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DANGEROUS IMPLICATIONS OF WORLD CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND FAITH

A twelve-day "world conference on faith, science and the future" has taken place in Boston, Massachusetts, in the USA. The conference was sponsored by the World Council of Churches and was composed of about two hundred scientists and two hundred theologians. This attempt to produce a bridge between opposites has produced some very weird statements according to the brief reports seen so far. It is very disturbing that, while scientists have always been quite diverse in their religious or non-religious beliefs, attempts are emerging to re-establish a connection between science—an approach dependent upon verifiable reality—and theology—an approach dependent upon speculation about a non-verifiable "reality".

Dr John Habgood, Bishop of Durham (mentioned as an outsider who might succeed the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Coggan) preached at a conference service. "Orthodox science needs the concept of truth," he said. "It needs a kind of overarching awareness of *some ultimate reality* which is what it is and not a mere projection of our own inadequacies; a reality to which belief in God bears witness." (our italics). He also declared: "To me concern for truth and concern for God are two sides of the same coin."

Now science has nothing whatever to do with "*some ultimate reality*", it is an approach aimed at constantly examining and re-examining immediate reality. And to suggest that concern for truth and concern for God are two sides of the same coin is greatly to confuse the use of the word "truth": the quest for scientific truth and for God are pursued in quite different currency. Scientific truth is always provisional; Newton's theories were amended by Einstein, whose theories in their turn are being amended . . . Scientific truth will always, by the very process of science, be changing and extending. God,

however, is alleged to be eternal, absolute, unchanging—a hypothesis that cannot be verified and by its very definition cannot be amended.

Dr Philip Potter, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, suggested that faith in Christ meant a radical break with a static understanding of existence, a change into "dynamic living and daring God's future" . . . whatever that may mean! He also said that "Science and technology are not neutral or value free, but are instruments of power—and that means political power. How then can science and technology become vehicles not for legitimising and perpetuating structures of injustice, but for opening up possibilities for structures of social control which include all people?" This is an important question, if you assume that science and technology are not themselves neutral; but it is their *use* not their process which affects values and political power. Although there may be ways in which scientific research is—like all knowledge—limited by the society in which it takes place, the possibility and likelihood of scientific imagination and creativity exploring quite new areas is always there. Questions of structures of injustice and social control are essentially political and social in nature. And an alliance between the churches and science—notorious for their outstanding historic role as controlling structures which perpetrate injustice—sounds a fearful prospect.

Areas of Discussion

Four major areas of discussion at the conference have been reported. They are the relationship between science and faith, the relationship between man and nature, what science is appropriate for Third World countries, and the political control of science.

(continued over)

The relationship between science and faith sounds like a non-subject. Science rests upon the possibility of constantly repeating experiments, which, although taken on faith by non-scientists and even in specialist areas by scientists, always remain open to being repeated. But religious faith is blind faith, an unverifiable, subjective "I believe . . ."

The humanist attitude to man and nature is likely to be quite different from the religious approach. Secularists see man as part of nature, part of a continuity, an ecosphere, a complex of interrelations: for this reason the environment and animal rights are often humanist concerns. The Christian, in contrast, proposes that man is a quite different creature from the animals, with a soul, a place in paradise, and a role as "lord of creation". Although Christians may be equally concerned with environmental issues, it will therefore be for different reasons, and it may be seen by some Christians that man has a god-given justification to reap and rape the earth.

The kinds of technology appropriate to Third World countries obviously need discussion, but the relevance to the discussion of theologians is in no way obvious.

The political control of science is a historical phenomenon which should highlight the need to keep science and religion as far apart as possible. Of course, marxist control of science, as in the attempt to uphold Lysenko's theories of genetics, is totally inimical to scientific development. But the major precedent for this kind of control is the centuries during which the churches attempted to suppress scientific results which conflicted with biblical or priestly truths; witness the persecution of Galileo by the Catholic Church and the long Christian resistance to the theories of Darwin.

The USA has seen increasing religious anti-science trends. An example of this is the Creation Research Society and its Institute of Creation Research, devoted to destroying the ideas of cosmic and organic evolution. In an article in the *American Humanist* (Jan./Feb. 1979) Delos B. McKown, head of the Philosophy Department at Auburn University in Alabama, wrote that "The mischief that this organisation is prepared to do to the life and earth sciences, particularly in elementary and secondary schools, staggers the scientific imagination."

The article—"Close Encounters of an Ominous Kind, Science and Religion in Contemporary America"—points out other threats to science from religious quarters. Old-time fundamental religion has seen such an upswing that devotees are prepared totally to abdicate their common sense for "received truths". Delos B. McKown also speaks of "a pervasive kind of methodological solipsism"—in other words an approach that admits the statement "Whatever is true to me is true". Also, his article comments on the number of quasi-religions which are actively opposed to Western scientific method, such as the Hare Krishna form of Hinduism.

The threat can easily be exaggerated, science is still flourishing, but any anti-science trend is worrying. A reason for this trend is the increasing specialisation of science, so that while science indubitably impresses it is frequently not understood. Thus cults and sects can be found using meaningless pseudo-scientific jargon to impress disciples of the truth of their weird claims. The answer would be greater education for an understanding of basic scientific method and knowledge.

If orthodox Christianity is trying to establish that there is no difference between scientific reality and the reality of God, as is suggested by the conference at Boston, then the world may be in for another dark age. Brilliant innovative scientists have sometimes been religious believers, either like Newton, who used his mathematical ability to calculate the date of the second coming, or like Einstein who held to a kind of pantheistic determinism ("Human beings, vegetables or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.") But their important scientific research has been quite distinct from their religious beliefs.

Theologians may meet scientists in Boston, but for the future of science we must trust that science and religion are kept apart, and for the future of mankind we must hope that churches and scientific communities do not get together to talk about social control.

WORLDWIDE

SWEDEN

The new Swedish government is investigating the Church-State relationship with a view to complete separation of Church and State. A special committee has been given six months to look at the question, and the Swedish Church Information Service has expressed its fear that "The Government will try to force a separation between Church and State in Sweden". There is also a possibility that a conscience clause protecting ministers who oppose women priests may be changed.

USA

An atheist group is challenging a city's payment of the electricity bill for a fifty-foot cross that stands next to the Hollywood Bowl and is illuminated at night. The case will go to court and is expected to be lengthy and expensive.

An International Exhibition of Literature for Non-Believers will be held at the University of Stockholm throughout September. "The Freethinker" will be on display, as will a number of National Secular Society pamphlets. There will be literature displayed from as far apart as Argentine and Australia, Canada and Japan, showing, in the words of Bertrand Russell, that "The non-believer is, above all, a free person".

Birth of Gay Humanist Group

BARRY DUKE and BRIAN PARRY

Britain's recent Gay Pride Week saw the launch of a national Gay Humanist Group. Two of the founder members, Brian Parry and Barry Duke, explain how the group was formed, and argue that an alliance of freethinkers and homosexuals is a logical development, given the degree of persecution both minorities have suffered at the hands of the religious Establishment over the years.

Traditionally, homosexuals and humanists have been at odds with authority in dogmatic societies—the former because they refuse to conform to so-called sexual norms dictated by church or state, or both, and the latter because of their constant challenge to irrational beliefs and the laws used to enforce them.

But it took Mary Whitehouse's private prosecution for blasphemous libel against *Gay News* in 1977 to highlight the strong similarities between the two groups, and bring them together in defence of free expression.

Whitehouse's action against the journal (which she no doubt hoped to destroy) was not at all well supported by the public in Britain. Leading articles in newspapers throughout the country lamented the fact that this archaic and quite pointless law had been resurrected after 56 years, and letter pages were filled with indignant comments from large numbers of critics—many of them professed Christians—who could not understand why so much time and public money should be spent defending a God of the Anglican variety against the suggestions of homosexuality contained in Kirkup's poem "The Love that Dares to Speak its Name".

Whitehouse claimed on several occasions that all this criticism—and the growing conviction that her action was prompted by her anti-gay sentiments—had been orchestrated against her by a vociferous "homosexual humanist lobby". Of course, no such lobby existed at the time, but out of her action the nucleus of such a movement was born.

For more than a century, freethinkers had fought a lone battle against blasphemy law in this country, but the *Gay News* trial had the effect of alerting many gays to the existence of humanism and humanist groups, and in the months that followed the trial, links between the two sections became stronger, and eventually led to the formation of the Gay Humanist Group.

This was a logical development, for both groups have been the victims of blind prejudice for centuries. The Judeo-Christian era brought in its wake sustained attempts by a variety of religious regimes to exterminate non-conformists. These attempts, invariably unsuccessful, persist to this day.

A 20th century example of an attempt to purge

society of freethinkers and homosexuals occurred in the thirties in Nazi Germany. Many freethinkers were outspoken critics of Hitler, and when he came to power in 1933, aided by a concordat with the Vatican, he took immediate reprisals against them. Freethinkers were imprisoned and their assets seized. They were possibly the very first of the "hated minorities" to be attacked.

The Third Reich also enacted harsh laws against homosexuality—it was an offence to even *think* homosexual thoughts—and gays were thrown into concentration camps. The Allied victory brought comfort to neither group. While other Nazi victims received sympathy and help from their liberators, freethinkers were branded as communists, or, incredibly, Nazi sympathisers. At the same time gays found that Hitler's anti-homosexual laws had been retained by the Allies, and the risk of imprisonment remained.

Hitler's attempt to purge his country of homosexuals and non-believers has, most recently, been repeated in Iran under the fanatical rule of Islam. Homosexuals are being shot, and criticism of the Islamic state, particularly by secular elements in the country, is being outlawed.

Discrimination

In Britain, and many other countries, there are still many examples of discrimination. For instance, although it is now possible to affirm, rather than take the oath in court, the myth still persists that only people with religious beliefs tell the truth, and it can be damaging to one's case if one refuses to swear by Almighty God. Recently a judge ordered a young girl home "to find out about God" when confusion arose over her taking the oath as a witness. She knew nothing about God or swearing on bibles.

Similarly, homosexuality can jeopardise one's position in court—even though it may not be relevant to the case. Recently a magistrate reportedly increased a sentence already passed on an accused person after the police informed the bench of the man's homosexuality.

Custody cases highlight discrimination against lesbians. Often a judge will refuse the mother custody solely on the grounds of her sexual orientation, with no regard to the fact that she is the best person to keep the child or children concerned. And neither gays nor non-believers are considered ideal people to adopt or foster children. Freethinkers were forced to establish their own Agnostics' Adoption Society (now the Independent Adoption Society) because of the discrimination against atheists or agnostics by adoption agencies controlled by religious agencies, or state bodies in

which Christians had a hand. The chance of gay couples, male or female, adopting children is virtually nil.

Job prospects can also be damaged—notably in education. Teachers who are non-believers are often compromised by being forced to take part in religious education. Because a substantial percentage of schools are administered in this country by churches, they can and do insist that teachers have to be practising Christians in one denomination or another, even to teach non-religious subjects. The discrimination against gay teachers who do not disguise their orientation is well-known.

The system is also unfair to pupils. Christian indoctrination takes place under the guise of religious education, and seldom are children taught that there are alternatives to Christianity—humanism for instance. Similarly, sex education classes seldom inform children that there is a perfectly natural alternative to heterosexuality.

This conspiracy of silence has led to a situation where, in the latter half of the 20th century bible-based ignorance still abounds. The term "atheist" is still often used in a derogatory manner. And the media, which would never apply words like "wog"

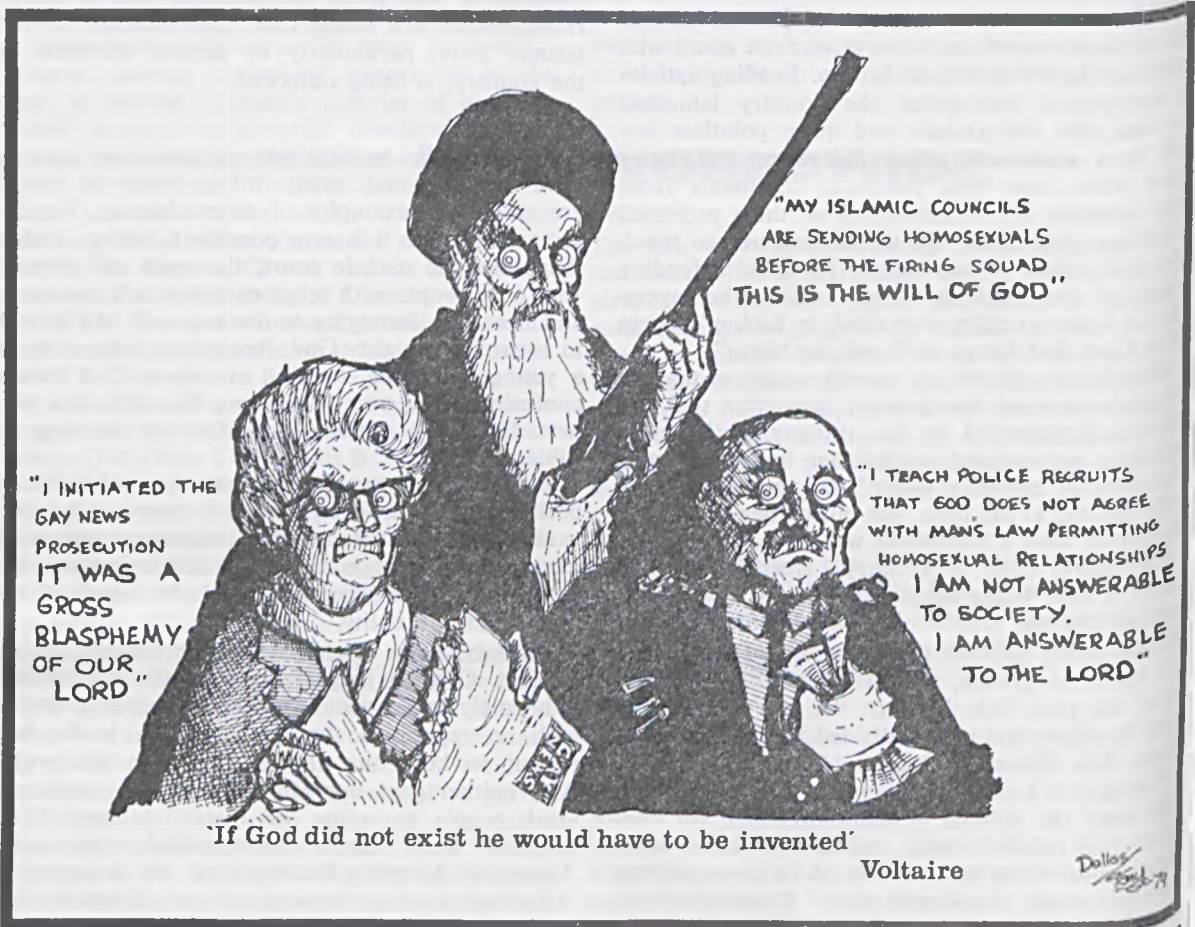
or "nigger" to black people, don't think twice of pandering to society's prejudice by using terms like "queer", "fairy", "poof".

Because of this, gays are often forced to hide their nature from family and friends through fear of rejection. Likewise, many people still attend church occasionally to keep the family happy rather than admit that they don't share the faith.

By fighting ignorance, superstition, dogma and bigotry, the Gay Humanist Group hopes to encourage more gays and humanists to come out and declare themselves and their convictions with pride.
Details from GHG, 45 Telford Ave., London SW2.

Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet.—Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

MOHAMMED by Maxime Rodinson
£1.25 + 15p p&g
THE NEW APOCRYPHA by John Sladek
£1.50 + 19p p&g
Full book list from: G. W. Foote & Co.,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL



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Our Masonic Correspondent

FRANCIS BENNION

Reports of current activities of the Masons in the "Telegraph" have prompted Francis Bennion to reflect upon his memories of Masonic influences in his family background. He argues that the Masons' secrecy and irrationality make them an unhealthy influence in society.

When the *Times* is absent, the *Daily Telegraph* ranks as the newspaper of record. The facts recorded include news from a person it calls "Our Masonic Correspondent". On 16 April, for example, this scribe was accorded eleven column inches on the Court page. Absurd of course—but then almost everything about Freemasonry is absurd. It is one of the most bizarre offshoots of Old Testament theology. As Our Masonic Correspondent confirms however, it is still both popular and powerful.

I had nearly as much trouble with my father as Edward Blishen had with his, and some of our frequent rows were over Freemasonry. I knew something about it because Grandfather (who lived with us) belonged to a Lodge. He joined the Masons in his early days as a shopkeeper in Manchester when someone told him it would be good for trade.

Sometimes I surprised Grandfather studying a mysterious black book. He was not much of a reader, and his lips moved in silent agony as he tried to master the intricate rituals it described. Mother told me they were rituals. Grandfather would say nothing, and slid the black book out of sight down the arm of his chair when discovered. According to Mother, who was occasionally taken by him to Masonic "ladies nights", the old man was striving to rise in the hierarchy. He had to pin on a little pale blue silk apron whenever there was a Lodge meeting. I once saw this when Mother was sewing black rosettes on it as a mark of respect at the death of King George V.

Father, who was a civil servant in the Exchequer and Audit Department, was very scornful about the Masons. It was over this scorn that I had the rows with him. He told me often that no one could get promotion in the Civil Service unless they joined a Lodge. Being a man of integrity he refused to do this himself. That explained why he was never promoted.

Father did pick up some of the Masonic secret language from somewhere. He told me that at one promotion board the inquisitor said to him "Do you know the meaning of words?" Father believed this was a cabalistic interrogation, and he knew the response. He told me it was "I've been taught to be cautious". He replied to the inquisitor in these terms, but was not promoted. Probably he got it wrong.

The rows with me came when Father sought to

apply a double standard. Although on principle nothing would induce him to join the Masons himself, he urged me to do so. Whatever career I took up, he said, I would have much more success at it if I were a Mason. Being, as a point of honour, no less idealistic than he was, I indignantly refused. Father returned to this several times, and each time there was trouble.

One way or another the Masons caused me a lot of trouble as a child. I remember an acutely embarrassing experience at school when I was about twelve. Trying to make conversation to some ass of a master, I volunteered the information that my Grandfather was a Mason. It was only after he had made a number of patronising remarks about the worthiness of honest toil, to which I contrived laboured replies, that his misunderstanding dawned on me. By then it was too late for my immature social capability to engineer a correction. The master was a snob, and thenceforth treated me coldly.

Silliness

Back to the present day, and the eleven column inches in the *Daily Telegraph*. Can grown men (there seem to be no women involved, except on ladies nights) really be so silly? Yes, it appears they certainly can. Our Masonic Correspondent faithfully records it all.

Worthy citizens, some captains of industry or scions of the nobility, award themselves childish titles. In these the word "grand" appears with monotonous regularity. Earl Cadogan, Pro Grand Master of United Grand Lodge, installs a Mr Shepherd as Provincial Grand Master for Lincolnshire. He is assisted by two other Provincial Grand Masters and a Grand Director of Ceremonies. Lurking in the wings is a personage who is not a Secretary, nor even a Secretary General, but a Grand Secretary.

Earl Cadogan hasn't finished yet. Changing hats rapidly, he becomes Pro First Grand Principal of the Royal Arch Supreme Grand Chapter. He then heaps further honours on the humble Shepherd, and in a flurry of mumbo-jumbo erects his Grand Superintendent over Lincolnshire. (Do the Department of the Environment know about this?)

Our Masonic Correspondent is just getting into his stride. Now he tells us about the Mark Masons (though he doesn't of course tell us what they are). There has been a meeting at Brighton of their Sussex branch (sorry, Sussex Provincial Grand Lodge). In breathless tones he discloses an "historic" discovery. A document more than 105 years old has been found by a Provincial Grand Warden backing a picture. It is the original petition from the four oldest lodges in Sussex for the formation of Sussex province, and is signed by no less a personage than

Earl Percy, MP. Recognising the document as being "of great value" the Grand Warden hastens to submit it to his Provincial Grand Master. Our Masonic Correspondent adds that after restoration it is hoped the document will find a final resting place in one of the temples at the new Mark Mason's Hall in London. The Sussex Provincial Grand Lodge has so far raised £4,100 towards the cost of this building.

There is plenty more. I will not quote further—except to remark the sinister fact that these Mark Masons have whole Lodges devoted to *instruction*. They are a proselytizing lot. For all I know their numbers, clearly already considerable, are rapidly increasing. What makes people behave like this?

Does it matter, even if Father did exaggerate the importance of Masonic membership in achieving worldly success? I think it does. The existence of grandiose secret societies wielding power and influence is disquieting to democratic man. As Father fondly believed, it may affect the processes of central government. A friend who lives in Chester assures me that in that city the tenor of local government changes according to whether the Catholics or the Freemasons are in (Catholics are prevented by their priests from joining the Masons incidentally). This no doubt happens elsewhere too.

If grown men want to spend their time dressing up, learning and performing superstitious rituals, and awarding themselves ridiculous titles, need the rest of us bother? Yes, because the irrational is always disquieting and secrecy is usually unhealthy. I don't yet lie awake at nights worrying about those Mark Masons' temples slowly rising in London, financed by money from all over the country that could surely be better spent. But I might if I bring myself to read much more from Our Masonic Correspondent.

Freethinker Fund

Our thanks are expressed to the following for their generous contributions to the *Freethinker* fund:

H. A. Alexander, 75p; P. Brown, 60p; A. M. Chapman, £2.60; D. L. Cook, £2.00; W. Craigie, 60p; Mr Davies, 20p; M. B. Fuller, £1.50; A. E. Garrison, £2.20; D. T. Harris, 60p; E. J. Hughes, £1.00; J. Jeffery, £2.60; E. Lewis, 75p; D. M. Lingley, 25p; S. D. McDonald, £2.60; M. G. Matters, £2.00; A. E. Morris, £1.60; C. A. Newman, 60p; D. Redhead, 60p; E. Richard, 60p; K. C. Rudd, £2.60; A. Shore, 25p; A. E. Woodford, £1.00; D. Wright (Ilford), £3.00; L. M. Wright, £2.00; Anon, £20.00. Total for the period 19 June to 23 July: £52.50.

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NSS SECRETARY

Jim Herrick, who, for the past two years, has heroically combined the jobs of Secretary of the National Secular Society and Editor of the *Freethinker*, has now relinquished the former post so as to reduce the pressure of administrative work and give him more time and energy for creative thinking and writing. In addition to continuing his editorship of this journal, he intends to get down to writing a commissioned book on the history of scepticism.

Looking back over the past two years, Jim says that though "it was not easy to step into the shoes of so seasoned and vigorous a campaigner as Bill McIlroy," he has, in his capacity of NSS Secretary, been particularly pleased about the bi-centenary Voltaire meeting, the two annual dinners (with first Denis Lemon then Renée Short as guests of honour), the cooperation achieved with the RPA and BHA, both in occasional joint press releases and in constant personal contact, and the increase in the number of local groups affiliated to the NSS.

As President of the NSS, I would like to thank Jim for his hard work during the past two years, and to say how fortunate I feel we are in being able to call upon Terry Mullins now to fill the vacancy—Terry having recently completed a three-year degree course as a mature student at Stirling University. He was Chairman of the Fulham-Hammersmith CND Group during the heyday of the ban-the-bomb campaign, and later became Treasurer of the Central London Humanist Group. His many memberships include the BHA, RPA, Voluntary Euthanasia Society, and Scottish Minorities Group. In addition to considerable business experience, he brings to the job a keen interest in and knowledge of history, sociology, education and music, and says he feels that the upsurge both of evangelical Christianity and Islam as well as the fringe cults makes his new position a challenging one.

BARBARA SMOKER

CHRISTIAN WORLD BANKRUPT

Christian World, which started as a new ecumenical Christian journal last year, has suspended publication. Lack of funds may cause the weekly paper to fold altogether, but an appeal for £60,000 is being started (as the Christian Communications Trust—with, of course, charitable status and the tax relief that entails). *Christian World* launched a vitriolic attack on the Voltaire bi-centenary meeting organised by the Humanist Liaison Committee last year. It has often attacked a secular attitude, both within and without the churches.

The distinctive feature of *Christian World* was its attempt to appeal to all denominations. Its lack of success indicates that Christians, as ever, prefer to hold firm to their own brand of Christianity with sectarian determination.

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

The Anglican Church took another step Romeward last month when the General Synod's House of Clergy voted against a motion which, if carried, would have allowed legally ordained women from other countries to celebrate the Eucharist when visiting England. The outcome of the debate was a serious blow to the campaign for the ordination of women and to the ecumenical movement. The Church Union declared that the decision will reassure the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, while the *Catholic Herald* interpreted the vote as an indication that the Church of England "has set its face firmly towards Rome".

After ten years of discussions, reports and protestations concerning the desirability of church unity, it may seem exceedingly perverse of the General Synod to take a decision that is certain to sour relations between the Anglican and other churches. The more optimistic ecumenists were hoping that despite two previous decisions against women priests it would still be possible to secure recognition for women ordained overseas and acceptance of women ministers from the Free Churches. Such hopes have been dashed.

Anglo-Catholic elements in the Church, determined to prevent the ordination of women, have been encouraged by bodies like the Anglican Consultative Council which recently emphasised the importance of relations with Rome. Many of those who are opposed to women priests wear their ecumenical copes rather lightly when it comes to dealing with Methodists and lesser breeds within the Protestant fold. Their objective is reunion with Rome, and although there is still considerable opposition among Anglicans to such a development, the signs are that the two churches will eventually merge.

Few expect it to be a partnership of equals. Until the present day, Papal condemnation of the orders of men who are Anglican priests has not been repealed. Yet Anglican leaders are prepared to fawn on Rome, and Cardinal Hume enjoys the status of an Establishment figure.

Dr Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, reacted to the failure of the Anglo-Methodist scheme by declaring that he and like-minded Anglicans felt that they had entered darkness. But if Rome and her Anglo-Catholic allies are successful in their take-over bid for an established Church of England, then the 21st century could be a truly dark and reactionary period in our history.

* * *

I have always maintained that Mary Whitehouse

made a serious blunder when, in 1976, she initiated a prosecution for blasphemy over a poem that had already been forgotten by readers of the journal in which it originally appeared, and of which the general public was unaware. Although the good lady was gratified by the result of the trial and appeals, she did not succeed in bankrupting *Gay News*, which an increasing number of people are coming to believe was her real motive. But she did succeed in alerting libertarians to the threat that hangs over writers and publishers, and in transforming hundreds of nominal believers with a misplaced respect for Christianity into secular humanists. Mrs Whitehouse would no doubt like to think that the *Gay News* case is water under the bridge. But opponents of blasphemy law are fighting fit and their cause is being greatly assisted by the continuing discussion in a number of journals.

The Law Society's Gazette (on 25 April) carried a controversial article "Why Censorship is the Ultimate Blasphemy", by Michael Rubinstein, a lawyer and deputy chairman of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society. Mr Rubinstein appears to be a freethinking deist who deplores blasphemy "because of the harm that it must do, or which must have been suffered by, the blasphemer". This sounds like a variation on the hoary Christian assertion that those who reject the idea of God do so in order to get their own back on the Almighty for some physical or mental affliction.

Whatever Michael Rubinstein's religious beliefs may be, he is a forthright opponent of blasphemy law as a protection for Christianity or any other faith. He writes: "I can imagine no possible good which might be achieved by widening the scope of law to cover offence given to non-Christians (whether or not the intentions of anyone were deemed to be relevant) . . . harm must be done to spiritual causes, so long as blasphemy remains a crime at all, by the confusion of religious and secular values. Piety cannot be put down; religiosity can only be sent up".

There was a detailed examination of the House of Lords rejection of the *Gay News* appeal in *The Criminal Law Review* (May). It describes the decision as "a setback to a rational and fair system of criminal liability".

The *CLR* demolishes Lord Scarman's argument for extending blasphemy law to non-Christian religions. It comments: "If this extension were allowed, it would have to apply to all religions. The law might favour the religion of the established church but, once it goes beyond that, it could scarcely pick and choose. Yet there are religions which may well be regarded by thoughtful and well-informed members of the community as thoroughly harmful. Recent events at Jonestown in Guyana are fresh in our minds. Should the law protect all religions, however weird and potentially harmful to the community

(continued back page)

The beginning and end of life were the subject of two important parliamentary debates last month. An Abortion (Amendment) Bill, proposed (as described in the July *Freethinker*) by Mr John Corrie, was given its second reading with the large majority of 144. A motion to restore capital punishment, moved from the back benches by Mr Eldon Griffiths, was defeated by 119 votes.

The Abortion (Amendment) Bill was, by Mr Corrie's own admission, badly drafted and published only a few days before the debate, so that there was, in the view of opponents of the Amendment, almost no time to marshal arguments against the details of the proposals. The main clauses of the Bill are to reduce the upper time limit from 28 to 20 weeks (with possible exceptions for congenitally deformed foetuses), to change the phrase "risk" to health in respect of grounds for abortion to "grave risk", to only allow doctors of five-years-standing to authorise the operation, to strengthen the conscience clause of nurses and doctors, and to change laws governing private clinics so that referral and counselling are separated from medical treatment.

Mr Corrie presented his Bill as a tidying-up measure to prevent abuse. He wrote in a letter to the *Guardian*: "My Bill is a moderate one and is drafted to meet the current climate of opinion to restrict abuse of abortion procedures." All statistical evidence points to the current climate of opinion wanting the 1967 Abortion Act to be left alone and Mr Corrie has produced no evidence to the contrary. The "moderateness" of Mr Corrie's attitude to abortion was perhaps best revealed when he said on the television programme "Brass Tacks" that he was against an increase in day care clinics to facilitate early abortions (and thus minimise the number of late abortions). Many of Mr Corrie's supporters want not moderate tidying-up but reduction, or even elimination, of abortion.

The Bill is likely to be much changed during its committee stages. The large majority may produce a select Committee packed with anti-abortionists, eager for an even tougher Bill. They will doubtless carefully bear in mind their tactics, and how far they can go and still get the Bill through the House.

As has often been the case MPs giving their vote to preserve "the sanctity of life" by opposing abortion, also gave their Ayes to the destruction of life by capital punishment (for example Messrs Corrie, Bennion, Braine, Boyson . . .) But there was a large majority against the restoration of capital punishment even for limited cases of terrorism and the murder of policemen. Mrs Thatcher had promised that this measure would be given a free vote in her new government and herself voted to restore hanging (having previously taken the trouble to vote for Mr Corrie's Bill). In this matter (if in no other) the majority of her cabinet disagreed with her and voted against restoration of

capital punishment.

The arguments that martyrdom by hanging was no deterrent to terrorists and that there was no conclusive evidence that crimes of violence would be reduced by the threat of capital punishment were forcefully put by the Home Secretary, Mr William Whitelaw, and his opposite number in the shadow cabinet, Mr Merlyn Rees.

We will, at least for some years, be spared the nauseous thought of priests blessing the hangman and spending the last hours with the person to be hung, and the equally nauseous spectacle of ghoulish members of the public crowding outside a place of execution. Retribution and vengeance are religious concepts of "justice"; secular humanism looks to reform of criminals and practical protection of society as the civilised approach to even the most extreme forms of crime.

UNBELIEF UPHELD

"Paul Johnson explains how Christianity defied the sceptics" was the sub-heading of a four-page article in the *New Statesman* (1 June 1979). The former *New Statesman* editor, who has abandoned his earlier socialist outlook and now seems ready to out-Muggeridge Muggeridge as a media-conscious Christian apologist, is eager to proclaim—in the title of the article—"A Vindication of Belief".

The arguments of Paul Johnson are too lengthy to summarise in full, but he makes some of the following points: that belief in immortality is the "most powerful and indestructible idea ever conceived by man" and that Christianity's strength lies in the clarity it gives this belief; that the "slogans of anti-Christians have worn badly"; that atheism peaked in the 1880s and has since declined steadily; that the nineteenth century science-based system of belief became rapidly out of date; and that theology is only seen as unnecessary when, "as in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the intellectual elite is under the illusion that it possesses a sufficient non-theological explanation of the universe".

In an article, which the *New Statesman* did not print, countering Paul Johnson's attack on scepticism, Nicolas Walter, editor of the *New Humanist*, pointed out some of the numerous weaknesses of Johnson's arguments. He says that Johnson is wrong about immortality, since its widespread existence as a belief does not make it true, and the Christian version is striking "not because it is so clear and confident, but because it is so wrong and repellent". Johnson is also wrong, argues Nicolas

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Walter, about the decline of Christianity coinciding with a brief nineteenth century period of doubt—for scepticism is older than the nineteenth century “crisis of religion” and even if few of the many unbelievers today ever join a humanist organisation “the formal movement which represents them is alive and kicking”. About Johnson’s assertion of theology, Nicolas Walter commented, “Theology is not the queen of sciences, but the whore”.

The full arguments of the two articles will appear in a future issue of the New Humanist.

* * *

Barbara Smoker, in a letter to the *New Statesman* commented on Johnson’s assertion that secularist or humanist groups suffered after the 1880s a decline which was “steady and ultimately catastrophic”. She pointed out that “In the 1880s the churches were railing against secularists for their teaching of evolution, for their promotion of family planning, and for their anti-imperialism. The Christian opposition on these, and other, social issues has long since dwindled to a small minority, even within the churches that were the most vehemently reactionary in the 1880s.

“Such a conversion of our opponents surely turns a peak into a plateau, not a decline!

“When did Christianity itself ‘peak’? Certainly not in the 1880s, though the middle classes attended church as a sign of respectability. Christianity was at its strongest during the cruel crusades and *autos-da-fé* and witch-trials.”

ABSURD THANKSGIVING

We have no wish to comment on the Thorpe case, over which excess ink has already been spilt. But an absurd epilogue to the case should be recorded, as an example of the speed with which clerics rush to make fools of themselves. A thanksgiving service was held in Mr Thorpe’s parish after the jury found him not guilty. The Rev. John Hornby, who carried out the service, said “People in our parishes have told me they prayed for him during the trial, as I did in my private prayer. When God granted our requests I decided to give a big ‘thank you’.” The service was not well attended.

GOD AND THE BIG BAG

The theory of the “big-bag” as an explanation of the origin of the universe was developed by the famous *Guardian* misprint department: “The quark—the smallest known unit of matter—may have triggered off the big-bag (sic) beginnings of the universe”. A

correspondent wrote that “It seems quite incredible that such a small thing could have blown up this bag, let alone burst it . . . Give me Genesis every time.”

A letter from Jim Herrick, Secretary of the National Secular Society, was subsequently printed. He said that the correspondent “may prefer Genesis to quarks in searching for cosmological origins. But that’s no help. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and earth . . .’ but which bag did God come out of?”

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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BOOKS

FASCISTS—A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE NATIONAL FRONT by M. Billig. Harcourt and Brace.

Now that the Silly Party has polled over 600 votes in the Dover constituency at this year's General Election, thus doubling the votes received by the National Front candidate, it becomes rather hard to see how Michael Billig believes that a decline in the National Front overall performance is not to be expected at the ballot box. However, I am writing this review of his social psychological study of the National Front with the benefit of hindsight, having seen the election results, and when this work was published earlier in the year the National Front were more of a force than they are at present.

By detailed analysis of the ideology of the National Front, intense scrutinisation of their twin publications *Spearhead* and the popular (if that is the correct word) *National Front News* plus an informative survey/questionnaire of members of a National Front Branch, Michael Billig indeed makes a presentable case for asserting that the National Front is a fascist organisation.

I am prepared to go along with this assumption as this work is undoubtedly the most detailed psychological analysis to date on the National Front, though I have one or two reservations in calling the National Front out and out fascists, since I can perceive slight but significant differences which suggest to me that they are better described as neo-fascists. Space does not permit me to enter into a detailed analysis of what fascism is, but perhaps the most concise statement defining fascism came from its founder, Benito Mussolini, when he wrote the article "Fascismo" in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. He stated: "Fascism is a spiritual conception born of the general reaction of this century against the sluggish and materialist positivism of the eighteenth century. . . Fascism is a religious conception in which man appears in his inherent relationship to a superior law, to an objective will which transcends the particular individualism and elevates him as a conscious member of spiritual society."

From this definition we can see how fascism is particularly suited to Catholic countries in south Europe rather than the Protestant north and it is no coincidence that fascism tended to do far better in countries where the majority of the population was Catholic in the 1930s. Therefore, although individuals within the National Front conform to the fascist stereotype, I remain unconvinced that the bulk of its membership adheres to an ideology comparable to Mussolini's.

Michael Billig points out that fascism in the 1970s has changed its form from the pre-war years and that naturally the National Front has a differing approach to its predecessors. There is strong evidence to sug-

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gest that within the higher echelons of the Party there is a coterie with a committed national socialist outlook and through official Party literature this national socialism is thinly disguised. Certain individuals within the Party have—to put it mildly—a somewhat shady background, and *Spearhead's* anti-Zionism, as Mr Billig points out from his research into back numbers, is nearer to raw anti-semitism. Whether or not this inner coterie is successful in influencing the membership with its theories of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy is a debateable point as Mr Billig's survey of a branch of the Party seems to indicate. Some members were absolutely convinced of a world Zionist plot whereas others tended to reject it.

From the careful analysis made of *Spearhead* it does seem that the magazine has an obsession with Jews dating back to its inception in the mid-1960s, but when its founder shows all the symptoms of being paranoid that is hardly surprising.

On a psychological level Michael Billig explains that from the data he has gathered there are distinct fascist personalities which, though taking different forms in different societies, have common roots. I use the plural, rather than the singular, because paradoxically what National Front members have in common is their differences. This is demonstrated well in the chapter dealing with the man of authority and the man of violence. On the one hand we have a man firmly believing in respect for law and order, on the other a man who would commit acts of violence when pressed thus breaking the law so slavishly admired by the former.

It is perhaps because of these inherent contradictions within the National Front that recently it has suffered a few setbacks. The survey of a branch membership indicates the different backgrounds and upbringing of individual members, though they are mainly working class. Its membership tends to join mainly because of "coloured" immigration, but even on this issue some members seemed to have reservations about the Front's policy of compulsory repatriation for "coloured" immigrants and their dependents.

I would not be surprised to hear that within the next few months some faction has broken away from the National Front, as happened a few years ago when the National Party briefly appeared on the scene. This latter group came into existence because of differences in interpretation and personality conflicts which Michael Billig examines mid-way through his book. Since the recent election must have considerably lowered the morale amongst Front members all the ingredients are there for an internal con-

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flict: a phenomenon not unknown on the far-right in recent British political history.

Statisticians as well as students of politics from a psychological basis will be impressed by the correlation coefficients of values in National Front literature in chapter 4 where comparison is made with material from the Labour and Conservative Parties, so there can be no doubt that Mr Billig has a firm empirical basis to support his hypothesis of the fascist nature of the National Front. The bibliography contains a wealth of material, which I certainly found helpful, covering virtually every aspect raised in the book.

This work would be essential reading for anyone making a study of the National Front and maybe because of its more scientific, empirical approach I found it an improvement on Martin Walker's *National Front* published two years ago, which in itself was a good analysis of the National Front. Yet, try as I might, from what I know about the National Front, I still find it easier to see them as an object of ridicule and satire rather than an ominous fascist army about to take over control. In any case, having seen their members marching, I would conclude that most of them would have the greatest difficulty in putting on jackboots.

KEN WRIGHT

IN SEARCH OF HISTORY by Theodore H. White. Cape, £6.50.

Theodore White calls this "a personal adventure", from the Jewish ghetto of Boston and war-ravaged Indo-China to the corridors of power at the White House during the Kennedy years: he has seen and reported on most of the major events in world affairs within those years. And though few could disagree that he has "seen it all", some might take issue with his sense of discovery.

Mr White is perhaps best known among general readers for his chronicles of the final furlongs in the races of successive American presidents. His "Making of the President" series first alerted us to the trappings of public relations in national politics. Though he did not invent the term "hype", he brought the concept into the sitting rooms of middle America. It is almost surprising that the man who has become such a window on the Establishment should himself be a product of its intellectual fringe. So, too, were the Kennedy clan, if one thinks back to the furore their Roman Catholicism created in 1960. Mr. White went to Harvard and read history, was a class-mate of Kennedy biographer Arthur Schlesinger, no less. But to read of his childhood struggles when he was compelled to attend Hebrew

school and commit vast junks of Old Testament to memory, we might well wonder how indeed he managed to break through.

His book is long and discursive, epic in sweep, yet idiosyncratic in tone and outlook. Here he is, privy to the intimate disclosures of imperial-warlords, frequently depicting their Gargantuan struggles as petulant squabbles among schoolboys.

It is a freak of history that world conquest often rests on a pinhead so minuscule that the eventual cataclysm is grotesque. Such was indeed the case in the fight for control within the American chain of command in the Pacific during World War II. As White reveals, the dispute between Generals Stilwell and Chennault began over nothing more substantial than Stilwell's puritanical objection to a brothel for the troops. Behind this lay not only the whole direction of the Pacific campaign but also America's part in the Communist Chinese revolution. Had Stilwell not been replaced as commander of American forces in Indo-China, the Korean War might never have taken place. Though speculation of this sort is dangerous—and in fairness, White does not push it that far—the thrust of his personal search carves out patterns as White the trail-blazer compels us to adopt his own global view of events. The tragedy of Vietnam is never far removed from his survey of the years he spent covering the Far East.

About China's revolution, White falls well inside the revisionist camp. He detects its inception in the late 1930s and is never prepared to condemn the communist initiative outright. If anything, he is most critical of the nationalist government of Chiang K'ai-shek. The members of Chiang's government had become so westernised through their exclusive Ivy League upbringing that they were totally out of touch with the populist sentiments running through their own country. Small wonder, then, that successive American administrations failed to appreciate the extent of how far things had gone in China by the end of the war. No-one in Washington was prepared to believe that the revolution was irreversible. Their own advisers were recalled and forced to stand trial as "Red sympathisers", publicly disgraced, their careers ruined. White's copy was altered or otherwise blacked when he spoke of how Mao and Chou En-lai were becoming a force for the good within China.

And elsewhere White roundly condemns what he calls the American imperialism that believes that what is good for America must also be good for the world. We can see a shift in this philosophy, since the advent of Vietnam, in American policy toward Angola, for instance. The shift even underwrites overdue recognition of Red China. Yet for all his justified anger at American foreign policy, White maintains that the post-war Marshall Plan exemplified American diplomacy and American benevolence. True, the threat of Soviet aggression was at the root of this massive aid scheme ("the most successful anti-communist concept of the last fifty years", White says). But in its attempt to unify as

well as revitalise Europe, the plan paved the way for the wonderful economic community—and some might well argue the toss there. In his analysis of Britain's new Labour government in 1945, White may be even more wrong-headed. Attlee, he says, was "one of the greatest nonentities of British history", while his highest praise of anyone of the Labour ministers is reserved exclusively for *Ernest Bevin*. Thus White is here guilty of the same blinkered vision for which he criticises America in the Far East. It is a sorry comment on White's lack of consistency that whereas he is incisive in one area, he is totally inept in another.

His comments concerning the Kennedy Administration are so peremptory that one assumes he will continue the story in a second volume. Here they serve as an epilogue and offer us nothing we did not already know from White's previous work and elsewhere. He cut his milk teeth on China, and this section is by far the most absorbing and authoritative. Worth the price of this coffee table book alone, and a snip at that.

JAMES MACDONALD

WORKERS AGAINST THE GULAG by Viktor Haynes and Olga Semyonova. Cluto Press, £1.95 paperback.

The marxist far left is in a sorry state in Britain. Millions of working people, deified by Karl Marx, solemnly voted Tory at the General Election. Clearly they can't wait to climb on to the middle class band wagon on which the composers, for example, are well settled at £15,000 a year. Whatever happened to impoverishment? What about socialism? What indeed!

It must be very difficult these days both to wear doctrinal blinkers and have to face the facts. It can't be done, but that doesn't stop people trying. *Workers Against the Gulag* is a case in point. It is sub-titled "The New Opposition in the Soviet Union". That word "New" is the give-away. Since 1917 millions of people, most of them workers and peasants, have been persecuted, and masses of them put to death, by "the revolution"; but the myth had it that they were "class enemies", non-persons and therefore not to be taken into account. Generation after generation has been fooled and found out too late. Now the present generation, in its turn, is finding out. . .

They can't ignore Vladimir Klebanov because he is a miner. Klebanov began agitating in what we would regard as a normal trade union way in 1958 and nineteen years later news of his activity got through to the West. "The West first heard of the Free Trade Union Association on 25th November 1977 when Klebanov held a first informal press conference in Moscow."

What follows is so pathetic that comment is unnecessary: "These people are not 'dissidents' in the normal sense of the word. They are much simpler

men and women: 'honest labourers of the socialist society, producers of national wealth'."

And again: "What distinguishes these workers from the civil rights movement [wicked and bourgeois of course] and what makes them so important, is, first of all, that their complaints stem from the workplace: their original criticisms are economic." The ideological hooray-words are suitably stressed in case we miss them.

Klebanov had discovered that he and his fellow miners were being cheated out of their pay by the pit management. His crime was to discover the truth and insist on honesty. For this he was "hospitalised" for paranoia and then sent to prison, where he remains to this day.

Most of the book consists of verbatim texts of workers' depositions. They all tell substantially the same story—the Soviet industrial worker is badly paid and systematically exploited in an industrial system where piece work rates, work norms and commodity prices are all manipulated without regard to real values in order to keep the Army, the KGB and the Party in being as privileged classes. No trade unions, as we understand them, are allowed and all grievances have to go through top channels in Moscow (those of the Procurator, the Politbureau, etc) where the principal offenders are the judges in their own cases. There is no way out except to the prison camps and the Special Psychiatric Hospitals—until the day when something cracks at the top.

Every worker has to carry two passes (shades of South Africa!): one is a residence permit the other a work permit. Without these a Soviet citizen is a non-person, unable to get a job anywhere or a place to live.

If the reader discerns a certain bitterness in my treatment of this book it is because I write from personal experience. Back in '56 I was the Secretary of the Cambridge Communist Party and presumed to defend the Hungarian Revolution. What I said was true—10,000 Hungarians were shot down by Russian tanks in the violence in streets of Budapest. Simple simon that I was, I thought truth and right were important. There was, of course, no acceptable answer to what I said so I was given the familiar treatment. The loyal hard-working teacher and party secretary, who had given his life to the Party, became overnight a wicked "intellectual" and a "petty bourgeois renegade" with "a right deviation" out to mislead "the honest party workers". It really had nothing to do with class at all. The smoke screen of name-calling that the far left puts up to separate the good honest workers from the wicked intellectuals in the Soviet Union is of the same order. It is what the Kremlin wants, the only answer they have to the truth.

The happy and rather droll thing about this book is that after fighting to sustain their silly class dogmas throughout, the authors abandon them in their very last sentence: "It is, therefore, essential

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that the workers movement in the West should give its support to *all* those fighting for human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe." It seems that the "truth" will out after all!

Two other books have appeared recently that complement this one but at much more significant levels. The first is by Rudolf Bahro of Eastern Germany. He was a leading Party member, well placed, high up in the hierarchy of the GDR. He did a Crossman on the regime, wrote an exposé in secret and got it out to the West where it was duly published. It is now available in English. He avows that he is still a marxist out to build socialism, but that it is nonsense to talk about the "working class" in a country where any independent organisation is completely forbidden in places of work. Bahro looks to thinking, caring, discerning individuals and groups. Heresy! They couldn't get him for criticising the regime because that is not a crime in the GDR, so they have put him inside for being in the pay of foreign imperialism (after a trial *in camera*). His case is exciting a lot of interest among marxists in the West. At a recent meeting in Conway Hall the extraordinary spectacle was witnessed of the CP and the Trots *on the same platform* calling for the release of Rudolf Bahro. Orwell—you should have lived to see this day!*

The other book is Charles Levinson's *Vodka Cola*—indispensable for understanding what détente is really all about. As usual, things are not what they seem. We were given to understand by the media that détente was about the East and the West being sensible and agreeing to co-existence because both sides want peace. Not a bit of it! It seems that ever since the middle 'fifties, shortly after the death of Stalin, the multi-nationals have been moving in on the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. They worked out an ingenious gold-and-barter contract system that got over the previously impossible exchange problem, i.e. what to do with worthless roubles? Fiat began it, General Motors followed (working through a German subsidiary) and hundreds of other companies, including Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola, followed suit. Today they are queuing up. This provides the West with a marvellous new field of investment for surplus capital, using and exploiting the most docile and unorganised labour forces in the world. The KGB is now Wall Street's best ally. And for Moscow and Peking, etc, it means that consumers' goods can be provided in increasing quantities without any liberalising of their regimes.

Détente was deliberately set up by both sides for their own reasons—to increase the profits of one and underwrite the servitude of the other. Happily the whole rotten edifice is cracking visibly, and even their friends can see it, as these books are our witness.

PETER CADOGAN

*Rudolf Bahro: "The Alternative Eastern Europe". (New Left Books, £9.50).

BENT by Martin Sherman. Royal Court. Transferred to the Criterion.

The fact that *Bent*, a new play by Martin Sherman, now transferred to the Criterion from a successful run at the Royal Court is a measure of its powerful theatricality, virtuoso performances, and hard-hitting message. It is an important play, if not a great one.

Max, played with stunning aplomb by Ian McKellen, and his boy-friend are forced on the run by Nazi persecution of homosexuals. They witness a casual friend have his throat cut by storm-troopers, escape with the aid of a night-club owner (rather a clichéd touch of *Cabaret* atmosphere), and while living as outsiders in a tent, Max attempts to persuade his uncle, a man who nervously disguises his own homosexuality, to get tickets for them to leave the country. But they are captured; on the train to Dachau, Max watches his boy-friend tortured and refuses to acknowledge him, thinking that by avoiding classification as a homosexual his treatment in the concentration camp will be less unbearable.

The more cohesive second act is set in the camp and we see a gruelling, Sisyphus-like task of pointlessly moving stones around the stage. The love which develops between Max (who has evaded categorisation as a homosexual) and another prisoner, Horst, classified as homosexual and wearing the pink triangle, gives beautiful moments of warmth and complex conflicting emotions in an atmosphere of anguish. Horst, played with gritty integrity by Tom Bell, is eventually shot. Max, in a heroic gesture, tears the pink triangle from the dead body and throws himself at the electric fence.

The pink triangle has become a symbol of gay liberation, and it is often forgotten that homosexuals were persecuted by Nazis with as much hate as Jews; in fact, they were the lowest of the low in the dire hierarchy of the concentration camp. *Bent* has a strong message in recalling this too easily forgotten fact. The Jewish holocaust is well-known; during the post-war years they were a visible and cohesive group whose persecution evoked the anguish and horror of the world. Homosexuals were invisible; gay rights movements had begun to be crushed as early as 1933, when the storm-troopers raided Hirschfield's Institute for Sexual Science, and had all but vanished by the end of the decade. So in the post-war climate of opinion homosexuals were not able to stand up and publicly count their loss.

Incidentally, it is also rarely remembered that Nazis persecuted freethinkers. In 1933, Hitler seized the assets and buildings of the Freidenkerbund (Freethinker organisation) and leaders, such as Max Sievers, were imprisoned. Ironically, in view of the Catholic role of complicity during the early stages of Nazism, after the war occupation powers gave help

to Christian churches, while freethinkers were suspected of sympathising with Nazism.

Persecution provides a dramatic theme and *Bent* is painful to sit through. There are some weaknesses in the rather flat dialogue, but Robert Chetwyn's production amply compensates for this with its riveting pace and telling atmospheric detail. Ian McKellan and Tom Bell give one of the most original pieces of verbal eroticism I've ever seen on stage. Perhaps the concluding heroic gesture was psychologically inconsistent, but it stirs the feelings towards the justness of the gay liberation case. *Bent* does not have the resonance of a play which delves deeply into the nature of humanity, but it is dramatically and powerfully persuasive.

JIM HERRICK

CINEMA

THE EUROPEANS directed by James Ivory. Certificate U. Curzon Cinema.

In my opinion it is an excellent idea to adapt the novels of Henry James for the stage, for radio or the small screen, and an altogether less excellent one to aim for the large screen. The use of a full palette of colour only serves to compound the error. However good your screenplay is—and Ruth Praver Jhabvala's script for *The Europeans* really *does* capture that slightly amused deliberateness — James's economy of style, his delicacy, are bound to be swamped by the large, bright images on the screen and by the over-explicit dialogue and action.

That said, I did enjoy *The Europeans*. The choice of actors and locations tallies to a remarkable extent with my own preconceptions (just one actor is cast against type: the blond stoutish young clergyman, Mr Brand, is played by an actor who looks for all the world like an angry, sensual Frenchman). The direction, by James Ivory of *Shakespeare Wallah* and *Hullabaloo* fame, is lucid and assured. New England in the fall is ravishing.

The plot: the Europeans, a brother and sister. he a painter of flattering, mediocre portraits, she the estranged wife of a German prince, descend upon their wealthy Bostonian cousins, the Wentworths and the Actons. Spongeing is the name of the game, and it is played with consummate grace and style. Kith and kin they may be, but the Bostonians have a very different way of life from the Europeans. The two adventurers are raffish and flamboyant; while their cousins are restrained, given to "... meagre and savourless pleasures" and to strict observance of the Sabbath. Not surprisingly, two of the Wentworth children have rebelled, to their father's gentle distress. The son, Clifford, has been sent down from Harvard for getting "tipsy", and one of his sisters, Gertrude, has been helped by Mr Brand to curb her own ungovernable temper and easily excited nature. To me, she seems simply a very slapped-down young

woman.

James leaves his readers to ponder on these family conflicts, and concentrates on the love-intrigues, which culminate in three marriages. Ivory devotes even less time to Mr Wentworth and his problem children. Clifford is reduced to a farcical bumpkin. His father and sister fare better, thanks mainly to two well-cast actors, both of whom show a very fine sympathy for James's wistful, unspoilt Americans. Lisa Eichhorn, in particular, makes Gertrude's "hesitating, not at all positive, way of speaking" and her anxious gravity quite memorable. A pity that the ending of the film (decidedly *un*-memorable) does not honour that of the book: "Then (Gertrude) disappeared, and the echo of a gaiety of her own, mingled with that of her husband, often came back to the home of her earlier years. Mr Wentworth at last found himself listening for it; and Robert Acton, after his mother's death, married a particularly nice young girl."

VERA LUSTIG

TELEVISION

A new BBC television series, "Person to Person", aimed at giving viewers an insight into the backgrounds that shaped the lives and attitudes of well-known personalities got off to a pretty shaky start when Mary Whitehouse faced the cameras in an interview with David Dimbleby. Unfortunately, not a great deal of new information regarding the life and times of Ms Whitehouse emerged, and, as usual, she was able to use the event as a platform from which to put across her own brand of "facts" — without ever being seriously challenged.

We were told at the start that Mr and Mrs Whitehouse met through the Oxford Group (later to become Moral Rearmament). This has often been told before, but no attempt was made to explain just what this group was or is. This scrap of not-so-new information was followed by a commercial for the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, during which we were informed by that body's leading light that VALA existed to help people of diverse views, "whether they agree or disagree with us", to make their feelings known to the broadcasting authorities.

Now that is news (at least to me) and I would exhort all freethinkers to make full use of Mrs Whitehouse's services. If they wish to complain about the "Epilogue", "Stars on Sunday", or even "Person to Person", they should first contact VALA. In fact, members of all minority groups who feel they are misrepresented by the media should avail themselves of this facility forthwith.

At one point in the programme Mr Mary Whitehouse, in gardening togs, was given the opportunity of comparing his wife with other notable people "thrown up by history" (very sic.). People like Elizabeth Fry, Lord Shaftesbury, and Wilberforce. He said he preferred to stay in the background, which is

probably just as well since that was where he remained for the rest of the programme.

Back to the "star", and more Whitehouse "facts". Sex on telly intrudes into the family circle and "turns people into voyeurs". No mention of the "off" switch possessed by television sets was made at this or any other stage of the proceedings. Nine per cent of children aged between seven and ten are still watching TV at 10 pm, and 42 per cent of 11 to 14-year-olds are still goggling at the box even later, she revealed.

"They would have seen that," she declared, referring to a sexually explicit clip from "Pennies from Heaven", without any mention of the two other channels available, and the distinct possibility that the kids may have been watching something less serious. Brushing aside absence of proof for her assertion, and the question of parental responsibility, Dimpleby moved on to probe her own childhood.

She was one of four children (one of whom was handicapped) in a family that was continually short of money. Sometimes her mother had to work through the night to make ends meet, and her father was "a frustrated artist" who separated from his wife when Mary was 20. In spite of all the difficulties, she considered her childhood a stable and secure one. During her early 20s she fell in love with a married man which caused her a crisis of conscience. The manner in which she resolved this crisis highlights the difference in the way religious and non-religious people tackle their problems. In her case she confessed the problem was "too big" for her, and she turned to God to solve it for her, via the Oxford group.

Having done this shallow dig into his subject's history, and touched on the turbulent sixties and the dawning of the Nationwide Festival of Light, Dimpleby returned her to the subject she and Dimpleby appeared most obsessed about—sex. More "facts" emerged from those ever-smiling lips. Women have always known about the female orgasm and therefore there should be no talk of such matters on television. No mention of the recent Hite report and that research has shown that masses of women have never heard of such a thing, let alone experienced it.

Oral sex? It's in "bad taste", she complained and should not even be hinted at in the media. It might give people ideas. At any rate such behaviour isn't necessary. Millions of couples have perfectly normal sex lives without having to resort to oral sex. And so on. Ignorance, apparently, is bliss.

Then finally to her greatest hang-up—homosexuality—and another well-known Whitehouse "fact". Homosexual militants are going into schools and telling impressionable adolescents that "to be gay is the most wonderful thing in the world", and telling children who are going through a normal homosexual phase that "this is it, you have arrived". When

she made this allegation on London's Capital Radio phone-in programme recently she told a listener who doubted her word that she had leaflets to prove it.

Well, there is at least one viewer who would like to see that evidence. Me!

BRIAN PARRY

LETTERS

CONSISTENT APPROACH

Your July editorial mentions the small share of the vote cast in Sutton and Cheam at the General Election for the Pro-life Independent candidate, John Smoker—who happens to be my brother (still true to the ancestral R.C. faith). As his campaign was directed mainly against "too-easy" abortion, you suggested that his lack of support reflected lack of support in the constituency for restricting abortion. Unfortunately, however, this is not entirely so.

Although I do not, of course, condone John's views on abortion, I would like to point out, in fairness to him, that he combined this issue with opposition to the campaign of the Tory candidate (now MP) for the return of capital punishment—thus showing, unlike most anti-abortionists, at least some "pro-life" consistency. And there can be no doubt that the anti-hanging part of his platform cost him a considerable number of votes from the local SPUC and LIFE supporters, most of whom are pro-hangers as well as anti-abortionists, and for whom my brother is generally too left-wing.

BARBARA SMOKER

PRIMITIVE THEORY OF RELIGION

How has Peter Cadogan come to enter the minds of "primitive" (primeval) man and know what they believed; and how did they come to believe such nonsense?—ideas are not biogenetically moulded like arms and legs, and the world is not a gigantic Skinner-box. Who would have thought that in those far-off and difficult days, intelligence (the making of distinctions) was a sorely needed commodity? If early man was as stupid as some paint him, he would have been snuffed out long ago. Animistic thought amongst some "primitive" (modern but uncivilized) peoples is no evidence for protocultural animism, and there is no reason to think it any less derivative and degenerate than the religious forms to be found in modern civilized society.

This discredited theory of primitive animism (primeval stupidity) was once quite fashionable and had long been a weapon in the armoury of some uncritical secularist propagandists. However inadequate some of them might have felt it to be as an explanation of the origins of a social institution, they thought it admirably suited to the purpose of flattening Christians and could never forgo the great pleasure and feelings of self-satisfaction as they gleefully belted Christians over the head with it. But now we witness the phenomenon of Peter Cadogan claiming spiritual affinity with primeval idiots and rejoicing in it.

BRIAN AUBREY

An index to the 1978 issues of "The Freethinker" is available to readers on request with a stamped addressed envelope. Write to 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

EVANGELISM

The National Strategy is the title of the recently published policy statement from the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism. The aim is to bring the Christian gospel to every person in Britain by the year 2000. A Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism assembly is being planned at Nottingham University in September 1980.

The General Synod of the Church of England last month debated evangelism. The Bishop of Guildford said: "I see evangelism as something which has to be done Sunday by Sunday, day by day, in the parishes, by all Christian people, not only the clergy . . ."

Watch out! and have your *Bible Handbook* by G. W. Foote and W. F. Ball at the ready.

(Jottings)

from vilification, ridicule and contempt? It is submitted that vilification, ridicule and contempt may be decidedly in the public interest. Should it not be possible to attack in the strongest terms religious beliefs that adulterers should be stoned to death and that thieves should have the offending hand lopped off, however offensive that may be to the holders of the beliefs? With respect, the right to freedom of religion provided for by article 9 of the European convention does not necessarily imply a duty to refrain from insulting or outraging the religious feelings of others".

Edward Royle, the Lecturer in History at York University, contributes an article entitled "Historical Reflections on the Blasphemy Law" (*New Humanist*, June), in which he writes with erudition and authority on previous blasphemy cases. He concludes by quoting Sir James Fitzjames Stephen's reference to "scandalous prosecutions which have never in any one instance benefited anyone, least of all the cause which they were intended to serve, and which sometimes afford a channel for the gratification of private malice under the cloak of religion".

Tom Gleeson's "Publishing Blasphemous Libels" (*Police Review*, 6 July) is, by comparison, very thin gruel indeed. He airily dismisses *The Criminal Law*

Review and other critics of blasphemy law as being "legal purists". Put another way, the "legal purists" are concerned to protect the citizen from unjust and obsolescent laws; Mr Gleeson is concerned to protect the privileged position of Christianity, "which most of us hold to be basic and fundamental if we wish to live in any decent sort of society".

Mr Gleeson may yet see his name on the letter headings of Mary Whitehouse's outfit.

* * *

Judge Mervyn Griffith Jones (Eton, Trinity Hall, Cambridge and the Coldstream Guards), who died in July at the age of 70, had a long and distinguished career. He was one of the prosecution team at the Nuremberg trial of war criminals and led for the Crown in the Stephen Ward trial at the time of the Profumo affair. But he will be best remembered as prosecutor in the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial when he enquired of the jury: "Is it a book you would like your wife or servant to read?"

Wives and servants—possibly judges' wives and servants—have been reading about Lady C's adventures for many years now.

EVENTS

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

London Secular Group (outdoor meetings). Thursdays, 12.30 pm at Tower Hill; Sundays, 2-5 pm at Marble Arch. ("The Freethinker" and other literature on sale.)

London Young Humanists. Discussion: "Must humanists be socialists?" Sunday, 19 August, 7.30 pm. 14 Muswell Hill Road, N6.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Discussion: "Urgent Reforms we would like to see". Monday, 20 August, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Discussion: Topics including humanism and marxism. Tuesday, 4 September, 8 pm. 86 Ainsbury Road, Coventry CV5.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas trip to Malta fully booked. Easter 1980: Isle of Wight. Details from Mrs Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 0NA. Telephone: 01-673 6234.

THE FREETHINKER

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