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TWO PRIESTS GUILTY OF NEGLIGENT HOMICIDE IN GERMAN EXORCISM CASE

Two Roman Catholic priests have been found guilty of homicide through negligence in Germany, for their part in an exorcism case. Fr Wilhelm Renz and Fr Ernst Alt both conducted extended exorcism rites on Anneliese Michel, who subsequently died of starvation weighing only 68 pounds. The prosecution claimed that the girl's life could have been saved if medical assistance had been sought. The accused, including the girl's parents, were given a suspended six months' gaol sentence. The judge said they had witnessed the girl's suffering and should have realised that she needed a doctor more than prayers.

The trial, which lasted several weeks and ended on 21 April, has been headline news in the German press. Many commentators have referred to the trial with incredulity, saying that the whole affair belonged more to the middle ages than the modern world. The trial took place in a criminal court in Aschaffenburg in the shadow of one of West Germany's cathedrals.

Anneliese Michel died from hunger and exhaustion at the age of 23, on 30 June, 1976. The rites of exorcism had been administered to her 67 times before she died, and she had been refusing food and drink in the advanced stages. She was a theology student at Würzburg University and she had become convinced that she was possessed by devils. Doctors told the court that she suffered from epilepsy and a "hyper-religious personality disorder". They had treated her condition medically in 1975, and one of them recorded "a certain satisfaction with the result", but she had not returned for treatment. In the middle ages epilepsy was often regarded as possession by the devil, but it is a condition that can now be controlled medically.

The girl's parents, Anna and Josef Michel, were devout Catholics, who created a family atmosphere of severe religiosity and fanatical intensity. The father was a wealthy, Bavarian timber merchant.

Priests were called in by the parents. They were convinced that the possession was genuine because of the girl's ability to respond correctly to languages she did not know and her accurate forecast of the theft of consecrated wafers from a local church. Bishop Josef Strangl of Würzburg entrusted Fr Renz with the task of exorcising Anneliese Michel's devils. The ritual used was the *Rituale Romanum* going back to Catholic canon law of 1614. Words used included the sentence "I command thee, thou cursed spirit, thou Prince of Darkness, to depart from this creature and return to thine own place, to remain there for ever".

Manifest Devils

Photographs and 43 tape recordings made by Fr Renz were presented to the court in evidence. A hushed courtroom heard him describe how he and two strong men had fought with Anneliese to free her of six devils. The presiding judge asked how he knew that there were six—"You didn't see them did you?" The priest replied that they manifested themselves and named them as "Judas, Lucifer, Cain, Nero, Hitler and Fr Fleischmann who lived some time ago." The court were also told by Fr Alt that the girl died a "death of atonement". She had deliberately served penance for such wrongs in present-day Germany as abortion, the errors of politicians and the defection of Catholic priests from the church.

During the exorcism session Anneliese spat at Fr Renz and at a religious picture, shrieked obscenities and destroyed a rosary. On one occasion she ran straight through a glass door. Father Renz was asked why no medical help was called. He replied that possession by the devil is not an illness and not therefore a medical problem.

The Bishop of Würzburg, who authorised the ex-

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orcism, was not charged, though he was questioned by the police. The Munich daily paper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* commented that "The trial took place in the absence of its two protagonists: the devil and the Bishop of Würzburg".

Father Renz was alleged to have been an experienced exorcist. He had spent 15 years as a missionary in China "where demons cropped up every day".

This amazing case, which might be regarded by some as a rarity, is unfortunately not unique as a modern case of exorcism. German newspapers commented during the trial on the fact that belief in devils was not uncommon among fundamentalists in Bavaria. It was also disclosed that Catholic Church exorcists were at present working on another person who was "possessed by the devil". Fr

Adolf Rodewyk, aged 82, a Jesuit sometimes called "Germany's number one exorcist" told a Hamburg newspaper "The sufferer is being treated according to the *Rituale Romanum* of 1614".

Nor is the United Kingdom immune from these outbursts of irrationality, encouraged by the churches, who have not yet abandoned some of the worst medieval aspects of religion. Readers may recall the case of Michael Taylor, in 1975, who killed his wife shortly after an all night exorcism. It is high time the churches—and even the Church of England still appoints exorcists—firmly repudiated the process of exorcism. Too many tragedies can occur, when the vulnerable or sick have their difficulties compounded with evil aspects of religion rather than being given medical treatment or sane, compassionate counselling.

WORLDWIDE

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

An Anglican bishop warned against the dangers of fanatical charismatic groups, when it was claimed that four women had become pregnant after attending village church services organised by the Pentecostal Movement. The Bishop of Popenetta, Rev George Ambo, said a small group of self-styled "priests" had been holding bizarre charismatic services in the Northern Province of Papua New Guinea. During the service, it is alleged, teenage girls were carried out in a trance-like state to have sexual intercourse with the "priests". Bishop Ambo said "It is all conducted in the dark" and complained that the abuse of women was breaking up marriages and leading to fighting in the villages.

PAKISTAN

A public flogging was watched by about 20,000 people recently. Mohammad Sabir was sentenced to ten years imprisonment and 15 lashes for rape. Such whipping is part of the policy of "Islamisation" introduced by the military ruler General Zia-al Haq.

The "audience" watched the event in a public race course. Since General Zia's rule horse-racing has been banned, prohibition introduced and film love scenes censored. Scholars say it is debatable how far Quoranic law sanctions whipping.

ITALY

The Vatican has protested at the performance of a work by Hindemith at the Royal Opera House in Rome. The opera, which is about a nun's erotic fantasies, has been described as a "blasphemous and sacrilegious" work.

The composer had withdrawn his work after its first performance in 1922 produced a storm of pro-

test. The Rev Romeo Pancirolli, in 1978, described it as "a real profanation of Catholic faith and religion"—but the applause drowned the catcalls at the opening performance at the Royal Opera House.

Freethinker Fund

Once again we are pleased to report an excellent total to this fund, which so helpfully supports *The Freethinker*. Our thanks are offered to: Anonymous, £20; Anonymous, 50p; Mrs B. Able, £7.60; A. E. Avery, £1; Hazell Bowser, 60p; J. L. Broom, 75p; S. Clowes, £5; Ms Cordesse, 60p; Mrs J. B. Coward, £1.60; W. Craigie, £1.60; Mr & Mrs S. Eadie, £2.60; R. C. Edmunds, 60p; Mrs P. A. Forrest, £2; D. Harper, £5.04; G. B. Horne, £1.60; Mrs L. Hopkins, 75p; Dr D. J. Holdstock, £1.60; S. Hunt, £2.60; E. J. Hughes, £1; Mrs B. W. S. Irwin, £7.60; H. J. Jakeman, £2.60; A. G. Jenkinson, £2.60; J. Jeffrey, £2.60; C. Jones, 60p; In memory of John Dodds Kay, £10; E. Litten, £1.60; R. J. Martin, £2; C. Marcus, £1.60; Cmdr G. S. Mellor, £2.60. J. W. Mooney, £2.60; Notts Humanist Group, £5; R. A. Saich, £2.60; N. Sinnott, £1.10; R. Stubbs, £2; J. C. Tugwell, £2.60; Mrs A. Woods, £2.60; D. Wright, £3. Total for the period 18 March to 17 April 1978: £112.34.

GOOD GOD—a string of verses to tie up the deity by Barbara Smoker. 95p plus 12p post. G. W. Foote & Co, 92 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

THE PORTABLE VOLTAIRE. Edited by Ben Ray Redman. Penguin. £1.95 plus 22p postage.

JOSEPH SKURRIE'S FREETHOUGHT REMINISCENCES. Introduced by Nigel Sinnott. 35p plus 7p postage.

Submission on Obscenity and Film Censorship

A committee of inquiry is studying the law relating to obscenity and film censorship. It is to be chaired by Bernard Williams, Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge. Publicity has been given to the submissions of some organisations clamouring for greater restrictions. The National Secular Society's submission, printed below, was quoted in the "Guardian" and the "Telegraph". It argues that the present laws are unreasonable and unworkable.

The National Secular Society views the present laws in regard to obscenity and indecency as both unreasonable and unworkable.

They are unreasonable because, in the first instance, they are based on the wholly unproven premise that obscene material would deprave or corrupt those who come into contact with it.

Professor R. M. Jackson, Downing Professor of Law at Cambridge University, said the following in a submission to the Arts Council Working Party in 1968: "The supposed depravity and corruption produced by obscene articles is a matter of conjecture. No hard evidence can be put forward, for nobody can demonstrate that anybody has ever been depraved or corrupted by a particular obscene article. A decision that an article would have such a tendency is based entirely upon opinion unsupported by verifiable facts." This view was largely confirmed by experts from the psychiatric and social sciences who testified at the working party.

They are unworkable because the laws inevitably got entangled with political and religious intrigues, and wound up imposing severe restrictions on free expression.

For instance, obscene libel was linked with seditious libel in order to silence Wilkes, and was used against Bradlaugh on behalf of Victorian industrialists who were exploiting big working class families who knew nothing of family planning. Just as the Roman Catholic *Index of Prohibited Books* gave more attention to heresy than to *erotica*, so Lord Campbell, the zealous Presbyterian who in 1857 decided that the common law misdemeanour of obscene publication needed strengthening by statute law, had a sturdy background in blasphemy prosecutions. The great show trials that stand out in the minds of the general public have involved such serious creative artists as Gustave Flaubert, Havlock Ellis, James Joyce, Magnus Hirschfeld, Norman Haire, D. H. Lawrence, John Cleland, Henry Miller and Hubert Selby Jnr., and create an impression of official philistinism. Nor, at least in the long term, have they been effective. After causing considerable,

and sometimes grievous, expense and worry to authors and publishers, these attempts to suppress literature have failed. There have been two results: one is the creation of a notoriety that has impaired objective literary criticism; the other is the wider circulation of the books concerned among many who would not otherwise have heard of them—which was not the intention of the Act.

As they stand today, the laws concerning obscenity are confused and unsatisfactory. They are of use only to those censorious elements in society who feel the need to impose their moral standards on the majority, and see the present laws as handy weapons in their battle against free speech.

Lord Goodman, who convened the 1968 conference to consider the workings of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 and 1964 and other relevant laws, described the situation created by the 1959 Act as "a total nonsense". That situation became even more ludicrous in the years that followed Lord Goodman's criticism.

At the time Lewis Hauser, QC, said "no-one knows what the phrase 'a tendency to deprave or corrupt' means". Ten years have passed since he made that statement, and still no-one knows.

"Obscenity," said the working party's own distinguished legal witness "is incapable of objective definition and is therefore an unsatisfactory subject for criminal law."

The National Secular Society is wholly in accord with these sentiments. The society is opposed to censorship of even the most controversial of material, whether it be considered "obscene", "indecent" or "blasphemous".

Any laws that are open to misinterpretation, or have the tendency to put magistrates, judges and juries into the roles of arbiters of taste and morals, are undesirable and the sooner they are repealed the better.

The Society feels that there is no point in attempting to redefine the law governing obscenity, because obscenity itself defies definition. No two people can agree on what is or what isn't "obscene" and any new law would, in the words of the 1968 Working Party, "still present juries with an unanswerable conundrum, defendants would still find themselves on trial for an unpredictable crime, judges would still be floundering in a sea of indeterminable paradox and little good therefore could accrue to the law's repute."

While the National Secular Society feels that there ought not to be any legal constraints on sale of sexually explicit matter to people who wish to purchase it, it recognises that there are people who

(Continued on page 78)

No Shroud of Evidence

BARBARA SMOKER

Are we living at the start of a new Dark Age, with science selling out to superstition? At the turn of the century, the future seemed to be with rationalism. Now, much of the academic world has sunk into a morass of mindless occultism: astrology, spiritualism, witchcraft, exorcism, the revival of blasphemy trials, "the Bermuda Triangle", and Uri Geller; culminating this year in a great resurgence of belief in the Holy Shroud—stirred up by a vast international public-relations exercise in time for its celebration this autumn of 400 years' sojourn in Turin. Here, the President of the National Secular Society investigates the investigations into this fantastic relic.

When your one true God incarnate not only rises from the dead but even ascends bodily to heaven, what future is there for the relics industry? Unlike his contemporary, John the Baptist, whose severed head was at one time proudly exhibited in at least six churches simultaneously, JC left not a toe behind.

But reliquarians are nothing if not resourceful. Was there not, after all, the foreskin from the circumcision? Divine foreskins turned up all over the place. And what about the navel-cord? At least six churches boasted the authentic one. Milk-teeth, of course, abounded. And speaking of milk, "Specimens of the Virgin's milk", says Joseph McCabe (in *A Rationalist Encyclopaedia*) "were held in honour in various Spanish churches until the materialistic nineteenth century."

Beyond these few items, however, they had to make do with secondary relics: the swaddling clothes, thorns from the crown, whole crowns of thorns, the crucifixion nails, and enough splinters from the one true cross to keep a chip-board furniture factory in production for months on end. Most popular of all, however, were the Veronica towel (on which JC had left a miraculous image of his face) and the burial cloths. The true shroud of Jesus was in such demand that it was preserved in hundreds of shrines throughout Christendom.

Gradually, in the interest of plausibility, all the shrouds were eliminated except one—the best one: the *Santa Sindone*, or Holy Shroud of Turin, still kept in the Royal Chapel of Turin Cathedral. This relic went one better than the Veronica, as it boasted an image of the whole body of the Saviour, front and back—not just the face. And it has continued to attract a good annual catch of pilgrims whose piety is surpassed only by their gullibility. But now that McCabe's "materialistic nineteenth century" has given way to the pseudo-scientific occultism of the latter half of the twentieth century, the pilgrims have been joined by eminent scientists and

intellectuals, who might have been expected to know better.

Physicists, forensic experts, a blood-analysis specialist, a chemist, an expert in early textiles, head of a radiological laboratory, an art expert, historians, and a television team, all converged on the Cathedral of Turin in 1973 to bring their expertise to bear on bolstering the credibility of the shroud. Five years later, perfectly timed to boost the 400th-anniversary celebrations this autumn of the cloth's arrival in Turin, a book about it—*The Turin Shroud* by Ian Wilson—is being published this month by Victor Gollancz Ltd, and a film about it, *The Silent Witness*, has had eleven showings a day for five weeks at the Piccadilly Hotel Cinema. (In spite of some horrible torture scenes, the film was not given an X certificate, and many parents took their children to see it.)

Half-truths

For the sake of *Freethinker* readers, I have ploughed through the book and sat through the film. The genre of both might be described as science-fiction posing as fact—associated, for instance, with the name Von Däniken. Millions of apparently reasonable people will swallow the most incredible hypotheses if these are supported by pundits presenting half-truths couched in scientific jargon. This book and this film have pundits, half-truths, and jargon galore.

The day before the film opened—with obvious significance, Easter Sunday—a reputable newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, devoted most of its colour supplement to "Christianity's most controversial relic", and, since the author of the article was none other than the author of the book, it consisted of the same special pleading, though in mercifully smaller compass. Two weeks later, the Religious Affairs Correspondent of *The Times*, no less, devoted the whole of his weekly article to an equally mystical assessment of "the most curious object in the world".

Meanwhile, the question about the shroud predictably cropped up on the radio programme "Any Questions?" The complementary programme "Any Answers?" included a letter from me in which I pointed out that, while it would be impossible to devise any scientific test that could conclusively prove the Turin cloth to have been the burial shroud of a particular person, there were tests which, if carried out, could prove it to be a fake—and the most relevant of these was radio-carbon dating (such as was carried out on the Piltdown Skull a quarter-of-a-century ago), which could establish within 50 years or so, when the flax was grown

from which the linen was made. The late Archbishop of Turin steadfastly refused permission for this test to be carried out, ostensibly because it would entail the destruction of too large a fragment of the cloth. So refined has the carbon dating technique now become, however, that the fragments already removed for other tests would suffice for it, so the new Archbishop is left with no excuse to withstand the increasing demand (from believers and sceptics alike) to allow fragments of the shroud to be dated by the carbon 14 method, and it seems likely that this will be done during, or shortly after, the international "Shroud Congress" in Turin in October.

Radioactive Resurrection

As a result of my letter on "Any Answers?", I received a lengthy telephone call from an executive member of the British Society for the Turin Shroud, in the course of which I asked him how the members of his Society would react if carbon dating were carried out and it revealed that the material from which the shroud was made could not possibly have existed as long ago as the alleged lifetime of Jesus. "Oh", came the staggering reply, "we don't expect the date to come out right: you see, the Resurrection would entail a burst of radioactivity, which would nullify the tests completely." So they have their excuse ready in advance.

The article in *The Times* also prompted a letter to that paper from me and, to my knowledge, letters from several other freethinkers, but none were published, and I was told by the letters' editor that he did not want to start up a lot of correspondence on the subject. My abortive letter read as follows:

"How on earth can your Religious Affairs Correspondent claim (April 10) that, were the Shroud of Turin 'any other object from antiquity, the chances are very high that by now its authenticity would have been accepted beyond question'?"

"Having seen the film and read most of what has been published about the alleged relic, I am certain that no other object with an unbroken chronicled existence of only six or seven centuries would, without scientific dating, be accepted by educated people as being 2,000 years old, let alone as a particular legendary object.

"The nature of the image suggests that it was formed by the cloth's being placed over a corpse of a life-size figure of a man, and then subjected to scorching in some way. But it is a rather big jump from that conclusion to the pseudo-scientific hypothesis that the scorching was caused by the burst of radioactivity that 'might be expected' when a dead man suddenly rises from the dead! (What observations, I wonder, have been carried out on radioactive resurrections, and what data compiled on them?)

"When the linen was tested for the presence of blood and sweat, none was found: had there been some, this would no doubt have been hailed as evidence of its authenticity; as it was, the conclusion drawn was that the image must have been produced miraculously . . . The marks that appear to corroborate the scourging and the spear-thrust of tradition are taken as positive evidence: on the other hand, the marks that seem to indicate a cap (rather than the traditional circlet) of thorns, and the apparent nail wounds through the wrists (rather than the traditional palms of the hands), are taken as ruling out a medieval forgery, since the forger would naturally have kept more closely to tradition! (Heads I win, tails you lose.)

"In the film, the Los Angeles pathologist, Dr Robert Bucklin, says there seem to be abrasion marks on the shoulders, as though a heavy object had been carried on them, and an abrasion mark on the nose (or was it the knees?) as though caused by a fall: why not suppose a fall on the shoulders, and a heavy object carried on the nose? (Or knees?)

"The scientists guilty of such unfounded interpretations must have a strong emotional desire to believe in a miraculous resurrection—and, no doubt, by extension, to believe that they themselves, unlike the rest of nature, will live for ever.

"At one time there were many hundreds of objects venerated as the one true shroud of Jesus; but all the other shrouds were eventually eliminated in favour of this one. And still, in an age supposedly of science, it brings a lot of money into Turin, as well as lending spurious authenticity to the gospel story—but now with the connivance of a number of scientists who are prepared to betray science.

"'Belief in the shroud', writes Clifford Longley, 'requires only belief in the integrity of scientific method, not faith.' What it seems to require is a most unscientific faith in the integrity of scientists.

"I would not dispute Mr Longley's contention that 'Either the shroud is indeed the very wrapping in which Jesus's body was buried, or it is a stupendously clever fabrication meant to deceive'—but there have always been 'stupendously clever' forgers."

Clever photography

Since writing that letter, I have been wondering whether the 1931 photographer, the late Commander Giuseppe Enrie, was not even more "stupendously clever" than the anonymous medieval forger of the original image. After all, the amazingly detailed medical descriptions of the wounds depicted

in the image (e.g. "Each bled in a manner which corresponded to the nature of the injury"—Dr R. Bucklin; and "They have been caused by independent puncture wounds of the scalp"—Dr D. Willis) are based not upon examination of the impressionistic smudges on the cloth itself, but upon the far clearer photographs taken of the cloth, either in negative or positive.

There can be no doubt that the reverse image, as seen in photographic negative, has a far more realistic appearance—as was discovered by the first photographer of the relic, Secondo Pia, in 1898. But it needed more than that to revive the kind of medieval credulity we see today. The medicos could hardly have based a convincing diagnosis on the Pia photograph, as Ian Wilson describes it:

"Today the Pia negative, which caused such excitement, is rarely reproduced. It is of the whole cloth, with the face a mere detail, and by modern standards it is of poor quality and seems distorted by the cloth having been under glass at the time. It has been totally superseded by far more professional photographs taken in 1931 . . ."

Certainly, the vast improvement in photographic equipment during the 33 years from 1898 to 1931 would account for there being so much more clarity in the later photographs that they have "totally superseded" the earlier one. But why have photographic improvements in the next four decades not produced even better results, to supersede in turn those of 1931? In June 1969, there was another sequence of photographs taken (again with no covering glass between) by a young photographer, Giovanni Battista Judica-Cordiglia.

"Although he used more advanced photographic equipment", comments Ian Wilson, disparagingly, "his photographs turned out to be in many instances inferior to those taken by Enrie in 1931." That is an understatement—as can be seen by comparing the reproductions in the *Sunday Times* colour supplement: the sensational black-and-white photographs by Enrie alongside the blurred colour photographs by Cordiglia. The book itself does not provide any such comparisons, as—significantly enough—it uses only Enrie's photographs. But the best direct comparison can be made between a positive print of the back-of-body image photographed by Enrie which is reproduced only in the book, and a positive colour-print of the same image, photographed by Cordiglia, which is reproduced only in the colour supplement.

Some retouching?

Whereas the peripheral marks on the cloth—scorch-marks from the known fire incident of 1532 and earlier damage apparently made by a hot poker—are shown in such greater precision in the later photograph, the central image is much clearer in

the earlier one. What possible explanation for this can there be, other than some retouching of the Enrie photograph?

Although Ian Wilson can hardly have failed to notice this discrepancy, I can find no reference to it by him (or anyone else, for that matter) in all the irrelevant verbiage on the subject. And it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that there is an element of deliberate reticence, not only in his failing to raise this question but in the fact that the two prints have appeared only in different publications. (The editor of a colour supplement would doubtless make it a condition of publication that some, at least, of the illustrations should be in colour.)

Wilson describes Enrie as "a widely accredited professional photographer . . . who worked in the presence of some hundred scholars and other dignitaries, including the then septuagenarian Pia." And, later, referring to Enrie's best negative (which Enrie himself egotistically called "my perfect plate"), Wilson declares:

"There can be no question regarding the authenticity of the phenomenon reproduced on it. Among those who watched Enrie working was a specially appointed commission of expert photographers who checked every stage and issued a notarised statement that his work was free from any kind of retouching."

This somehow reminds me of all those earnest scientists who, having carried out observations of Mr Uri Geller at work, have declared that (though he was known as a clever entertainment magician in his youth in Israel, and has actually been caught using magicians' trickery during some of his supposedly "paranormal" feats) he could not possibly have fooled them. Educated people, especially those educated in the exact sciences, are often the easiest to fool. And it would most likely have been even easier for Giuseppe Enrie than for Uri Geller, since the "specially appointed commission of expert photographers" did not, presumably, keep him under observation day and night, in his bath and in his bed.

When a man is under observation to prevent him from cheating, he is all the more likely to do so if he can see how to get away with it. Besides, Enrie seems to have been motivated by a childish vanity. In Walsh's translation of his book *La Santa Sindone rivelata dalla fotografia*, Enrie describes what his sensational success meant to him in these words:

"I well remember as one of the most beautiful moments of my life, certainly the most moving of my career, the instant in which I submitted my perfect plate to the avid look of the Archbishop and that select whole group of people."

My theory is that Enrie secretly retouched his glass plates, and then made new high-contrast plates

(Continued on page 79)

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

Now for the good news. Religious Education (it sounds much cosier than the Religious Instruction of yore) has become a lost cause. That is the opinion of *ACE*, the quarterly journal of the Archbishops' Council on Evangelism. And in a London Weekend Television programme, *Credo*, a teacher at a Church of England School in central London, lamented that she knew of secondary schools where there were no RE teachers and no RE. Good for them.

ACE declares that RE should be supported where it is done well, "but it is past fighting for elsewhere if the Church is felt to be seeking privilege". The Church has never been squeamish about seeking privileges in the past, so it is unlikely to take much notice of *ACE's* delicate warning.

It has been evident for a long time that all is not well with Christianity in the classroom. Religion irritates teachers and bores pupils. The legal requirements of the 1944 Education Act concerning religious instruction and daily worship are unashamedly ignored in hundreds of schools throughout the country.

Such neglect of religious observance has become a matter of deep concern to Christian pressure groups like the Festival of Light and the Order of Christian Unity. Poor Mary Whitehouse got her knickers in such a twist about it that she launched a "Save Religious Education" campaign in addition to her other endeavours to save Christian civilisation as we know it.

Secularists who started the new campaign against school religion in 1964 have constantly warned against the danger of unjustified optimism. But we can at least be encouraged by increasing resistance from teachers and pupils to the religious clauses of the Education Act.

It appears that those who are concerned with children's education are rebelling against Christianity's statutory inclusion in the curriculum and the Church's privileged position within the education system. Many pupils, particularly those who are over 18 and legally adults, resent their inability to opt out of religious instruction and the act of worship; ratepayers and taxpayers are becoming less inclined to subsidise Church schools.

Of course Christians will not relinquish their privileges—legal, financial or educational—without a struggle. And they still have the law on their side on the question of school religion. Those head

teachers who sensibly ignore the religious requirements of the 1944 Education Act are legally and professionally compromising themselves. Vast sums of money are still being spent on segregated education. It is virtually impossible in many parts of the country for parents to send their children to non-Church schools. Until the end of the 1980s it is certain that whatever political party rules the roost at Westminster the top posts at the Department of Education and Science will be filled by Roman Catholics.

Any optimism about the demise of school religion should therefore be cautious and based on realities.

* * *

During the coming weeks opponents of censorship will be collecting signatures to a petition that has been launched by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law. The text of the petition is given below.

WE DEPLORE the Court of Criminal Appeal's decision to uphold the conviction for blasphemous libel of the Editor and publishers of Gay News. The Court's decision will encourage litigious and censorious persons to initiate legal proceedings for blasphemy or blasphemous libel. It is intolerable that such a threat should hang over writers, journalists, publishers, artists and commentators.

WE ARE CONCERNED that attempts may be made to extend blasphemy law to protect other forms of religion in addition to Christianity. Such an extension would encourage zealots of such faiths to exploit this obsolete law in the hope of involving unpopular, non-religious individuals and publications in heavy fines and costs. The Obscene Publications Act and the Public Order Act afford sufficient protection for the religious beliefs and convictions of citizens.

WE URGE the total abolition of blasphemy law.

CABL asks that petition forms, together with a covering letter, should be posted to the Home Secretary on 4 July—the first anniversary of the *Gay News* trial. The Committee hopes that organisations will also send letters and resolutions to the Home Secretary on the same date.

Petition forms are obtainable from the secretary of CABL, 32 Over Street, Brighton, Sussex.

* * *

Brighton was the scene of considerable activity in the early days of film-making in Britain. Pioneers who worked in the town include Adrian Brunel who later became one of the country's leading directors and, as older *Freethinker* readers will recall, an expert on the life and works of Thomas Paine. There is a plaque on number 20 Middle Street to commemorate the fact that William Friese-Greene, the inventor of cinematography, carried out his original experiments in the house.

So when the National Film Archive decided to
(Continued on back page)

VOLTAIRE

A meeting to commemorate the bi-centenary of his death to be held in the Library at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1 at 7.30 pm on Tuesday, 30 May, 1978.

SPEAKERS:

JAMES HEMMING (*President of the British Humanist Association*)

THE LIVING SPIRIT OF VOLTAIRE

BARBARA SMOKER (*President of the National Secular Society*)

VOLTAIRE VERBATIM

NICOLAS WALTER (*Editor of the New Humanist*)

VOLTAIRE IN HIS TIME

In the Chair: PETER CADOGAN (*General Secretary, South Place Ethical Society*)

Organised by the Humanist Liaison Committee

Voltaire was a campaigner and writer throughout the age of enlightenment. He was a man who took a vigorous part in the affairs of the world: his quarrels led him to the Bastille and to exile, and his stands against injustice became *causes célèbres* of the period. Above all he was a writer who attempted numerous forms of writing, pouring out works of history, philosophy, poetry and tales of much wit. *Candide* is an ironic tale, accepted as his literary masterpiece, in which he ridiculed religious fatalism with the famous phrase "All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds". As a friend (and enemy) of many leading writers, politicians and aristocrats, he left an enormous correspondence, which demonstrates the versatility of his thought and variety of his influence.

Technically a deist—he believed in a prime mover of the universe—he tirelessly attacked the church, assailing both the injustices which were perpetrated by clerical power, and the nonsenses which were sustained by theology and dogma. Well is he remembered for the phrase "Écrasez l'infâme". He is also well remembered for his pleas for tolerance and one of his most important essays was *A Treatise on Toleration*. This principle of fiercely preserving tolerance was perhaps his most enduring legacy to the humanist tradition.

The meeting on 30 May will cover his biography (Nicolas Walter), some aspects of his writing (Barbara Smoker) and the important question of how far his spirit is alive today (James Hemming).

NEWS

The following quotations illustrate aspects of Voltaire's thought. They are all taken from "The Portable Voltaire" edited by Ben Ray Redman, Penguin.

Liberty of the Press: In general, we have as natural a right to make use of our pens as of our tongue, at our peril, risk, and hazard. I know many books which have bored their readers, but I know of none which has done real evil. Theologians, or pretended politicians, cry: "Religion is destroyed, the government is lost, if you print certain truths or paradoxes. Never dare to think, till you have asked permission from a monk or a clerk. It is against the public welfare for a man to think for himself . . ."

The Ecclesiastical Ministry: The institution of religion exists only to keep mankind in order, and to make men merit the goodness of God by their virtue. Everything in a religion which does not tend towards this goal must be considered alien or dangerous.

Sect: Every sect, of every kind, is a rallying-point for doubt and error. Scotist, Thomist, Realist, Nominalist, Papist, Calvinist, Molinist, and Jansenist, are only pseudonyms.

Tolerance: What is tolerance? It is the natural attribute of humanity. We are all formed of weakness and error: let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly. That is the first law of nature.

It has been reported that the deep-frozen body of an 81-year-old woman was finally buried in Missouri after eight weeks and several attempts by her evangelist son to resurrect her. "I guess", he said "The Lord needed her to be with my father more than he wanted her to be with me".

HUMANIST HOUSING ASSOCIATION

An appeal has been launched to raise £2,005 to install a chairlift in Balmoral House. The house is a Humanist Housing Association project in Tunbridge Wells, designed to provide individual bed-sitting rooms and communal services for the elderly and infirm. A chairlift is vital to enable those who have difficulty with steps to use communal facilities. Donations should be sent to Friends of Humanist Housing Association, 311 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2TJ.

AND NOTES

BAN ON CONTRACEPTIVES TO END

For many years there have been attempts to change the absurd situation in the Republic of Ireland where contraceptives may be legally imported into the country but not sold. Now the Irish bishops stand as fiercely against progress as Cerberus guarding the gates of hell and their fury at the thought of extra-marital pleasure (even of marital love, if not linked to procreation) rivals the force of the Eumenides. But they are in the embarrassing (for them) process of changing tack and it involves getting their Jesuitical knickers, so to speak, in a stupendous twist.

They have affirmed their opposition to birth control as a moral outlook, but it now seems they have never opposed any State sanction of contraception. They maintain as strongly as ever that "artificial contraception is morally wrong, and no change in State law can make the use of contraceptives morally right . . ." But emerging on the horizon is a godsend of a let-out clause, for the bishops have added that there are many things which the church holds to be morally wrong which it had never suggested should be prohibited by the State.

As the arguments are brewed in preparation for a bow to the inevitable, the Catholic bishops are making it clear that *if* the inevitable happens—not that they have ever been against the inevitable after all—the inevitable would best be accompanied by narrow guide-lines. If the ban should just happen to be lifted, contraception should be limited to a married couple, distribution and advertising should be strictly limited, and certain methods such as the intra-uterine device should be banned completely. No doubt the day when a woman may exercise the simple right of easily controlling the size of her family will still not come easily to Eire.

CHEERFUL END

The architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, who spent his life designing buildings to give pleasure, wanted his death to bring pleasure, too. He hoped that some of his ashes might be sent up in a firework rocket.

Sir Clough, renowned for the creation of a village in Portmeirion, North Wales, styled on the Italian renaissance, was a strong atheist. After his death at the age of 94, it was stated that he had made it clear that he wanted no funeral service. His body

should be "fast sent off to the handiest crematorium in a truck or Portmeirion van" he wrote. The best use for his ashes he had suggested would be "to fertilise the crematorium garden".

He had also indicated that some ashes might be returned "in a tobacco tin and incorporated in the next following big rocket to be let off in a Portmeirion fiesta". "I would like to think", he added "that there would be cheers and handwaving and shouts of goodbye when they go up—and no more."

To comply with his wishes to "make my exit with the minimum of fuss and bother" no memorial services were held and cremation arrangements were kept secret.

MAYOR'S END

Mr Theo Whalley has been banned as mayor of Haverfordwest, Dyfed, only a month after he was elected. He has been reported as saying that, as an atheist, he would refuse to appoint a mayor's chaplain during his year of office.

In a spirit of toleration Mr Whalley said he would "hold a mayor's Sunday service and would also attend the Remembrance Day Service and the Battle of Britain Sunday". The council, however, voted by eleven to one to replace him. The one vote against was that of Mr Whalley himself. "The general consensus", he said "was that they felt it would be embarrassing for people to have to meet me . . . But I've been an atheist for 30 years." He made it clear that he thought it would have been hypocritical for him to appoint a mayor's chaplain.

BISHOP IS THE END!

What a nerve! Churchman, Dr Graham Leonard, Bishop of Truro, has criticised the private life of Princess Margaret. Ever swift to pry and offer prurient condemnation, churchmen—with a 2,000 year record of hypocrisy and a far from unblemished line of clerical lives—would do well to look to their own house. Didn't someone once say something about not judging, that ye be not judged? Quick to defend Princess Margaret was Dr Mervyn Stockwood, showing, as ever, that the church speaks with many tongues.

Republican readers who would oppose members of the royal family being given any rights that the ordinary citizen does not possess, would at least allow them the ordinary right of a private life free from the censorious eye of the church.

A recent edition of "Children", magazine of the National Children's Home, has the following surprising information: "In Essex, three charming courtesans (sic) . . . represented their Brownie Pack at the Harlow Festival."

MARIE STOPES by Ruth Hall. André Deutsch, £5.95.

Two and a half centuries ago, Jonathan Swift said in *Gulliver's Travels* that "whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together". The same could be said of whoever could make only one baby to be born where two were born before, and the people who have campaigned for contraception during the past century and a half have perhaps been the greatest benefactors of our species. We may be proud that nearly all these people have belonged to the free-thought movement—what Mary Whitehouse calls the "humanist-contraceptive lobby"—but there is one important exception, who was also the most influential of all the campaigners for contraception: Marie Stopes.

The life of Marie Stopes is hardly obscure. One biography was written by her friend Aylmer Maude while she was alive, and another by her friend Keith Bryant soon after she died; there is also a useful elementary book by her son Harry Stopes-Roe, and a useful chapter on her in Peter Fryer's book *The Birth Controllers*. Ruth Hall has now written a fashionable journalistic biography which claims to tell "the truth about Marie Stopes" because it says more about her private life than before, but it actually tells less of the important truth about her than before.

The trouble is that, like most people who get things done, Marie Stopes was a pretty crazy and cranky person, and there is a great temptation to poke fun at her. Ruth Hall doesn't resist this temptation, and the result is disappointing, though certainly entertaining. It is an extraordinary story. Marie Stopes was a late developer in her teens, but became a brilliant scientist in her twenties. If she had died in her thirties, she would be remembered for her work in palaeobotany (the study of fossil plants). But after several unhappy and unconsummated affairs she made an unhappy and unconsummated marriage, and at the age of 35 she got it annulled. Then, still apparently a virgin, she wrote one of the most sensible and successful books on sex ever published.

Married Love appeared in 1918, partly financed by Humphrey Roe, whom she married a few months later. He was interested in "birth control", the phrase coined in 1914 by the American campaigner Margaret Sanger, whom Marie Stopes had met in London in 1915. *Married Love* said little about contraception, so at the end of 1918 — still almost inexperienced in sex — she filled the gap with a

FREETHINKER

sequel, *Wise Parenthood*, and for the next forty years of her life enjoyed fame as the best-known campaigner for birth control in the country and the world. In 1921 she opened the first birth control clinic in Britain (Margaret Sanger did so in New York in 1916, and Aletta Jacobs had done so in Amsterdam back in 1882), which was followed later in the same year by the Malthusian League.

Here we come to an aspect of Marie Stopes which is neglected by Ruth Hall — her relationship to the general contraception movement in Britain. This had been founded in the 1820s by militant freethinkers as part of a wider radical programme. The Malthusian League was first formed by Charles Bradlaugh in 1861, and it was revived at the time of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial in 1877. But it was only a propaganda organisation, and actual contraception information and apparatus had to be supplied by individuals. Marie Stopes's great achievement was to unite propaganda and practice, as Margaret Sanger had in the United States, and as the contraception movement has done ever since. But she always insisted that her work was essentially different from that of her predecessors and competitors, and it should indeed be remembered that it had an explicit religious basis. One of the strangest of her many strange works is *A New Gospel to All Peoples*, which was circulated to the Anglican Bishops in 1920 and published in 1922, preaching artificial contraception as a divine command. More prosaically, she called her work "constructive birth control" to distinguish it from anything else, and she always maintained a sectarian attitude to everything else.

It is a pity that Ruth Hall almost completely ignores the reaction of the established movement. Thus, when Marie Stopes opened her London clinic in March 1921, she made a public statement about "the very essential difference between my message and that of Bradlaugh and Besant. They were fundamentally Freethinkers and Atheists . . . My message, on the other hand, is in the name of God, and is delivered as an extension of Christ's own teaching, specially applicable to the needs of the present community and rendered possible by recent advances in knowledge." She added some sneers at the technical methods and social reforms advocated by her predecessors. Chapman Cohen, president of the National Secular Society, replied in *The Freethinker*, pointing out that it was her predecessors who had made her work possible:

To put the matter briefly, Dr Stopes is doing in safety what Bradlaugh and Besant did at the risk

REVIEWS

of imprisonment and in the face of persecution. She is doing this because of what they did, and she thanks them by publicly dissociating herself from them and their work. (17 April 1921)

A few months later she made a public statement distinguishing "between Malthusianism and simple constructive birth control" and condemning the way people "erroneously associated birth control with Atheism". This time Robert S. Pengelly, a director of the Rationalist Press Association, replied in the *Literary Guide*, describing her as "a talented lady who has been advocating 'birth control' so actively that she is inclined to suppose that she is the inventor of it", and repeating that most advocates of contraception had been freethinkers:

What we particularly miss from Dr Marie Stopes's observations, on this and on other occasions, is any recognition that if it were not for the fact that the despised Atheists, Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, faced imprisonment, misrepresentation, insult, and ostracism for this cause 44 years ago, she would not be able to conduct her campaign today. . . . It would become Dr Marie Stopes if she showed some realisation of the gratitude due to the man and woman who by their self-sacrifice enabled others to go forward. (November 1921)

And *The Malthusian* often had to correct her historical mistakes and misunderstandings.

It is also a pity that Ruth Hall confirms Marie Stopes's false position by repeating her false claim that contraceptive propaganda was never illegal in Britain. In fact it was automatically interpreted as being obscene in a series of cases over a whole century—from the trial of John Stuart Mill for distributing Francis Place's handbills in 1823, to the trial of Guy Aldred and Rose Witcop for republishing Margaret Sanger's *Family Limitation* in 1923. It ceased to be obscene not because of any change in the law but because of a change in public opinion, which both helped and was helped by Marie Stopes's own work. (It is worth remembering that *Married Love* was itself found obscene in the United States in 1921.)

Above all it is a pity that Ruth Hall says so much about Marie Stopes's private life and so little about her public life — about the actual sexual and contraceptive techniques she taught, the detailed arrangements for organising the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress and for publishing *Birth Control News*, about her attitudes to eugenics and feminism, indeed about what makes

her worth writing a book about. Instead there are patronising descriptions of her dotty politics, her sex life, her quarrels with everyone, and her illnesses, and silly remarks claiming that she was "the central figure in that social revolution by which men, but more particularly women, were freed from the miseries of sexual ignorance and haphazard reproduction" or that "compared with her initial struggles, the activities of the women's liberation movement over the last decade appear in retrospect as mere mopping-up operations after a major battle".

The real problem is that it is still too early to decide the place of Marie Stopes in the movement for sexual liberty, equality and fraternity. She died only twenty years ago, and is still a living presence to many people. I find most of her ideas absurd, but I feel strong personal links with her. My grandmother got a degree at her college; my mother and my wife both attended her clinic; my daughters go to her school; I saw her once, very near her death, debating against a Roman Catholic priest in the Oxford Union. So I enjoyed reading this book, but I don't like it. Perhaps the saddest thing about it is that it will prevent a better one being written about Marie Stopes for some time; but in the end she will get the biographer she deserves.

NICOLAS WALTER

HOUSESPY by Maureen Duffy. Hamish Hamilton, £4.50

I've reviewed Maureen Duffy so often in *The Freethinker* that I think I must rank as her common law reviewer, as it were. And I begin with this bizarre remark because I want to say, at the outset, how various she is as a writer, and how constant. Looking back, I remember *The Love Child* as a . . . yes, most memorable, and pictorially brilliant, exploration of sexual ambivalence. A *tour de force*: you're never sure if the hero is the hero, or the heroine. (And I put it that way round, obviously, because I'm conditioned to think I'm mainly a hero, myself). And though *The Love Child* is splendid as a literary amazement, it is not shallowly amazing: as, I think, much novel-making is, and perhaps always has been. There is a very great deal of heart in it. The novel celebrates very seriously our universal sexual uncertainty.

Then there was *Capital*: again, a novel marked by imaginative brilliance. I was startling someone recently by telling him how Maureen Duffy has her Stone Age Britons walking up Piccadilly, on a day when, as I remember, they finished at Heathrow Airport. All the author had done was to give an account of a journey 3,000 years old in terms of the topography of the present: but it was stunning. But again, alongside the various brilliances of *Capital*, there was heart. I mean, there was a deep love

of London, and of England, and of English obstinacies and vulnerabilities. Then came *The Passionate Shepherdess*, her recent account of that neglected writer, Aphra Behn. Here was Miss Duffy, the assiduous and successful literary investigator, collecting bones and fitting them together, and being scholarly and cocking a snook or two at the traditional forms of scholarship, and being brilliant at the same time that she was being plainly sensible and most seriously involved with the idea of Aphra Behn as a suffering creature engaged, in awkward circumstances, in using her talents to make a living.

A long approach, I realise, to this new novel. But a pleasure of reviewing in *The Freethinker* is that one may hang about in the garden before knocking at the front door. Here, when one does knock, is a spy story with various characteristic differences. Scully is a top London policeman given the job of guarding a Cabinet minister, who's planning to nationalise the banks, and his American wife. Scully (curiously a Graham Greene-ish name?) is gently tough: has an adored daughter: has always been an awkward copper: is well-read, perfectly able to pick up an allusion, and romantically sensitive. He is the instrument of a secret service that, embodied in Maureen Duffy's Sir John Harpisson, is cruel, nasty in a very English fashion, malevolently worried. (Scully being summoned into Sir John's presence at the opening of the novel reminded me of being mysteriously called to the prefects' room of the grammar school I attended in the 1930s. What the prefects really wanted to say was that I was obviously a hoick from the town, and they foresaw problems in the matter of transforming me into one of them. I mean, that's the English prefectorial quality of Sir John's nastiness. Perhaps it's because of the nature of spying that so much in our spy stories has this resemblance to behaviour in playgrounds and classrooms.) The minister is thinly created, I think: he is, perhaps, a sort of Wedgwood Benn. It's the wife in whom, I feel, the author has a greater interest. In some odd way, one sees at once, she's more awfully vulnerable than any Cabinet minister's wife should be. In Europe, where they go for ministerial reasons—and in America, where Scully goes for vital investigative reasons—the plot closes round the beautiful, politically frail, figure of Danny Oldfield, the wife. Scully, armed on the whole with English poetry, but also with the plausible immunity that heroes of such fiction need, tries to ward off the horrid blows aimed at Danny: they come from her own past, but also from dim and probably contradictory quarters of the political present. But you feel that, for all his policeman's skill and poetry-reader's quickness of insight, he's at a disadvantage viz-a-viz both Europeans (I mean, continental Europeans) and Americans. Whatever game they are playing—and it's never

in the least clear what that is—it starts from a completely different philosophical position . . .

Let me say that *Housespy* is, as to its surface, a most satisfactorily exciting piece of story-telling. I come back to where I began, in this examination of Maureen Duffy's gift. She is a good storyteller: but I suspect that what matters to her as much as her narrative skills are the ideas that live like totally legitimate parasites in the guts of the story. What *Housespy* is about, I think, is an essential subject of all Miss Duffy's work. It's about England. Scully is the English knight—faced, in the persons of his vaguely outlined minister, and his far more firmly imagined minister's wife, with twentieth century challenges that might have thrown, at first, the knightly figures of *The Faerie Queene* . . . and then would have been recognised by them as totally familiar. Scully represents England, having to bring its traditional ironical gallantries to bear on the existence of some of the most elaborate dragons in history. Danny Oldfield looks at all that from outside, but as one who's been for a while inside, when she tells Scully: "One of the things I'll both miss and be glad to be rid of is the horrible love-hate you all feel for yourselves and everything to do with you."

Housespy, I suspect, is the work of a radical patriot: a modernist who happens to regard the English awareness of the world, especially as manifested in the long sweep of its literature, as a living sensitivity with which it is positively exciting to identify oneself.

Well, there's an odd conclusion to reach in *The Freethinker*? I think not. In the intellectual economy of the world, who with an ounce of sense would belittle the contribution of the English radical . . . whose imagination goes back to, and beyond, the Stone Age man enduring bad weather on the perimeter of Heathrow Airport? Has, I mean, a sense of historical distance, of a long stretch of recorded experience.

I guess that (a drawback of reviewing for *The Freethinker*) I may have overstressed the ideas, at the expense of the narrative. Let me say again, then, that as a spy story, *Housespy* is most satisfactorily exciting, and cunningly written.

EDWARD BLISHEN

THE CROSS AND THE SICKLE by Mervyn Stockwood.
Sheldon Press, £2.95.

Mervyn Stockwood is certainly a man of contradictions. As the Bishop of Southwark in the conservative Church of England, he is entitled to sit in the House of Lords, which is in general an instrument of reaction. On the other hand he is a radical campaigning bishop and led the Christian contingent on the recent march against racism in Lewisham.

Another of his contradictions is contained in the

title of this book, which tries to reconcile Christianity with Marxism. For me these two philosophies are diametrically as well as dialectically opposed. Marxism is, as Stockwood rightly points out, a materialistic view of life, whereas Christianity is concerned with the idea of a holy trinity and life after death. He accepts the Genesis theory of creation as a symbolic truth, which is a euphemism for saying it is a piece of fiction. He points out that in the bible Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah spoke out against injustice and the wealth of the privileged classes, but it was more a case of their religious views not being accepted by the ruling oligarchies. This is evident today, when many Christians are all too keen to pipe up against the injustices in the Eastern bloc, while all too few take a strong line against apartheid since South Africa is a Christian country.

In any case, if the book of Ezekiel is regarded by Stockwood as presenting an ideal against injustice and oppression, he would do well to read chapter 23 again.

Of course there are Christians in the world, in particular in the South American continent, who profess to be Marxists at the same time. It is claimed by some Catholic priests that the concept of liberation is common to both Marxism and Christianity. They claim that Jesus was always the champion of the poor and oppressed peoples and in the incident where he turned over the tables in the temple he was prepared to put his words into action. On the other hand he was prepared to condone slavery and to accept the status quo of Palestine when he said "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's".

Probably because of its briefness, this book cannot hope to deal with all the issues raised in this conflict of ideologies and there are far too many sweeping generalisations and things left unexplained. I note that on several occasions there is a reference to a divine image which leaves me to ponder why all people look different and people who call religion superstitious bunk are summarily dismissed as those who "speak without knowledge". Stockwood claims that the world's resources are a gift from God, so does this maxim apply to other natural phenomena on earth like volcanic eruptions and tidal waves for instance?

In short this book fails to reconcile Marxism and Christianity. In fact I don't think that the bishop knows that much about Marxists as he says that its adherents identify themselves with the Communist Party. I doubt if members of the Socialist Workers or the Workers Revolutionary Party would agree with that. To accept both the "broad outline" of Christianity and Marxism is a contradiction in terms. This is a muddled book from a muddled Christian.

KEN WRIGHT

MEDIA

In a television series *Cross Question* Clive James, the television and literary critic, asked Gore Vidal, the American novelist and essayist, "Was Christianity necessary?" Neither of them appeared to put much energy or wit into the debate, but a few interesting points about the development of Christianity emerged. Both were arguing from an atheist standpoint, but Clive James questioned Gore Vidal's view that Christianity was nothing but a disaster for Western Europe—"Christianity was a curse upon the West". Gore Vidal described Christianity as a death cult with the obscene idea of worshipping a man tortured on the cross.

A future programme in this series will show Nicolas Walter, editor of the *New Humanist*, questioning St John Stevas on the topic of RE (Sunday 14 May).

LETTERS

HUMANIST ACTION

If Freethought stands for anything politically, it must be for the toleration of all viewpoints except the intolerant. So Terry Liddle and Bill Comrie (Letters, "The Freethinker", April) are both right.

The problem is, how to secure effective humanist political action in a climate which is at once largely indifferentist and increasingly intolerant? Most people nowadays aren't positive religious believers, but they hedge their bets just in case there is a Big Daddy in the Sky after all—and they let the more fanatical of His followers get away with blue murder: witness the political muscle currently pulled by tiny, unrepresentative groups such as the Whitehouse/Festival of Light lot, who trade upon peoples' guilt feelings and a craving for "respectability".

To preach the Humanist doctrine of full acceptance of personal responsibility for one's own life at a time when more and more people seem unwilling to face up to the consequences of their behaviour will be an unenviable task and quite possibly one with few immediate dividends. But it may well be vital for the survival of democracy in this country, and so I hope that Bill Comrie's suggestion will be taken up and acted upon. Only then will Humanists in public life be seen to have a good deal more ethical principle than most of their Christian critics.

ANTONY GREY

REGRETS

There is no use crying over spilt milk: but I do very much regret not having signed Bill McIlroy's letter of protest against the law of blasphemy. His invitation arrived at a period of pressure for me, and I put it on one side to ring him about it; and when I rang he was out. I should have left a clear message. I wanted to ask Bill whether the letter could be re-recorded somewhat, because it seemed to me that it was not as good as the original statement of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law. I would have been more persistent if I had realised the importance this letter would assume.

Incidentally, it is a pity Bill did not ask other people from the BHA as well: e.g. Kenneth Furness (General Secretary) and John White (Chairman, Educa-

(ion Committee). I mention this in case anyone thinks they did not sign because they too were inefficient—or worse, that they were against it. We are all very much in favour!

HARRY STOPES-ROE, BHA Chairman

DISGUSTED

I am disgusted by the support which "The Free-thinker" has given to the defence of Denis Lemon, the Editor of "Gay News", and of Thorsen, the Dane who was refused entry to England at a time when he was talking of making a film of the sex life (imaginary) of Jesus.

My quarrel is with the various churches who have exploited the reputation of this great philosopher Jesus, who tried to improve the old Jewish concept and who paid for it with his life, as indeed did Socrates. Can we humanists retain the great ethical concept of human relationships which Jesus advocated and reject the dross of dogma or deism, which have accumulated since his death?

G. A. MAWSER

HARMFUL MEDICINE

I was greatly tickled by the Hugo-quoting letter in your April issue from my fellow Scottish nationalist and sceptic, Bill Comrie.

Equally, it is true as when Molière wrote it that "Presque tous les hommes meurent de leur remèdes et non de leurs maladies".

J. A. S. NISBET

FICTION AND SCIENCE

I am not the least surprised that secularists and fundamentalists are united in their rejection of Von Däniken's outlook (G. Webster, "The Freethinker", March). I would be surprised if they were not united in thinking that the moon is not made of cheese. UFO's might exist; against all the NASA evidence the moon might be made of cheese; mankind might be the result of extraterrestrial genetic experiments. Will Mr Webster condemn me for being dogmatic if I say that all these are extremely unlikely? I cannot say that their probabilities are exactly zero, simply because it is very difficult to prove a negative.

What really intrigues me is why anybody should choose to believe such ridiculous suggestions: what is the psychology of a person who prefers to believe that odd lights in the sky are the work of BEMFOS (bug eyed monsters from outerspace) rather than a pint too much beer or a slight migraine, or simply saying "how odd—yet another little item in this remarkable world we do not understand yet".

Incidentally, I am addicted to SF and used to read ghost stories too, but unlike some people I can tell the difference between a good yarn and a piece of scientific research: I thoroughly enjoyed "Star Wars" and want to see "Close Encounters of the Third Kind". I am sure it will be great fun but do not ask me to take it seriously, please.

P. L. LANCASTER

Obscenity and Film Censorship

would be offended by the public display of such material.

It therefore feels that there is a case for some legal control over public displays, and for shops selling material likely to be offensive to some people to be clearly marked so that those likely to be offended can avoid this discomfort. (On the same principle films likely to give offence to some people

are better shown in private cinema clubs, where those who wish to join can do so. There should be no harassment of such private cinemas, which cause no harm if those who dislike their films need not see them.)

One other limit on freedom of expression needs a little more attention: the availability of material to children. It is widely accepted that there is some need for protection of children from material likely to be upsetting to them. The age at which material should be available to children and adolescents will vary from period to period. At present the age of consent for sexual intercourse is 16 (with the curious and regrettable exception of homosexuality). This would be a reasonable age at present for adolescents to be allowed to come into contact with all adult material including films.

There is some concern at present with pornography which depicts children. This should be dealt with not by censorship but by employment laws, and if there is evidence of physical exploitation, by the laws which exist to prevent this. On the same lines that laws exist to prevent children from being exploited to clean chimneys—which would probably be more harmful than being photographed.

A further argument against censorship is that it leads to a black market, and the accompanying criminal sub-culture which has been seen in the past to arise with black markets. It is also clear, as has been seen, that police corruption is much more likely in cases of victimless crime, where many feel that it is a matter of opinion whether the activity is criminal.

There is as yet no strong evidence to suggest that violent material once seen produces violent behaviour. In occasional incidents a screen depiction seems to have acted as a catalyst for violent behaviour. But it seems likely that the violence might have taken place in some form or another anyway. Even if it could be shown that there was a direct relationship between violent action on the screen and in the street, it would have to be asked: is censorship the best way to deal with this? For what are the roots of an individual's violence in society? Are they not an insecure childhood leading to feelings of impotence and frustration, and a society which presents very real frustrations and injustices for some groups of people? In this case, the answer to the problem lies not in censorship, but in better upbringing and education, and efforts to tackle the causes of injustice and frustration.

By what right, the National Secular Society asks, does one adult decide what another adult should be allowed to see? The secularist would look towards a society where as many adults as possible feel they have autonomy and control over their own lives, rather than one where people are protected by censorship.

from them—after which, he would have destroyed the originals. If I am right, he was a twentieth-century accessory-after-the-fact to a medieval forger!

Of course, I cannot produce conclusive proof to substantiate the theory; I merely say that to my mind it seems more probable than the main alternative “scientific” theory: that, nearly two thousand years ago, a man who had been dead and buried from a Friday afternoon till Sunday morning (usually counted as the prophesied three days . . .) suddenly jumped to his feet, with a burst of nuclear energy, leaving a radioactive imprint of his body on the linen sheet that had covered it—and that that same sheet turned up in France some 14 centuries later, after a lengthy Mediterranean tour, plausibly traced by Ian Wilson.

To be fair, many churchmen and theologians are sceptical about the origins of the “shroud” and have warned their flocks against basing their faith on a mere material object. Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants are mostly at one on this—though the RCs are, as ever, trying to have it both ways, by publicising alleged cures vouchsafed to Holy Shroud pilgrims, whilst stressing that whether the shroud is genuine or not, the essence of its veneration by the pilgrim is “spiritual”.

However, one piece of medical evidence cited by Ian Wilson does raise a rather awkward question for Catholics. This is the factual evidence that the body weight of a crucified man could not be held by nails driven through the palms of the hands, but only through the wrists. While this is good news for the shroud promoters—since they are able to claim that it could not have been known by a medieval forger, and yet the apparent wounds left by the nails are shown on the shroud at the wrists—it is not so good for belief in stigmata. There is a long, entrenched tradition in the RC Church that certain saints are impressed with facsimiles of the wounds of Jesus, as (in the pious view) a divine favour. The fact that miraculously impressed facsimile wounds in the palms are incompatible with the new wrist theory prompted me to write a letter to the RC papers, asking:

“What, then, is the revised Catholic view of the stigmata of Francis of Assisi and all the other revered stigmatists (some within living memory) who ‘miraculously’ received wounds in the wrong place?

“Freethinkers have always put the phenomenon of stigmata down to medical hysteria and/or fraud. Catholics must surely now agree with us.”

Ironically enough, however, acceptance of the shroud as a genuine relic has been more wholehearted among some of the supposed “progressive” Anglicans than among Catholics—possibly because

Anglicans have less experience of this sort of thing. The most notable of these gullible “progressives” is Dr John Robinson (of *Honest to God* fame), who is not only cited in the Wilson book and in the *Sunday Times Magazine* as a convert to belief in the authenticity of the shroud, but who also appears in the film, where he has the gall to state that the evidence for the cloth’s being the genuine Jesus shroud is so overwhelming that “the burden of proof” has now shifted to the sceptic.

But what constitutes “proof”? If the “proofs” put forward by Ian Wilson are anything to go by, any interpretation, however far-fetched, is admissible in support of the shroud, and will be accepted without critical analysis by people who ought to know better. If further examination of the shroud were to reveal some Roman numerals in one corner, they would surely be assumed, without question, to be Joseph of Arimathea’s laundry-mark.

CAMPAIGN FOR REASON

A statement has been published to combat prejudice against homosexuals “to counter the backlash recently emerging among small but determined groups, who cling to prejudice and ignorance”. It has been produced by “Campaign for Reason” and is signed by 174 sponsors, from a wide spectrum of public figures including religious and political spokesmen, writers and philosophers. Among well-known humanists who have signed the statement are Professor Anthony Flew, H. J. Blackham, the Rt Hon Lord Brockway, Dr James Hemming, Barbara Smoker and Nicolas Walter.

The statement, entitled *Towards a Charter of Homosexual Rights*, begins with the belief that “fear or hatred of homosexuals is a social evil . . .” and continues by pointing out that it is a social evil which could be eliminated. The signatories believe that “the basic need for homosexuals is to be able to accept themselves with dignity, and then follow their own moral and spiritual lights”.

It is hoped that the leaflet will be widely sent to MPs, local councils, trade unions, counsellors etc.

A list of quotations following the statement begins with the words of Thomas Paine: “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must like men undergo the fatigue of supporting it.”

Towards a Charter of Homosexual Rights, c/o 2 Radcliffe Avenue, London NW10 (35p).

On Tuesday 9 May from 7 pm to 9 pm a meeting to which all interested humanists are invited will be held at the British Humanist Association, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8. The purpose of the meeting will be to prepare, possibly in leaflet form, a statement outlining a humanist attitude to the subject of homosexuality.

Jottings

organise a festival of films made during the first decade of the century, it was most appropriate that Brighton Film Theatre was chosen as the venue. But they did not reckon on the prodnoses who are responsible for vetting films before they are shown in local cinemas.

The festival was to include 200 films, over 40 of them made in Brighton, but as the town hall censors did not have time to see them all they decreed that the public could not see them either. Councillor Mrs Jackie Moran, a Conservative lady, said that the viewing committee must control films in order to "safeguard the youth of the town."

What moral dangers have Councillor Moran and her colleagues prevented the youth of Brighton being exposed to? Well for a start there is *Victorian Lady in Her Boudoir*, made in 1900 when Queen Victoria was still on the throne. And if youthful passions were still in check after the aforementioned Victorian lady had stripped down to her bloomers and corsets, they certainly could not withstand the eroticism of *Grandma's Reading Glass*, *Attack on a China Mission* and a documentary on the work of Hove fire brigade.

It is reassuring to know that our present civic leaders are following in the footsteps of those noble souls who strove to preserve moral standards by petitioning against mixed bathing in the sea at Brighton. But it would be unjust to accuse the Council of being inflexible on matters of importance. For instance, the times of committee meetings are altered so that Freemasons can attend lodge functions. The Lands Sub-Committee recently brought its meeting forward 90 minutes to accommodate the Masonic fraternity.

The majority of Brighton town councillors have a sense of priorities—if you are a Freemason or a supporter of film censorship.

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. Work of the Samaritans (Speaker from Samaritan district branch). Sunday, 4 June, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Vegetarianism (Speaker from Leeds Vegetarian Society). Tuesday, 9 May, 7.45 pm. Education Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Tony Milne: Is the Criminal to Blame? Thursday, 25 May, 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. The Decline and Fall of Industrial Revolution Man: Professor Richard Scorer. Sunday, 21 May. Future Fossil Fuels (BP film) and discussion on nuclear waste. Sunday, 4 June. Both meetings 7.30 pm. 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Blasphemy law—a discussion. Wednesday, 17 May, 7.45 pm. 248 Woodchurch Road, Birkenhead. Further information from Ann Coombes, 248, Woodchurch Road, Birkenhead (051-608 3835) or Marion Clowes, 26 Speedwell Drive, Heswall, Wirral (051-342 2562).

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1. Sunday morning meetings, 11 am. 7 May Tony Ashenden: Body and Mind. 14 May Prof Henryk Skolimowski: Culture as Healer. 21 May, Maurice Clementz: French Ideas after 1968. 4 June, W. H. Liddel: The Inspiration of Joan of Arc. Tuesday discussion, 7.00 pm. 2 May, Jim Herrick: Brecht and Becket: The Artist and Society. 9 May, John Tyme: Motorways versus Democracy. 16 May, Avro Manhattan: Zionism, Protestantism, Catholicism. 23 May, Victor Serebriakoff: Why We Need Elites. 30 May: VOLTAIRE 200th ANNIVERSARY MEETING (jointly with RPA, NSS and BHA) see p.72.

Tyneside Humanist Society. John Gowland: Glimpses at Local History, May 10. A. C. Hobson: Return to the Myth, May 17. E. Doreen Cox: Unlocked Doors and Open Minds, May 24. All meetings 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. AGM, 12 May, 7.30 pm, Friends' Meeting House, Page Street, Swansea. Peter Cadogan: Bertrand Russell, 26 May, 7.30 pm, Royal Institution, S'sea.

THE FREETHINKER

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