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ANTI-ABORTION CAMPAIGNER CHARGED WITH BREAKING ELECTORAL LAW

The director of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, Mrs Phyllis Bowman, has been charged under electoral law with illegal practices. The Director of Public Prosecutions has issued a summons against the society for its activities leading up to the parliamentary by-election in Ilford North in March.

SPUC is known for its vigorous campaigns against abortion. It embarked upon full-scale leafleting, at the time of the Glasgow Garscadden by-election, to inform electors of the candidates' attitude to abortion. (See *The Freethinker*, June 1978.) A similar and previous campaign at Ilford North made it clear that the Conservative was the only candidate against abortion. Plans to issue leaflets in the Manchester Moss Side by-election were not pursued after a warning from the Director of Public Prosecutions that prosecution was pending after SPUC's activities at Ilford North.

The charge is being brought following a complaint from the Labour Party election agent in Ilford North. The summons states that Mrs Bowman, as a principal of SPUC, "not being a candidate or election agent and without the authorisation in writing of an election agent did incur the expense of issuing publications with a view to promoting or procuring the election of a candidate at a parliamentary by-election . . ." Electoral expenses are governed by the Representations of the People Act 1949, which set limits on expenditure to persuade people to vote for candidates. The society claims to be politically neutral and says that the 35,000 leaflets distributed in Ilford did not urge the voters to choose any particular candidate. The case comes up at Redbridge Magistrates Court on September 13.

A report in the *Catholic Herald* says that the Knights of St Columba have pulled out of a secret plan to provide financial support for the defence of SPUC. The Knights of St Columba are a fraternal

order of Catholic men (strange how male groups are so eager to restrict choices for women). The order had sent a circular to its branches asking for donations to be sent to SPUC, but these were quickly withdrawn because they did not wish to be politically involved. The Knights made it clear that this did not mean that they were going back on their anti-abortion stand, nor on their support for Mrs Bowman.

Another incident in which SPUC was involved came unstuck recently. SPUC is reported to have given their support to Mr Paton in his attempt to prevent his wife Mrs Joan Paton from having an abortion. Sir George Baker in the Family Court decided Mrs Paton could go ahead with the abortion which her estranged husband had tried to prevent. Mr Paton deserves sympathy for the problems of his personal life; but he regaled the public with such a catalogue of chauvinist views that they could not be surprised to learn that his marriage was in difficulties. Soon after the case Mrs Paton found it necessary to seek an injunction to restrain Mr Paton from "molesting, otherwise interfering with her, or uttering threats".

SPUC Lost Spectacularly

Dr Colin Brewer, writing an article about the case of Mr Paton in the *General Practitioner*, commented: "With enemies like SPUC, those of us who favour a permissive approach to abortion hardly need friends. In the first significant challenge to the 1967 Abortion Act SPUC and its allies have lost publicly and spectacularly."

Another strange, though not representative, case indicates the risks a few individuals publicly defending abortion have undergone. An 18-year-old Croydon student who carried out fire-bomb and explosive attacks on people with pro-abortion views was sentenced to life-imprisonment at the Old

(Continued over)

Bailey in July. Thomas Lascelles made "fiendishly elegant bombs", which might have killed people. The home of Mrs Susan Lord—well-known for her pro-abortion views and as a former member of the Croydon Humanist Group—was attacked with a fire bomb and parcel bomb. At another time Lascelles had left a firebomb at a house which used to be the address of the local humanist society but was no longer used by them. A parcel bomb was also left outside the offices of Action Research for the Crippled Child in Horsham. The organisation had just been accused in Roman Catholic newspapers

of advocating abortion as a means of reducing the number of handicapped children.

The youth's diary contained a full account of his crimes. He wrote: "I could not have completed my noble mission without the blessing of God" and talked of his need "to purge the land of evil".

The actions of the youth, described as a psychopathic type, are obviously untypical; but the case indicates how religion so easily feeds instability. More important in the long-term are sustained campaigns, such as those by SPUC, to prevent women from having the choice of an abortion.

International Humanist Congress

The subject of the Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union held at the London School of Economics was "Work for Human Needs in a Just Society".

The Congress Chairman, Renee Short, MP for Wolverhampton North East, opened with comments about mankind's constant struggle for freedom and progress and the rights of minorities. She felt that, "even though wealthy powers and the cohorts of religion are ranged against us", progress was possible. She was keenly conscious how this had been so in Great Britain in the triumphant struggle for women to obtain the right to choose an abortion.

Among future struggles Renee Short mentioned the rights of women to full educational and employment opportunities, and the fight against racial prejudice and the fascist forces which could take advantage of this. In the area of abortion facilities, of which she had much parliamentary experience, she mentioned that the decision to terminate pregnancies still rested not with the women concerned, but with doctors; this could be grossly unfair in areas where a majority of the doctors were unsympathetic.

Three speakers lectured about the theoretical place of work in society. James Dilloway put work in the context of economic activity and the total environment. Howard Radest pointed out that "dumb jobs" were the characteristic of industrial societies, but it would be feasible to create jobs that are interesting, require our judgement and intelligence, and are "worth doing for human beings". James Robertson faced two possible future alternatives: the Hyper Expansionist (HE) vision expressed the masculine qualities of super-industrial super-growth, while the Sane Humane Ecological (SHE) vision placed personal and human values above technical and economic ones.

Three speakers considered the practical aspects of work in society. Mihailo Markovic, from Yugoslavia, described some of the organisational problems of improving the quality of work with particu-

lar comment on worker participation in industry. Madame Osmin-Lamarque, from France, gave a forceful, historical account of the subsidiary role played by women in work and referred to the need to give women a better deal in the world of work today. Renate Bauer, from Germany, examined the implications of widespread unemployment among the young.

Later in the congress two speakers offered suggestions about work and society in the future. James Hemming discussed the way changes in education could bring about greater fulfilment—especially taking into account brain-research giving importance to the right hemisphere with its creative and intuitional qualities and also putting individual interests of children above the needs of a curriculum. Peter Draper spoke of the possibility of creating a health-promoting economy, which would need to reject indiscriminate growth and manipulative advertising and develop work which was of much greater social value. Piet Thoenes, from Holland, summed up some of the themes of the conference.

During the conference a Humanist Award was presented to Mr V. M. Tarkunde, an Indian whose opposition to Mrs Ghandi's use of special powers to limit free speech was highly praised.

At Conway Hall the Rationalist Press Association and the South Place Ethical Society were hosts to congress members and English humanists who had been unable to attend the congress were also welcomed. It was at such social events that some of the most valuable cross-fertilisation of ideas took place.

Next to enjoying ourselves, the next greatest pleasure consists in preventing others from enjoying themselves . . . Moral indignation is one of the most harmful forces in the modern world, the more so as it can always be diverted to sinister uses by those who control propaganda. Bertrand Russell

The Fallibility of Popes

BARBARA SMOKER

The late Pope Paul VI will be remembered above all as the pope who refused to sanction the contraceptive pill and who thus brought about the rapid decline of ecclesiastical authority. Here the President of the National Secular Society assesses his pontificate and the problems facing his successor.

Describing, in an Italian radio interview, the death of Pope Paul VI, the Vatican's Assistant Secretary of State used a strange though significant turn of phrase when he said that "an electrocardiograph made by the doctors confirmed that *unfortunately* the Holy Father had left this earth to enter paradise" (my emphasis). If the man genuinely believed that this life is merely a prelude to a better one, why describe the transition as unfortunate—especially for a soul whose salvation might be assumed and whose earthly sojourn had well exceeded the biblical span?

Roman Catholics the world over were then urged by their bishops and priests to pray for the repose of their late pontiff's soul. Even if no more than 10 per cent of the world's seven-hundred-million RCs responded to this appeal, the aggregate of prayers recited to reduce his purgatory must have far exceeded those said for most of the faithful departed. Is this an extension of the unfairness of life into the next world? Or does the Pope need so many more prayers than anyone else?

Logic, however, is hardly to be expected from religious quarters. It is more important, if less amusing, for us to consider the effect of the pontificate just ended upon the church and upon the world.

From a personal viewpoint, Paul VI deserves some sympathy. Known in his pre-papal years as an intellectual progressive, keen on social justice, and groomed to succeed the equally intellectual (though less liberal) Pius XII, he had to wait, in the event, for another four and a half years before he ascended the papal throne—and those four years radically changed the whole tenor of his subsequent pontificate and his place in history. The rustic, avuncular Pope John, whose short reign intervened, opened the flood-gates of ecclesiastical reform, without realising what problems he was creating, and for the next 15 years his liberal successor found himself forced into a conservative role, in a desperate attempt to stem the flood.

He struggled loyally to make sense of John's wild ideas, to reconcile them with the "infallible" statements of the past, and to keep the erstwhile monolithic structure of Roman Catholicism from complete disintegration. That he did, in fact, manage

largely to do so was all but miraculous. He also achieved considerable modernisation of the papacy, in such matters as his unprecedented globe-trotting, elimination of much of the mediaeval pomp, and deletion of many legendary characters from the universal calendar of saints. However, what he will inevitably be remembered for is his refusal to sanction the contraceptive pill.

The committee of inquiry set up by Pope John to consider the whole question of birth control gave Pope Paul a unique opportunity to pronounce the pill OK without betraying the condemnation by his predecessors of mechanical methods of contraception. But this would have entailed some less than honest reinterpretations of the grounds given in earlier pontificates for such condemnation, and unfortunately, as well as unexpectedly, the Pope put his intellectual integrity and the apostolic continuum before a compassionate concern for the quality of life of millions of human beings.

Perhaps he lacked the imagination to envisage the unremitting child-bearing, the drudgery, the squalor, the malnutrition, the physical suffering to which he was condemning so many of his "flock". He also manifestly failed to realise that in the developed areas of the world most Catholic women had jumped the gun in the belief that he was about to sanction the pill, and, having started, most of them would simply go on using it, often with the connivance of their priests, in spite of his prohibitory encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. And more and more would follow their example.

Pope's Great Blunder

This, above all else, has weakened the authority of the Vatican; this one great blunder undermining Pope Paul's efforts to keep the magisterium intact through all the theological, liturgical, collegiate, and ecumenical changes of his 15-year reign.

In a letter published in the *Guardian* (August 9), a Catholic monk actually asserts that it is possible to accept this papal ruling without living by it. (And he is not a Jesuit, either!) But this is blatant whistling in the dark, and will fool nobody.

Humanae Vitae, though by far the greatest blunder of Paul's reign, was by no means the only one. There was also, for instance, his parallel rigidity on the celibacy of priests. And there was his apparent connivance at the Vatican's fraudulently obtaining EEC subsidies by openly importing, secretly exporting, and then re-importing (several times over) EEC surplus butter, between Italy (member of the EEC) and the Vatican (outside the EEC)—but perhaps the only blunder in this was being found out and creating a scandal.

WORLDWIDE

It is generally considered to be in bad taste, however, to speak out too forthrightly in assessing the record of a public figure immediately after death—especially a religious public figure—as the LBC radio news commentator Ian Gilchrist discovered, to his cost. It is easy enough to understand how, in his unscripted chat show, he came to refer to Pope Paul as “a silly old fool who has caused misery to millions of gullible people”. Not surprisingly, however, thousands of Catholic listeners immediately protested and succeeded in getting the poor man suspended from the show—though most of them were themselves doubtless proclaiming, in the conduct of their lives, the very same opinion.

At the other extreme was the absurd spectacle of Anglican churches flying their St George's flags at half-mast for six days, mourning the late Pope. One almost expected an earthquake from all those Protestant churchmen of the past four centuries turning in their graves! And there is added irony in that St George was one of the saints dismissed by Paul VI as mere legend so as to make Christianity more credible in the modern world.

Problems of the Future

But what of the future of the Roman church and the papacy? The new pontiff, like his predecessor, is faced with daunting problems largely created by his predecessor. Either he must condone the widespread flouting of *Humanae Vitae*, and with it papal authority, or he must explicitly contradict its teaching and thus undermine the supposedly immutable magisterium.

Sooner or later the latter course will have to be taken, and the pope who takes it may at least breathe a sigh of relief that Paul VI was modest enough to refrain from putting the seal of infallibility on the encyclical. Even so, nothing can now halt the decline of ecclesiastical authority, whether the late Pope's ruling is formally rescinded or simply disobeyed. It therefore looks as though the cause for which centuries of freethinkers have worked, struggled, been imprisoned, and suffered torture and death has finally been brought about by the papacy itself—by the incompatible sequence of the impetuous John and the uneasy Paul.

The name John Paul, chosen as we go to press, by the newly-elected heir to the papacy is presumably intended to appeal to progressives and conservatives alike. But it could prophesy a falling between stools.

If the next few occupants of Peter's chair play their cards cleverly enough, they may, by concentrating on Christian unity, expand their empire once more to virtually the whole of Christendom. But never again will they rule as autocrats over the lives of the people.

Thank God for the fallibility of popes!

HOLLAND

A polio epidemic has affected members of the splinter groups of the Reformed Church opposed to vaccination. 96 cases have been registered and almost all the victims are children living in Holland's Bible belt in the central part of the country. Preachers of the splinter groups of the Dutch Reformed Church regard the disease as an example of divine wrath.

USA

A woman and seven children jumped from an eleven-story hotel balcony in Salt Lake City in August. The suicides appear to have been an insane religious act. The woman's husband, Mr Immanuel David, had killed himself by carbon-monoxide poisoning two days earlier. He led his own religious sect and had been living in various religious motels in and around Salt Lake City for some time.

The mother and four of the children died instantly and the other children were flown to hospital in critical condition. A police spokesman said: “they were religious fanatics and apparently decided to join their father.”

AUSTRALIA

Considerable publicity has been given in Australia to the formation of a new Secular Society. The Secular Society of Victoria held its inaugural meeting on 9 July 1978. Its inception was reported in *The Melbourne Times* and *The Melbourne Age*, and on radio stations in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.

The Secretary of the Society is Nigel Sinnott, a former editor of *The Freethinker*, who is continuing the long-standing link between British and Australian freethought movements. He described the aims of the society as “to promote greater awareness of the need for a rational, critical, democratic and humane approach to life”.

The President of the Society is Harry Pearce, a personality who has been collecting freethought literature since 1919. He is now 80, has more than 10,000 books, and is known for a lifetime's involvement in the Australian Labour movement.

Among the practical objects of the Society are replacing the religious oath in courts by affirmation and dropping the patriotic oath of allegiance in schools. The Society is strongly opposed to taxpayers subsidising religious organisations (as happens at present) and hopes to draw public attention to the obnoxious effects of religious “fringe cults”.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Membership details from:
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL

Joseph Skurrie, Child of the Sun

NIGEL H. SINNOTT

The lives of many forthright freethinkers remain unpraised and unrecorded. Men and women who, in times when atheism could be seen as a crime and an affront to civilisation, gave energy, courage and substantial parts of their lives to secularist publicity and debate. These people helped to shift public opinion so that atheism became more acceptable. Nigel Sinnott, who wrote about Joseph Symes in a previous issue of "The Freethinker", here gives an account of another such man—Joseph Skurrie.

In the introduction to an anthology, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), its editor, the poet W. B. Yeats, mentions by way of contrast the Irish sceptic he once met. The man in question was binding his corn with arms emblazoned with a tattoo of a Mohawk Indian; he vehemently denied the existence of both ghosts and hell, and was a walking object lesson of the truth of the local priest's repeated quotation from Thomas A. Kempis: "They who travel seldom come home holy."

The story about the Irish sceptic reminds me of a man who must have been something of his Scottish-Australian equivalent. Joseph Skurrie [*sic*] was born at 359 Gallowgate, Glasgow, on 8 January 1858, one of four children of Joseph Skurie, tinsmith, and Jane Skurie (*née* Duncan). Quite when the family name was altered to Skurrie is not clear, but it may have been in 1864 when they migrated on the *Tornado* from Liverpool to the colony of Victoria, where Joseph senior (who had been a shipyard worker in Glasgow) had doubtless heard of the promised riches to be won from the gold-bearing "white hills of Bendigo".

After a brief stay in Melbourne the Skurrie family headed for the goldfields in and north of the Great Dividing Range. It was a raw, bustling community, full of sturdy, independent, argumentative miners, many of whom still remembered the Eureka Rebellion of a decade previously. In this childhood situation Joseph junior must have been something of a misfit. "As a boy", he confesses, "I was different to most of my schoolmates. I was quiet and studious, not fond of sport, and did not mix in many of the games of my comrades." Nevertheless, he was not without a sense of humour and as a child was a bit of a "wag" and practical joker.

Despite Skurrie's studious disposition, he received little formal education. Probably as the result of his father's death, Joseph junior started working at the age of nine and ceased school attendance altogether at the age of eleven. He took what work he could get in the Bendigo area and, it would seem,

found it for the most part mentally boring and physically exhausting. At the age of 25 Skurrie married for the first time (c. 1883); little is recorded about the marriage apart from the fact that it was unhappy—the wife being described as a cold, unresponsive, "pious bigot"—and ended in separation. The couple had two daughters, Agnes (the elder?) and Jean (born 1894?).

In 1886, in the centre of Bendigo, Joseph Skurrie purchased his first copy of Joseph Symes's paper, the *Liberator*. He at once became a regular reader and promptly joined the Australasian Secular Association, of which Symes was then president. Dr Barry Smith describes Skurrie from this period of his life as being "a strong man, a blacksmith, about six feet two inches (1.88m) tall, with the courage of his convictions. He became a vegetarian and teetotaler and often denounced the Bible because it approved the eating of flesh." Harry H. Pearce, who knew Skurrie as a very old man, described him to me as shorter, nearer 1.73m (five feet eight inches). In photographs Skurrie appears bright and alert, serious, clean shaven, with large ears and a prominent nose.

Australian Secular Association

Skurrie's frustrated intellectual energies found a ready outlet in the Australian Secular Association which, in the mid 1880s, was enjoying its heyday. His freethought interests, perhaps combined with better job prospects in the city during the land boom, led him to Melbourne where he spoke by the Yarra Bank or at Merri Creek and entertained meetings and soirées with recitations from Burns or singing the hearty or melodramatic songs the Victorians loved. He also "had the pleasure of hearing over 400 lectures delivered by Mr Joseph Symes, Wallace Nelson, W. W. Collins and others".

In 1889 the Secular Association opened its new, custom built Hall of Science in Fitzroy (an inner, northern Melbourne suburb). After a while the post of caretaker fell vacant; Skurrie applied for, and got, the job which was some compensation for his frustrated ambition to be a professional freethought lecturer (he took elocution lessons from Symes).

But alas, in Skurrie's idiom, "The best laid schemes of mice and men aft gang a-gley." The Hall of Science became a prize in the increasingly bitter dispute between pro- and anti-Symes factions for possession of the assets of the Secular Association. When in June 1890 an anti-Symes gang seized the Hall by force, Skurrie barricaded himself in his room and waited until a relieving party of Symesites could be hauled up through his window

to retake the building. The stratagem succeeded, but the anti-Symesites included several original trustees of the land on which the Hall was built (albeit built largely by Symesite money.) They sued for possession and, to the horror of Symes and Skurrie, won the case in 1891—just after the death of Bradlaugh.

Deprived of his livelihood, and with nearly all his savings tied up in loans to the Hall's building fund, Skurrie decided to take his family back to Bendigo. Undaunted, he continued with his freethought activities on the goldfields and soon became corresponding secretary of the Eaglehawk and Bendigo branch of the Australasian Secular Association, and the branch's principal outdoor lecturer.

Skurrie Prosecuted

In 1893 Skurrie's open air loquacity resulted in efforts to muzzle and intimidate him by the Borough Council of Eaglehawk (about 6 km north-west of Bendigo). Skurrie refused to cease his lectures in the town and was promptly prosecuted for obstruction, trespass and using profane language. He escaped the first and last charges, but was fined £2 9s for trespass with £5 9s costs. Both indoor and outdoor lectures still continued and, in addition, Skurrie became active in the Eaglehawk Women's Franchise Movement. He also visited Adelaide, South Australia, where he was invited to lecture. But, so he says, his secularist activities eventually resulted in his being dismissed from the Virginia gold mine. Australia was now in the grip of the great depression of the 1890s, and work—even for skilled men—was hard to find.

Skurrie decided to walk from Bendigo to Melbourne, a distance of about 140 km! But employment prospects were no better in the metropolis. He went to Sydney, back to Melbourne, then to Strachan, Tasmania, where he had to sell his watch to pay his fare back to the Australian mainland and Bendigo. Eventually Skurrie found an offer of work at Adelong, New South Wales, where he was employed for three years as a blacksmith and drill fitter at the Gibraltar Consolidated Gold Mine.

After leaving Adelong, Skurrie went briefly to Brisbane (Queensland), then to Western Australia. Here he settled for some 15 years in the Kalgoorlie area, working as a blacksmith and (mining) engine driver. He became a foreman and miners' spokesman, joined the social democrats and studied Esperanto (then widely regarded as a promising international language). Probably for the first time in his life he earned a modest income, so he saved up and in 1910 treated himself to "seven months of delightful travel . . . the best part of my life". He travelled round the world, returning to Glasgow and also paying a visit to the home of his beloved Robert Burns, before going on to the United

States for the Sixth International Esperanto Congress in Washington, DC, where he met Dr Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859-1917), the language's founder. Skurrie then returned to Australia via the Pacific.

During the First World War (around 1915) Skurrie decided to leave Western Australia and return to Victoria. In Melbourne he joined the Militant Propaganda League and lectured for the Victorian Socialist Party, run by Robert S. Ross, editor of *Ross's Magazine*, one of the best produced rationalist-cum-socialist periodicals Australia has seen. Skurrie vehemently opposed conscription—a sentiment shared by Melbourne's famous Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix! Skurrie's 1916 lectures, on "Gods, Ghosts and Devils" and "Christianity and War" resulted in attempts to prevent transmission of *Ross's Magazine* through the post, and eventually a three months' prison sentence for the speaker under the War Precautions Act. On his release the unrepentant Skurrie submitted an article, which Ross duly published, "Tear Down the Prison Walls!"

In 1918 Joseph Skurrie joined the newly-formed Rationalist Society of Victoria; and in or about the same year (aged 60) he married his second wife, Winifred Froggatt, whom he outlived. In the late 1930s the rationalists in Melbourne became fiercely divided over the position of their leader of many years' standing, J. S. Langley. Skurrie supported the pro-Langley faction, just as he had supported Symes in a rather similar squabble half a century earlier.

Lambasted the Clergy

In his ninetieth year Joseph Skurrie turned to writing fiction. This resulted in the appearance of a 29-page novelette, *Unlicensed Union*, in 1948. Skurrie used the story to propound his views on socialism, atheism and free love, and particularly to lambast the clergy, in the guise of the "Rev Littlebrain", and prudes like "Mrs Peeping". Some of the names (possibly a few of the ideas) are derived from Symes's stories in the *Liberator*, but *Unlicensed Union* is still a remarkable and most imaginative piece of writing for a man of such advanced years. At the end of the robust and polemical story, Skurrie concludes with a more gentle, philosophical epilogue on "How the World Was Made":

"The sun, the father of our solar system, was millions of years old before the earth was born, for we of the whole planetary system are children of the sun . . . Every tree that grows, every flower that blooms, every bird that sings. All! All are children of the sun . . . All things that live must die . . . But cheer up. Millions of years may pass before our father the sun finally gives

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JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

Many and wondrous are Christian contributions to the current debate on blasphemy law, but the dottiest piece that I have come across is an eight-page pamphlet entitled *Swear Not At All*. It is the work of Laurence E. Porter, a retired grammar school master who now lectures in Bible colleges.

Mr Porter gives his homely definition of blasphemy as being "that which by its nature grieves and hurts the sensibilities of religious people". If so, then generations of Christians blasphemed every time they bawled hymns like *From Greenland's Icy Mountains* and *God of our Fathers, Known of Old*, verses of which are extremely offensive to many religious people outside the Christian fold.

The author refers to biblical strictures on blasphemy, not only against God but also against "His servants", among whom, no doubt, Laurence E. Porter is numbered. He does not appear to have any qualms about the death penalty for blasphemy as specified in Leviticus 24. Readers are reminded that in pre-Reformation times "blasphemy was always seen not only as a sin against God but also as a crime against civil law . . ." There is muted approval in his reference to the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus in the Reformation's "own holy city of Geneva". True, Servetus was done to death by his fellow-Christians for heresy. But no matter; ". . . down the centuries the line between heresy and blasphemy was wearing very thin".

Mr Porter may be indifferent to the fate of Servetus, but he is exceedingly dismayed by scientific and social developments that have taken place during the last two centuries. The nineteenth-century "spirit of exploration and research" would have been all very well if it had culminated in the Great Exhibition of 1851. But, Mr Porter sorrowfully records, it led to "over-enthusiastic investigation of Man and the Universe resulting in uncritical acceptance of the dogma of evolution".

Blasphemy in public debate "is at the least very bad manners", Mr Porter avers. He traces "the escalation of such rudeness" back to the British Association meeting of 1860 when "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford and one of "His servants" got his come-uppance at the hands of T. H. Huxley and the Darwinians. Since that time Britain has been on a slippery slope, and we have now reached the stage where "Man no longer falls at the feet of God to worship Him; he rubs shoulders with Him as an equal to patronise Him". Even

gentlemen of the cloth are not now accorded the deference and respect they enjoyed of yore.

Like most evangelical propagandists, the author of *Swear Not At All* is insufferably paternalistic. He writes: "I do not wish my children to be subject to the influence of blasphemous and other offensive publications". Now Mr Porter is described as a retired school master, and unless he came to parenthood late in life his children must be past the first flush of youth. But with characteristic Christian arrogance he and Mary Whitehouse, whose work is praised in the pamphlet, wish to dictate to people of all ages what they can read or see on television. The puritan lobby is using children as a red herring to confuse the public and stampede politicians into introducing more repressive laws.

If children need protection at all then it should be recognised that the greatest threat to their mental, emotional and intellectual wellbeing comes from prurient, sex-obsessed Jesuites.

* * *

Timorous readers of *Christian World*, the new religious weekly, got a nasty jolt recently when their journal's front page headline proclaimed: "Mother Teresa Attacked". Visions of the good lady being set upon by a ferocious tiger or, even worse, by hordes of supporters of the Indian Rationalist Association, were mercifully dispelled when it transpired that the attack was contained in a letter by Barbara Smoker, in which the president of the National Secular Society had the temerity to suggest that Mother Teresa and her helpers selfishly regard the suffering of others in terms of their own "salvation".

Miss Smoker's broadside was provoked by a report on the meeting which the Humanist Liaison Committee arranged in London to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death. This event was the subject of a vitriolic piece by Richard Mullen, literary editor of *Christian World*, in which he attacked Voltaire's philosophy and deplored "the liberty to establish and propagate atheism in public." In addition to implying that atheistic opinions should be expressed only by consenting adults in private, Mr Mullen went on to accuse humanists of being all talk and no action. From there it was but a short step to citing Mother Teresa as an example of a Christian doer of good works.

Replying, Barbara Smoker pointed out that Charles Bradlaugh—rationalist, unbeliever and Member of Parliament—did so much for what was in his time a British colony that he became known as the Member for India. She went on to say that Bradlaugh was a pioneer of family planning and a champion of Indian independence whose work was far more beneficial to people in the sub-continent than the efforts of a thousand Mother Teresas.

Nearly a century later secular humanists in India

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ATTACK ON RESTRICTIVE ATTITUDES TO SEX

"Our society is adopting an unhealthily restrictive attitude to natural sexuality. It pays the penalty in marriage breakdown, violent sexual crime, psychiatric illness and numerous other ways." This warning was given by Francis Bennion, addressing the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group on 3 September. Mr Bennion, a member of the Executive Committee of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society (DLAS), was speaking on "Sex, Violence and Censorship—the limits of permissiveness."

Mr Bennion criticised the way the Whitehouse view of life has gained an ascendancy. "Mrs Whitehouse complains to the BBC about the bad language used in *Gotcha*, whereupon the BBC obediently cancel a repeat showing of the play. *The Times* refused to publish a letter of protest from DLAS, pointing out that dramatic treatment of a sociological problem must show people as they really are. Mrs Whitehouse is a prude who seeks to fling a veil over the unpleasant things of life. There is a growing army of people like her."

Mr Bennion attacked local manifestations of this growing intolerance. "The police raid sex shops in Brighton and take away their stock. These shops meet a genuine public demand, and this should be recognised. They deserve the protection of the law. Another public demand is for a beach where people can sunbathe in the nude. This is healthy in every way, as those who know the naturist beaches of Europe can testify. Puritanical councillors refuse permission.

Describing the growing power of moral censors, Mr Bennion said that our society denied any legitimate outlet to the sexual drives of many of its citizens, particularly young unmarried males. "This is asking for trouble, and we get trouble. We get hooliganism, vandalism, rape and assault. Sexuality denied and repressed is behind many of these outrages. We need a new outlook on the natural, healthy sexual instincts of mankind: less censorious, more welcoming, more understanding."

SURVEY OF BELIEFS

A Gallup survey of religious belief, which is to be fully published in a report "The Unchurched American", indicates an upsurge of religious belief in the United States. Among all the industrialised countries the USA has the highest proportion of people who believe in God—150 million of the 216 million inhabitants. Only India has a higher proportion of believers in the world table. The Americans also hold a firm lead in the number of believers who consider that God observes individual actions

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and rewards and punishes people according to their behaviour.

In Britain only 23 per cent of those surveyed regarded religion as very important, though 26 per cent put religion in the "fairly" and "not too important" categories. Japan has the lowest figure with only 12 per cent seeing religion as very important. (So much for the religious mystery of the East.)

Commentators have suggested that the figures show a real religious awakening in the United States. In 1970 14 per cent of those questioned said that religion was increasing its influence in American society; today that figure is 39 per cent. The increase of interest is thought to be linked with President Carter's tendency to talk about his religious beliefs.

The survey also indicates a great dissatisfaction with organised religion. Young people are seen to be highly religious in some ways, yet not interested in organised religion. Eight Americans in ten felt that it is not necessary to attend church services to be a good Christian.

SOPER OPERA CONTINUES

Hard on the heels of the decline of the Methodist Church membership (July *Freethinker*) comes the retirement of Lord Soper. Still widely known as Donald Soper, he was probably the most well-known Methodist in recent years, and his resignation as Superintendent Minister at Kingsway Hall was marked by a Thanksgiving Service on 30 July. Even services at Kingsway Hall have seen a marked decline in attendance since Soper commenced his work there 42 years ago; but on this occasion the large hall, which is now rarely used, was packed, though not quite to capacity.

Amongst the congregation were—at least—two members of the National Secular Society: one, was the quite undistinguished author of this short article, the other, the Rt Hon Michael Foot, MP, of the NSS Distinguished Members panel. Foot had been invited to speak, and brought greetings to Soper within the fraternity of socialism and general goodwill, but also added that he thought Donald guilty of "devilment". Foot said he had looked up this word in the dictionary beforehand, and presumably he employed it to mean "mischievous", rather than "qualities of a devil". There were several other dignitaries in the large congregation, representing both the Anglican and Roman

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Church, and the state (the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Mayor of Camden). Soper's rift with his former musical director, Donald Cashmore, was healed for the occasion; the City of London Choir joined the Kingsway Hall Church Choir, and even Foot was seen singing during the rousing final hymn, Charles Wesley's "Love divine, all loves excelling"!

In his final sermon Soper spoke of the "lamentable ignorance of Christ" among young people today, compared with his early days when folk "at least knew the name of the church they stayed away from". Although he thought the rationalists less "cock-a-hoop" today than they had been in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he believed we lived in the "first secular age".

Soper is a controversial figure, and his Methodism is far from evangelical: candles were burning during his final service, and he has been at the front in moves for unity with the Anglicans.

He "suffered" a period of atheism after reading Lecky when he was young; during this time he stuck to playing the piano at a Sunday school to avoid preaching "heresy". But preaching and speaking have been his lifelong forte—he will continue in Hyde Park and the House of Lords. During his wartime talks about pacifism on Tower Hill, a policeman was there to take notes, but he seems to have had "celestial immunity" as no action against him was taken by the authorities. Just before his final service at Kingsway Hall, Soper spoke in Hyde Park, and it seems ironic that despite his views and the place he chooses to express them, he has nevertheless carved out a considerable niche for himself within the Establishment. Certainly others have not been so lucky. July 30 once again saw a secularist literature seller being harassed by police at Hyde Park. We may live in a secular age, but the churches haven't lost their privileges.

DENIS COBELL

PATRONAGE TO GO

The anachronistic rights by which a local squire retains the right of patronage in appointment of clergy are to be abandoned. The subject was debated at General Synod held in July and it was voted to replace the existing system by another complex and unclear system.

Private patronage is a 1,500-year-old tradition and creates some peculiar anomalies. For instance, atheists, Roman Catholics and children may own

livings, but—in contrast to atheists—Roman Catholics and children cannot appoint. This is a piece of atheists' privilege which has gone unsung by atheists since it is likely only to apply to a very few landed gentry, and since we seek equality not anomalous privilege. Other anomalies have allowed patronage to fall into the hands of companies; for instance, it has been reported that Tom's Foods Ltd, a subsidiary of Smith the potato crisps firm, took an active interest in its rights of appointment in the living of All Saints at Nocton in Lincolnshire.

The new system voted at the Synod will allow parishes to choose either to appoint by a registered patron in consultation with a bishop, or to abolish the patron's rights completely and hand them over to the bishop and lay representatives from the parish. The Benefices Measure was passed despite strong opposition from clergy who thought it was too complex and from those who thought it would place too much power in lay hands.

One exception to the Measure is that the biggest patron of church livings, the Crown (which holds about 10 per cent of the 10,000 or so parishes) will retain its rights. So the establishment creepers of crown and church remain entwined. But there is no hope of an atheist squire swaying an appointment towards an agnostic clergyman; perhaps there is no need with agnosticism so rife within the church hierarchy itself.

Freethinker Fund

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JOSEPH SKURRIE'S FREETHOUGHT REMINISCENCES

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ABORTION—TEN YEARS ON. Published by The Co-Ordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act. Available from The Birth Control Trust, 27-35 Mortimer Street, W1. 60p.

Ten years ago an Act "to amend and clarify the law relating to termination of pregnancy by registered medical practitioners" came into force. More in anger than in sorrow, the Co-Ordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act have now published "Abortion—ten years on". Anger, because after ten years in which, in the words of the Lane Committee, "The Act has relieved a vast amount of individual suffering", those who do not believe in forcing a woman to continue with an unwanted pregnancy are still having to fight to give women access to safe, early, legal abortion.

If you want a "primer" on the subject, look no further. For the generation who have come of age since the Act was made law, it should be compulsory reading. For those with some knowledge of the subject, or who lived through the Act's passage, it will be compulsive reading. Into one slim volume is packed every aspect; from the medical to the personal; from the up-to-the-minute to the historical.

David Steel, whose Private Members' Bill eventually became the 1967 Abortion Act, starts by putting the Act in geographical perspective, as it were, by reminding us that it has "regularly been used as a model elsewhere in the world. Indeed, over the last ten years we have been overtaken in the liberality of the law on abortion so that our much heralded and hard fought reform of 1967-68 now seems remarkably unadventurous". Madeleine Simms places it in historical perspective with a glimpse into the press cuttings book of ALRA, with its horror stories of deaths from septic abortions before the Act; of families of ten left motherless as desperate women sought the only solution they could find to yet another unwanted pregnancy; and of the criminal waste of time and money as the police and the courts tried to catch and convict "criminals"—whose "victims" looked on as allies and saviours.

In the introduction, Vera Houghton, ex-chairman of ALRA and initiator of Co-Ord, points out that after ten years we should now be "discussing abortion services and not abortion laws . . . Balancing NHS resources with women's needs for abortion is now more important than balancing the law between those who believe all abortion is murder and those who believe that abortion is a woman's inalienable right." To underline this, Lena Jeger, MP, presents a forceful and moving account of "What the Abortion Act has meant for Women", recalling those who came to her late husband's East End practice "prematurely aged through poverty and the

struggle to bring up four, five or six children—they would come with their grey lined faces and their varicose veins and their frightened eyes because they feared they had 'fallen on the change'"; while the Reverend Edward Pavey, Dean of Liverpool, gives a sane and precise analysis of the moral standpoints of the Roman Catholic, Methodist and Anglican churches and sees the question of abortion not as one separate ethical dilemma but part of the whole debate on man's ability to control his own destiny. He points out that the moderate viewpoint of the Methodists, which "feels it right to veer somewhat towards the women in the first few months of pregnancy . . . may not be pleasing to the protagonists on either flank but it seems to accord with the down-to-earth compassion which the New Testament commands as belonging to the Christian life-style".

Sir George Sinclair contributes a fascinating account of ten years of parliamentary activity from Norman St John-Stevas' Ten Minute Rule Bill, through the Lane Committee of Inquiry, John Hunt's Medical Services (Referral) Bill, Michael Gryll's Amendment Bill, James White's Amendment Bills, the Select Committee to William Benyon's Amendment Bill. Alastair Service, Chairman of the FPA, recalls "Lobby Nights"—a deceptively casual account of the hours of exhausting and difficult work that went into smoothing the way for the Steel Bill to become law. Robin Hodgesson, Conservative MP for Walsall North, considers the latest in the long line of wrecking bills, Sir Bernard Braine's, in the light of his experience as an MP of a West Midlands Constituency. He points out that while the conscience and actions of anti-abortion doctors is protected, no such protection is given to those who are liberal. "I have heard from junior gynaecologists in the West Midlands that, if it becomes known that you are 'soft' on the question of abortion, you may just as well leave the region for your chances of promotion are negligible." He speaks of local GP's "in the front line of medicine dealing with the problems of family, marital and financial strain resulting from unwanted pregnancies. These doctors do not deliver moral judgements from the safe distance of a teaching hospital, they have to face 'real world' difficulties". Hodgesson praises the work of the charities in his part of England pointing out "so far I have had no complaints about the behaviour of the pregnancy advisory services but several about the behaviour of the gynaecological 'establishment' in the West Midlands."

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The medical side is put by Malcolm Potts, with what emerges as a scathing attack on medical attitudes and practice. He points out how hostility to the 1967 Act has made surgeons and administrators more likely to stay with the status quo, rather than seek to use more advanced techniques and to streamline access. "The simplicity of day-care was seen as a threat to those who saw the slightly higher risk and somewhat greater expense of in-patient abortion as a more suitable 'punishment' for women with unwanted pregnancies". Streamlining of access is also Sam Rowland's theme, written from the point of view of the GP. He compares the situation in Cardiff and Newcastle; the former, where a total lack of communication and understanding between GP and hospital can lead to delays of up to four weeks between referral and outpatient appointment and of up to 38 days between appointment and termination; the latter, where the setting up of a central appointments department leads to women being seen within seven days.

"Access to Abortion: the role of the Family Planning Clinic" is the contribution of Caroline Woodroffe, Chairman of Brook Advisory Centres. It makes depressing reading, delineating as it does the cowardly stance of the FPA on the question of pregnancy testing and abortion counselling and referral. She shows how the birth control clinics have colluded with anti-abortionists in labelling women seeking abortions as somehow "bad", unusual and unfitted to share the same facilities as "good" women who use contraception. On the contrary, she says, "They are the same women, needing help from the same source".

Patricia Hewitt, General Secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties, extends this argument further and points to the fact that the freedom and equality of *all* women is linked to the ability of each woman to control her own fertility.

Included in the booklet are facts and figures about abortion and information about Co-Ord. As a concise summary of the abortion scene it is unique, useful and absorbing. It is also enormously entertaining.

SUZIE HAYMAN

CELESTIAL PASSENGERS. UFO's AND SPACE TRAVEL
by Margaret Sachs with Ernest Jahn. Illustrated, 220pp.
Penguin Books, 85p.

This book disposes effectively of the idea that those who report having seen UFOs, and those who inves-

tigate or theorise upon them, are irrational simpletons. Reading some of the newspaper coverage of the subject one might well feel some justification in concluding that the questions asked about UFOs can be dismissed out of hand along with any theories concerning them, on the ground that those who speculate on such matters, or devote their time to investigating sighting reports, are eccentrics with little if any scientific knowledge or training. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, as even an outspoken critic of the theory that some UFO sightings involve extra-terrestrial spacecraft such as the science journalist, Philip Klass, confirms. In an article critical of ufology published in the American journal, *The Humanist* (Vol 36, No 4, 1976), he acknowledges that several scientists with impressive academic credentials take the idea seriously. He omits to add the fact that one of them, the late Dr James E. McDonald, a leading American atmospheric physicist, savagely mauled his own theories in which he sought to demonstrate that UFOs were produced by unusual atmospheric conditions. The bitter debate between Klass and McDonald which lasted for several years, only ending with McDonald's death, demonstrates the point made by another scientist closely involved in investigating UFOs, the astronomer and former US Air Force consultant on UFOs, Professor Allen Hynck, that the subject raised problems which could not be solved by "off the shelf explanations . . ." (Foreword to *The UFO Controversy in America* by D. M. Jacobs, 1975, p.14).

Unfortunately the author of *Celestial Passengers* does her case some harm with her first chapter. Instead of leaving the facts to speak for themselves and so maintaining a serious level of discussion, as she does later, she seeks to create an air of mystery, entitling the chapter "Strange Things are Happening"—however, a more apt title would be "Follow Margaret into Wonderland." With hardly concealed glee Mrs Sachs plunges into a rubbish tip of some of the most weird and wonderful notions under the sun, and like a super bottle collector proceeds to excavate the midden to extract anything she feels helpful in making her point. This rampage through wonderland can hardly be said to inspire confidence in subsequent chapters, but to be fair to the author it has to be acknowledged that in the main she avoids descending to such depths again, and when discussing some of the actualities and possibilities of the American space programme (she totally ignores the Russian programme except for a couple of passing references) is deserving of high praise for her ability to present in easily understood form some rather complex ideas.

A major part of this book is devoted to a series of UFO case histories, many of which were investigated by Mrs Sachs' collaborator, Ernest Jahn, on

behalf of the American UFO investigation organisation NICAP (National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena). As this is the first appearance in a book of several of these cases they constitute a refreshing change from the usual tales which appear with monotonous regularity in book after book. But here we discern the author's main failing, her attachment to the idea that what are termed "high strangeness" category UFO cases involve extra-terrestrial activities, and she displays a marked reluctance to present ideas which tend to diminish the "high strangeness" rating. This one-sided approach becomes all too clearly evident when in passing, as it were, she tells her readers that Philip Klass has examined a particular case and advanced a solution to it, which is at variance with ideas she is promoting. Should you wish to look up Klass's case you will not find any clue in *Celestial Passengers* as to where it appears, for Mrs Sachs provides neither references nor bibliography.

The case in question is termed in UFO literature the Coyne helicopter incident; briefly, the facts are as follows. On 18 October 1973, an American army helicopter commanded by Capt (now Major) Lawrence Coyne was flying from Columbus, Ohio to Cleveland when, according to Coyne and his three man crew, they were "buzzed" by what they termed "a UFO". This affected the helicopter in various ways including putting its radio temporarily out of action and causing the machine to ascend while the controls were set for descent. Klass investigated the case and presents his findings in chapter 29 of his book, *UFOs Explained* (New York, 1974). He concluded that what the crew of the helicopter had seen was a fireball from the Orionid meteor shower. Mrs Sachs makes no attempt to show him to have erred, but seems to imagine that by referring to the crew as experienced she exonerates them from making what she calls an "astounding mis-identification". Other ufologists take Klass rather more seriously, as well they may, for he has come up with some very interesting explanations in respect to several important sightings. An American ufologist, Jennie Zeidman, contributed a paper to the British journal, *Flying Saucer Review*, in which she examines the Coyne incident and Klass's comments upon it. She rejects the fireball theory on the ground that the duration of the UFO sighting was too long for it to have been a meteor (*FSR*, Vol 22, No 4, pp.15-19). She also charges Klass with not having met Coyne, thus implying that he was not in possession of all the data.

Mrs Sachs does not discuss an interesting and, in terms of UFO investigation significant, phenomenon known as ball lightning. This is a serious omission for this as yet little understood phenomenon displays many of the features to be found in descriptions of UFO sightings including colour changes,

differing light intensity, hovering, ability to affect radios and electrical equipment. It is known to leave traces on the ground and to affect people physically and physiologically. Early in her book Mrs Sachs refers to UFOs appearing near power lines; as this is also the case with ball lightning the possibility is that some UFO sightings may well have been examples of this phenomenon. This, taken in conjunction with the other characteristics mentioned above, makes ball lightning very much an issue in ufological discussion, yet Mrs Sachs sees fit not to mention it.

Celestial Passengers could have been a balanced presentation of the nature and scope of UFO investigation, but the theoretical bias and American parochialism coupled with several serious omissions, of which a discussion of ball lightning is but one, destroys the possibility. The impression is given that all ufologists are dedicated adherents of the extra-terrestrial hypothesis, and this is simply not true, whether in the United States or elsewhere. In short, unless you are familiar with ufology this book will give you a totally misleading picture of the subject. Finally, of the two photographs printed in the book said to show UFOs one at least is strongly suspected of being a fake, but like much else the author forgets to mention this.

ROBERT MORRELL

ANARCHISM by Peter Kropotkin. **THE BLACK FLAG OF ANARCHISM** by Paul Goodman. Kropotkin's Lighthouse Publications.

A long-standing joke among anarchists is that whenever a large meeting is necessary a telephone box is always booked for the occasion—which is a rather sad reflection on the state of the libertarian groups in Britain at the present time. With the state and authority seemingly encroaching on our civil liberties like a cancer (blasphemy, Colonel "B" alias Johnstone, banning of demonstrations), it is timely that Kropotkin's Lighthouse Publications should have these two pamphlets reprinted.

The first of these is a concise treatise on anarchism by Kropotkin, who was probably the leading anarchist theoretician. It traces the origins of libertarian ideas in history, including the guilds and free cities; those wishing to study these concepts in greater detail will find his book *Mutual Aid* develops this more fully.

Most of the leading lights of anarchism in the nineteenth century find a mention in this pamphlet including Proudhon, Bakunin and the most widely known anarchist from this island, William Godwin. At the time when this pamphlet was first published anarchism was in fact a mass movement amongst workers in Europe and North America, particularly in Spain and France, where there was an overlap with the syndicalist movement. In the

East End of London in the first decade of this century there was a strong anarchist following culminating in the unfortunate Siege of Sydney Street just before the outbreak of the first World War.

Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, anarchist fortunes took a downward turn. It may be old hat to say that the first people to be shot after the revolution are the revolutionaries, but Lenin did put down the Kronstadt mutiny. Kropotkin's funeral procession in 1921 in Russia consisted of thousands of men released from prison who were promptly put back inside at the end of the day.

By and large there has been very little growth in anarchist ideas in this century, though there have been one or two occasions when headline news has been made by direct action.

The second pamphlet in this "Hit and Run" series is Paul Goodman's *The Black Flag of Anarchism* reprinted from the *New York Times Magazine*, which was written when the word "anarchy" was constantly in the headlines. I am of course referring to the 1968 student riots and protests which had world-wide repercussions. What with Czechoslovakia and Vietnam, not to mention the mini-skirt and the contraceptive pill, it was all too much for naturally rebellious youth (I was 15 at the time) who in Paris during the month of May virtually controlled the area in the city surrounding the Sorbonne university.

Goodman outlines anarchism in a modern context as the repercussion of the '68 protests entered the American campuses, particularly Columbia university, where there was an occupation by students over the sacking of colleagues, demonstrating the direct action idea popular with anarchists (though admittedly not always non-violent). In common with the first pamphlet a little of the history of anarchism is included with illustrative quotes from Kropotkin, Proudhon and Bakunin. Emphasis is made early on between anarchism as portrayed in the popular press, which means chaos and disorder, contrasted with anarchism to anarchists, which means order and harmony arising out of the free associations between individuals and groups.

Undoubtedly some of this ideology has rubbed off on the "hippy" movement, who seem to reject contemporary society totally by the creation of hallucinatory states of mind through the drug LSD. As Goodman points out it is unlikely that anything of permanent benefit to anarchism will result from this approach, though ironically the culture that came to life with the hippy movement is still with us now.

I found both these pamphlets informative and relevant even though one is getting on for a hundred years old. For people who desire to work for freedom, however they conceive it, both publications are worth reading.

KEN WRIGHT

THE WOMEN-PIRATES ANN BONNEY AND MARY READ by Steve Gooch. Royal Shakespeare Company (Aldwych).
THE WOMAN by Edward Bond. National Theatre (Olivier).

Two new epic dramas have been mounted by our resident national companies in London. Both are by socialist dramatists and both look to history to illuminate contemporary issues. The particular focus of each is informally feminist, and each, as its title suggests, shows how women could alter the course of world events—if only their power and influence were properly acknowledged.

The women in Steve Gooch's play are, he says, "double victims", of their sex, first of all, and then of the socio-economic privation that underwrote England's Imperial conquest of half the world's riches. Nearly a century before Mary Wollstonecraft began the campaign for women's rights, Ann Bonney and Mary Read took their fight to the high seas, became buccaneers on a pirate ship in the West Indies and demonstrated their superiority over their male counterparts against the Spanish, French and British Governments. Mary indeed is disguised as a man, and quickly asserts her dominance of even Captain Jack Rackham, a swashbuckling varmint who previously entered service in order to make off with the silver. Calico Jack is resigned to losing his woman to the strange recruit "Mark" Read, and it is only when Ann Bonney attempts to seduce her that Mary's identity is discovered. "The only man I fancy, and he turns out to be a woman", Ann wails. She and Mary must be allies, "sisters", she says, in a world where free booty encourages independence of thought and action and, where men plunder, a woman's body is up for grabs.

The woman as outlaw motif reinforces Gooch's Marxist argument. Mary would like nothing better than to settle down with a family and is forced, for survival, to be raised as a boy, thus "deviating from the nation's deviation". Ann, on the other hand, has broken from the tyranny of an Irish childhood to make her way in the new world. She prefers the honesty of pirates to the marauding piracy of the British gentry. And when their ship is besieged by His Majesty's Navy, the women let fly the cannon shot while their shipmates cower in the hold below.

A significant irony of the play is that, though they have been victims of their sex, the women are eventually rescued from hanging, "by their bellies", as eighteenth century statute forbade execution of pregnant women.

Edward Bond's reworking of the Trojan Wars has Ismene, of the Greeks, confronting Hecuba, of the Trojans, in reasoned consultation for a way to end five years of carnage that have left Troy ravaged by plague and poverty-stricken. The title refers at

once to the position of each of the women in their respective nations, and to a precious statue, "the goddess of good fortune", over which they have been fighting. Ismene and Hecuba perform an iconoclastic function, seeking to transform the statue into the goddess of "good sense" by divesting it of its mystic powers. If the statue were no longer in contention, then the battles would cease, and prosperity could be shared between them.

The force behind such a straightforward dialectic is that Bond sees in woman the power to replace superstition with rational goodwill. Again, the choice of woman is significant, far too often she has been seen as a spiritual figurehead, the mast upon which, in Marlowe's version, "a thousand ships were launched".

In the first part, amidst all the strife, both women are imprisoned by the Greeks, and here alone they have the freedom to think what they wish. Hecuba's grandson is put to death, and Ismene, thought mad, torments the soldiers by proclaiming peace through the walls. The priests call this sacrilege, the women are cast about on the waters, finally exiled together on a remote island. Part two depicts their life together as "mother and daughter" as well as the renewed pursuit of the statue by the Greeks. War in this context is seen as a hollow god, the statue its material emblem. The soldiers pursue it with a little forethought as they conduct the war, and there is as little purpose behind the struggle. This is made abundantly clear through the blinding of Hecuba, the madness of Ismene and the appearance on the island of a lame miner, called simply "the Dark Man", who through his affliction is able to defeat Heros, "the strongest man in the world". Personal suffering, then, is the occasion for insight, and the omnipotent Greeks, with their gold and their statue, are the blind men.

Both productions evolve with a sweep characteristic of Brechtian drama. *Women Pirates* is in many ways like *The Threepenny Opera*, exuberant, hilarious in parts and interspersed with several dance and fight scenes, choreographed with expert skill by B. H. Barry. The music by Guy Woolfenden captures the exact tone and pace of the action, and the lyrics adumbrate Gooch's main themes.

The staging of Bond's play, by the author himself, is excellent, and Hayden Griffin's stark and expansive sets make the best use of the Olivier's stage. The theatre might almost have been built to accommodate the play.

The central performances in the plays are, as they should be, beautifully delineating each pair of women and making their scenes together work in tandem. I was particularly struck by the way in which Yvonne Bryceland, as Hecuba, and Susan Fleetwood, as Ismene, develop in their roles, as the bond between them strengthens and their relation-

ship becomes increasingly unrealistic. It is difficult to convey the special qualities that make these two women seem extensions of one vibrant force, yet, Bryceland and Fleetwood succeed with musical precision.

JAMES MACDONALD

LETTERS

CHILD PROTECTION ACT

In all the coverage that Cyril Townsend has got for his shabby "Protection of Children" Act, not once has he specified what youngsters in the "vulnerable" 14 to 16 age group are being protected from, that is not already subject to legislation. His letter to last month's "Freethinker" enlightens us no further indeed it compounds the confusion.

If the "protection" is from "indecent assault" then the law already covers it. If from blackmail or threats against children, the law also covers that. If from encouragement to commit sexual acts, then the law against incitement to commit acts of gross indecency can be made to cover it.

In fact, the only thing that wasn't covered until the Mary Whitehouse/Cyril Townsend Bill became law, was the mere photography of naked young people—and the occasionally "cheeky" photos that result. Though they have never mentioned the fact, what really irked supporters of Mrs Whitehouse's ABUSE (Action to Ban Sexual Exploitation of Children) was the acquittal a year back of a man who admitted taking photos of a nude 13 year old boy: in the magistrates' opinion, such photography was not "indecent assault".

Not once, during debate of his Bill (brief though it was) did Townsend ever suggest that he sought extension of censorship into other fields. Otherwise he might have aroused at least some of Labour's somnolent back bench. Yet, within a couple of weeks of the PCB passing the Lords, he told the "Observer" (in fact, the "Young Observer") that the Act was simply a first step in a campaign against indecent literature in general. Appropriately, the week before the Bill became law—on August 21—police in Hoxton seized copies of "Playboy" and similar soft-core publications, on the grounds that they were a threat "to children" (see "Hackney Gazette" August 15).

Let us not be mistaken: the Protection of Children Act is a calculated political gambit designed to bring into the mainstream of politics a marginal group of people who, until a couple of years ago, were widely regarded as a lunatic fringe. They have little concern for the true protection of youngsters and none for their rights.

As for Townsend's assertion that most Western countries have seen fit either to legislate against "child porn" or investigate it, it is true that some states in the USA and Sweden have passed or considered legislation. What Townsend omits to mention, however, is that the very group he purports to protect in Britain—adolescent boys—have just benefited from a widespread liberalisation of sex laws in Sweden, including reduction of the age of consent to 15 years. They are therefore freer to do what they like with their bodies (including posing before a camera) than ever before.

One country in the West at least, has had the sanity to recognise that protection from adult exploitation is in no way synonymous with denial of physical or sexual freedom: indeed, is ultimately antipathetic to it.

ROGER MOODY

QUESTION OF COURAGE

The reply to Mr Townsend's "simple" question ("Free-thinker, Aug) was given by the Minister of State in the Commons on the Second Reading, and by the Minister of State in the House of Lords. Both Ministers explained in detail why, "except for one small gap", so-called child pornography could be dealt with adequately under the then existing legislation. The "one small gap" was that referred to in Mr Townsend's letter—the age gap between 14 and 16. All that was needed "to safeguard our children", had any rational step been possible under this dishonest campaign of pressure upon MPs, was to extend the age limit in the 1960 Act from 13 to 16. Even the change in the law was not stated to be necessary by the Home Office Ministers. Indeed, all the evidence produced by the government in debates in both Houses, after a searching inquiry of all Chief Constables, seriously questioned the basis for the wave of emotional propaganda whipped up by Mrs Mary Whitehouse, who claimed (in a letter to "The Times") to be the "instigator" of the Bill. Mrs Whitehouse and Mr Townsend and the Catholic Press joined in the chorus, urging their readers (under the banner headline "Your child is in danger") to "bombard" their MPs with letters.

On the run-up to the General Election, Mrs Whitehouse pulled off a political coup on a Bill which did not have government support, was not discussed in detail by the House of Commons at all and which had to be drastically amended in the House of Lords to make any sense of a piece of legislative hysteria. Not a single lawyer in either House defended the Whitehouse Bill. Lord Wigoder, a distinguished Liberal lawyer (who cannot be accused of making "silly and shallow" speeches), tore the Whitehouse-Townsend Bill to shreds on Second Reading in the Lords. When the Bill left the Lords it was a totally different Bill (and Mrs Whitehouse complained to "The Times" that her Bill was being made ineffective) yet the House of Commons swallowed it whole!

Even so, in its more moderate form, it is an addition to the powers of police and magistrates to raid business and house premises, invade privacy, and seize anything and everything with no obligation either to prosecute (for which the consent of the DPP would be needed), or to return articles seized unless the harassed citizen goes to court to show cause why they should not be confiscated.

No wonder that the Home Secretary wished to await the report of the (Bernard) Williams Committee on the law of Obscenity before embarking on any further legislation in this messy field. But no, no MPs stood their ground for fear of being wickedly misrepresented to their electors.

Courage did you say?

THE RT HON LORD HOUGHTON OF SOWERBY, CH

ABORTION AND POTENTIAL GROWTH

I had hoped that Brigid Brophy would have answered the question I put to her. Ken Wright's unhelpful and not very clever intervention is hardly worthy of refutation. Whether one uses the term "foetus" or "unborn child", one is speaking of a complete and living organism with individual characteristics and a potential adult person.

Though acorns are potential oak trees, it is right that some should be allowed to grow into trees and some used as food for animals. It does not follow that some babies should be allowed to grow into adults and others be either eaten by pigs or thrown into incinerators.

CHARLES OXLEY

(Jottings)

are still campaigning to promote birth control and to combat religious superstition. Unfortunately their achievements are largely unknown outside India while the Western world is hoodwinked by Mother Teresa's publicists.

A few days after Barbara Smoker's letter was published she and Richard Mullen appeared together in the BBC Radio 4 programme, *Sunday*, when the NSS President again demonstrated the logic of her case. Mr Mullen retaliated with the vigour of a grasshopper stricken by senile dementia.

Barbara Smoker's timely comments will infuriate those Christians who agonise at a safe distance over the misfortunes of others. Many of them don't care a fig for the underprivileged and cynically exploit them for religious propaganda purposes. They are well aware that for all Mother Teresa's compassion, ability and determination, she cannot even scratch the surface of the problem that blights the lives of millions. And the suffering which she strives to alleviate is often the direct result of religious superstition.

The sentimental goo generated by Mother Teresa's publicity agents has so far succeeded in concealing the fact that her chief concern is persuading people to believe in her Christian god, promoting the interests of her church and insuring the "salvation" of her soul. She is a model victim of her faith: superstitious, irrational and illogical. *Christian World* declared editorially: "We will stick with Mother Teresa"—a predictable reaction from such a quarter. But the people of India will eventually make a different decision.

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE

From the Newsletter of the Worldwide Church of God:

Q: *Why does John say in John 3:13 " . . . even the Son of man which is in heaven", when in the context in which the phrase occurs Christ is obviously on the earth?*

A: That particular part of verse 13 is a parenthetical statement added by John when he wrote his account years after the death and resurrection of Christ. The verse should be rendered as follows: "And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven (even the Son of man which is in heaven)." At the time John wrote the account Christ was again in heaven.

So now we know.

Thomas Paine Society. A meeting will take place on 4 November 1978, at 2.15 pm, Conway Hall Library. Christopher Brunel will talk about "Coins of Social Protest" (illustrated) and Peter Cadogan will speak on "Paine, Godwin and Blake".

(Joseph Skurrie)

up the ghost. The human circle will go on, men and women will marry and produce offspring, generation after generation. The sun will shine and the moon will travel its monthly course. The birds will sing and all Nature will rejoice, right to the end."

No gloomy old age for this infidel!

Joseph Skurrie lived to the age of nearly 92. In his final years he was cared for by two young friends, Mr and Mrs Percy Scouller. He died at 45 Morang Road, Hawthorn (near Melbourne), on 12 December 1949 and was cremated at Fawkner crematorium two days later. Despite his ambition to be a professional freethought lecturer, Skurrie remained a working man: his last recorded occupation was that of "brass cleaner". But he could hardly be described as an "ordinary" working man. In his old age he may have been regarded as a bit dubious by middle-class, respectable rationalists; but Skurrie's loyalty to the secular movement, his imagination and generosity were extraordinary to a degree.

Often wearied and angered by what he regarded as the gullibility, political naïveté and the financial greed of his contemporaries, Joseph Skurrie still remained—to the end—a tireless romantic who hoped for a more honest, more humane, world. He ranks, in my opinion, with Collins, Nelson, Symes and Harry Scott Bennett, and deserves to be remembered in both Scotland and Australia as one of the outstanding freethinkers of his generation.

REFERENCES

SINNOTT, N. H. 1977, (ed) *Joseph Skurrie's Freethought Reminiscences*. Lidcombe North, NSW: Atheist Society of Australia. (Gives detailed list of references on Skurrie.)

SKURRIE, J., various MSS in Merrifield collection (State Library, Melbourne); Some Notes On The Work Of A Freethou[gh]t Propagandist (MS, Pearce collection, Footscray, Victoria). Birth and death certificates of Skurrie in present writer's possession.

THE FREETHINKER

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EVENTS

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

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Nicolas Walter: "Religious Broadcasting". Sunday, 1 October, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Hasving and District Humanist Society. John Husband of the "Daily Mirror" leads a discussion on: "Official Secrecy—is Britain Becoming a Police State?" Tuesday, 5 September, 8 pm. Jean Woelmer discusses ways of preventing babies being born with handicaps: "Priorities of Priorities". Tuesday, 19 September, 8 pm. Both Harold Wood Social Centre (corner of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

Lewisham Humanist Group. Bill Rose: "Why I Am Not A Humanist". Thursday, 28 September, 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford 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. Louis Chase, organiser of Notting Hill Carnival: "Racism Kills the Black Man". Sunday, 17 September, 7.30 pm. Peter Cadogan: "William Blake". Sunday, 1 October, 7.30 pm. Both at 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, W8.

Merseyside Humanist Group. "Any Questions" about Humanism. Wednesday, 20 September, 7.45 pm. Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Further information from Marion Clowes 051-342 2562 or Ann Coombes 051-608 3835.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Teignmouth. Family Hotel. Four main days full board £13 per day. Extra days at £11. Easter at Bournemouth. August 1979. Two weeks on Suffolk coast. Details: Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, tel 01-642 8796.

Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must like men undergo the fatigue of supporting it.
Thomas Paine