feel that "we shall sustain the well-being of the country by the preservation of the existing law of blasphemy." Lord Gardiner recalled the abolition of the blasphemy laws on the Statute Book in the 1960s and said "According to my recollection, nobody spoke a word in their favour . . . It was the general belief that we had now abolished the laws of blasphemy . . . We have done perfectly well without it for 55 years—there had been no prosecution."

In his summing up Lord Willis withdrew the Bill and said: "I felt that I had opened the cage and could hear the baying of distant wolves; as if all the people against the Bill were terrified that something terrible was going to take place in our society." He referred to the fact that the Law Commission was to review offences against religion and public worship and commented that "if the Law Commission do not come up with some reasonable amendment to the law of blasphemy, then I will come back to the charge."

EVENTS

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

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Annual General Meeting. Sunday 7 May, 5.30 pm, Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Political Forum with John Leveridge, MP, and John Stephenson, parliamentary candidate. Tuesday 18 April, 8.00 pm, Harold Wood Social Centre (corner of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

Lewisham Humanist Group. F. A. Ridley: Has God a Future? Thursday 27 April, 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, SE6.

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. Discussion on monarchy. Sunday 16 April, 7.30 pm. Cynthia Fountain, BPAS: The Great Abortion Debate. Sunday 7 May, 7.30 pm. Both 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Peggy Stavely-Taylor: Amnesty International—Humanism in Action? Wednesday 19 April, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Further information from Ann Coombes 051-608 3835 or Marion Clowes 051-342 2562.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. K. Furness: The Humanist Future. Wednesday 12 April, 8.30 pm. 46 Windermere Road, N10.

South Place Ethical Society. Tuesday Discussions: Different kinds of Humanism. 7.00 pm. 4 April: Nicolas Walter: Scientific Rationalism. 11 April: Barbara Smoker: Secular Humanism. 18 April: Dr Harry Stopes-Roe: Creating Purpose. 25 April: Peter Cadogan: Religious Humanism.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. George Greening: Citizen of the World, April 14. Prof Roy Knight: Trouble in the University, April 28. Both 7.30 pm, Friends' Meeting House, Page Street, Swansea.

Humanist Holidays. August 5-12-19. Hotel by Derwentwater at Keswick, Lake District. £55-£59 per week, excluding lunch. Apply to secretary, Marjorie Mopham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, telephone 01-642 8796. Also if interested to join small party at a Welsh cottage one spring week-end for walking and talking. Communal cooking, small charge. Another possibility is family camping on North Wales coast in school holidays.

THE FREETHINKER

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