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PAPAL VISIT RESURRECTS IRELAND'S KNOCK LEGEND

The apparition at Knock was the focus of the Pope's visit to Ireland. In common with most apparitions when the evidence is given careful examination it is found wanting. Here is an article which is also appearing in the "Irish Times". David Berman, who teaches philosophy at Dublin University, looks rigorously at the Knock appearance and offers a rational hypothesis to explain the "vision".

Recently there have been several publications on Knock, but they have all been by Catholic supporters of the apparition. This has given the discussion an air of unreality which should please no one. Yet historical problems which have a practical relevance are surely as worthy of critical examination as those of academic interest. And that Knock is of practical relevance is clear from the numbers of people and sums of money flowing into it. About a million people visit its shrine each year; more than a million pounds have been spent on its new church; and it has drawn a Pope to Ireland.

The importance of Knock is based squarely on the alleged appearance of the Virgin Mary on the dull and rainy evening of 21 August, 1879. Now since I do not believe either in an after-life or in the supernatural status of the mother of Jesus, I could hardly believe that she visited Knock, Co. Mayo, a hundred years ago. I think my reasons for subscribing to what might be called naturalism are sound, but I recognise that to many people they are likely to appear difficult and unsatisfactory since they amount to a denial of religions such as Christianity and Judaism. Yet rejecting the Knock apparition without giving any reasons runs into even greater trouble: for it will be seen as dogmatic and arrogant. Moreover, it might be argued that there is no better way of appreciating the truth of a supernatural religion like Christianity than by observing a concrete manifestation of the supernatural. Thus an event, such as

that which is supposed to have taken place at Knock, may be said to prove the general truth of supernaturalism as against naturalism, and in a scientific way, as it moves from particular experience to general principle.

Be that as it may, I think it is worth considering the apparition in its own terms—within the Roman Catholic position, which firmly believes in the modern actuality of such supernatural occurrences. Let us then go directly to the hard evidence: to the official depositions of the dozen or so witnesses to the apparition. These depositions were, it is well known, made before the commission of three priests appointed by the Archbishop of Tuam. The depositions were taken on 8 October, 1879, six weeks after the event. What is not generally known is that there is now no trace of the original depositions. Considering the sacred significance accorded to the happening, this is surely surprising.

To be sure, depositions have come down to us and are duly quoted in accounts of Knock. But these depositions were neither printed nor certified by the commissioners or by the Archbishop. They were originally published in various newspapers, early in 1880—three months after the depositions had been taken. Since there seems to have been no repudiation by those concerned, it is simply assumed that these newspaper printings are faithful and authentic. In fact, because they differ in significant respects, they are highly problematic. There are two versions of the depositions: one is offered in the *Weekly News* of 21 February 1880 and the *The Nation* of 21 and 28 February, 1880, and the other is said to have appeared in a number of the *Tuam News* unfortunately not extant. However, this latter text is reprinted, we are told, by John MacPhilpin in *The Apparition and Miracles at Knock* (Dublin 1880).

(continued over)

The former text is reproduced in *The Illustrated Record of the Apparitions at Knock* (Dublin, circa 1880), published by T. D. Sullivan. MacPhilpin's text contains fifteen depositions, three more than Sullivan's. I cannot here specify all the significant differences between the two versions, but the following are important since they bear on a naturalistic interpretation of the events of 21 August, 1879.

In the deposition of Mary McLoughlin, who is supposed to have been the first to see the apparition, we find in the MacPhilpin version—to which we shall refer as (M)—that she first saw it “while it was yet bright day”. These quoted words do not appear in Sullivan's version—referred to as (S). Indeed (S) contradicts (M) on this point, for in (S) Mary says that “the sun had set that evening at a quarter past seven o'clock”—that is at about 8.45 pm modern summer time. And (S) records her as stating that she saw the apparition shortly after seven-thirty, fifteen minutes after the sun had set. Among the many other differences between the two versions of Mary McLoughlin's evidence is that on first inspection she says—according to (M)—“I saw an altar”; whereas in (S) there is no mention of the altar. This is understandable, since later in (S) Mary is to state that on her second visit to the gable of the church—the scene of the apparition—“I not only beheld the figures I have just now described, but an altar . . .”. And as there are similar words in (M), (M) not only conflicts with (S) but is inconsistent of itself.

Let us, however, move to the deposition of Mary Byrne, another major witness and the second to see the apparition. According to (M), this Mary first saw the figures at 8.00 pm or 7.45 pm, and “It was still bright.” According to (S) it was 8.15 pm, and there is no mention of brightness. Another noteworthy divergence, which reappears more or less throughout the depositions, is that where (M) reads “figure of St. Joseph”, (S) reads “statue of St. Joseph”. Thus Mary Byrne's brother Dominick says “I beheld the three figures or likenesses” in (M), but three “statues or likenesses” in (S).

In the testimony of Mrs Margaret Byrne we also find a difference in the time the apparition was first seen—8.15 pm in (M) and 8.30 pm in (S). In (M) “it was getting dark”; in (S) “it was just dark”. The last divergence I shall mention occurs in the depositions of Margaret and Dominick Byrne (not the same as those previously mentioned of that name). In (M) Dominick says: “The reason I had for calling the third figure St. John is because some saw his statue or his likeness at Lecanvey parish church”. But in (S) it is Margaret and not Dominick who says: “the reason I knew St. John was, I saw a statue of him at Lecanvey chapel.” Clearly the version of (S) is here coherent and sensible, far more so than (M): for how could Dominick recognise St John from what other people saw in Lecanvey? On the whole, (S) reads more convincingly than (M). Most of the

depositions in (S) are either signed, or treated in this way:

her
Margaret X Byrne
mark

(S) also ends with the following note: “All the depositions were duly witnessed by the clergymen conducting the inquiry.” This is missing from (M), where only Patrick Hill's deposition is signed, and it is witnessed by one commissioner alone. I should mention that both MacPhilpin and Sullivan are firm believers in the apparition's authenticity.

The hard evidence is not, therefore, nearly as hard as one would like. Admittedly there is a considerable amount of agreement between (M) and (S). But agreement does not imply that both accounts record accurately; whereas disagreement means that one version *must* be wrong. Now, working critically from the evidence there seem to be four possible explanations of what happened on the evening of 21 August 1879:

- (1) The Virgin Mary actually appeared.
- (2) There was a mass hallucination.
- (3) There was collusion and conspiracy amongst the witnesses.
- (4) There was some kind of hoax.

Now (2) seems to me intrinsically unlikely, especially considering the number of people involved, and the fact that Patrick Walsh, who saw “a most brilliant light” (S)—“golden light” (M)—from a distance, did not make contact with the other witnesses till the following day. The simplicity and straightforwardness of the depositions also seem to rule out (3). Moreover, if they wished to invent wonders, why did they not attribute some agreeable pronouncement to Mary, such as “This is my dearly beloved land”? No, I am strongly inclined to rule out (2) and (3), which leaves (1) and (4). And here I should like to examine (4), specifically considering the hypothesis that what the witnesses saw was the projection of a magic lantern slide. I recognise that there are difficulties with the magic lantern hypothesis; but considering the state of the evidence, it would be surprising if this were not so. What I wish to argue is that, for all its difficulties, the lantern hypothesis is far more credible than belief in its supernatural alternative.

Consider then the following:

- (1) The figures were motionless.
- (2) They became brighter as it became darker.
- (3) They appeared to be statues.
- (4) They were intangible.
- (5) They appeared up against a gable wall, a foot or so above the ground.

- (6) They embodied iconographic conventions.
 (7) They were surrounded by light.

Now one of the objections to the magic lantern is that the sky was too bright at the time for the projector to work effectively. But, as we have seen, in the version of the depositions printed by Sullivan, this difficulty need not arise. Indeed, one is tempted to see MacPhilpin's variants as an attempt to meet or counteract the magic lantern hypothesis. Apart from the earlier time and the brightness in his account, there is another important piece of evidence to support this unpleasant suspicion. I have shown that MacPhilpin's version tends to play down the statue-like appearance of the apparition, by often reading "figures" where Sullivan reads "statues". Now this is significant, as I discovered from a number of books or manuals on magic lanterns printed around 1865-1875. Two points of interest emerged: (1) that magic lantern slides of statues were particularly effective, and (2) that there were numerous slides of religious subjects available around 1870, and many of these were of statuary. Thus in *The magic lantern, dissolving views . . .* (London [1865]) the author informs us that:

"The extreme clearness of these albumen pictures, is nowhere seen to such advantage as in Negrette and Zambra's photographic pictures of statuary, which in the lantern, reproduce the statue on the screen with such wonderful effect and solidity, that they do not seem like pictures, but the statues themselves." (p. 8).

Similarly, we find in *The magic lantern: its construction and use* (circa 1870) that:

"Perhaps no pictures can be better shown with a lantern than photographs of statuary. These are now prepared in endless variety, and it is not too much to say, that any well-known statue, either ancient or modern, can be obtained in the form of a lantern slide. These pictures are usually blocked out, that is to say, every portion of the photograph but the statue itself is covered with black opaque pigment, so that the statue stands out upon the screen as a solid reality . . ." (pp. 63-64).

I have noted above that most of the witnesses describe the figures as being like statues. Indeed, some of them, like Judy Campbell, simply say that they were statues. In Judy's deposition—as given by (S)—the word "statue" is used four times; and Brigid Trench was struck by the immobility, the transparency, and especially by the solidity of the figures: which, as she says, "appeared to me so full and life size". All of this suggests that the witnesses did see a photographic reproduction of statuary. And the slide, or a description of it in a trade catalogue, may one day be found, especially as interest in both Knock and in trade catalogues grows. The considerable selection of slides of statuary and religious subjects is apparent from the advertisements at the end of the second pamphlet quoted from above. Thus Perken, Son & Rayment, of 99 Hatton Garden London, offered 59 slides of "Statuary in South Kensington Museum", 36 slides of "Westminster Abbey", 100 slides of Rome, 50 of English cathedrals, 250 Doré Bible illustrations, 60 Holy land, 50 Passion play, and more than 350 slides from the Bible. Note that this is from only one distributor of magic lantern slides; there were at the time dozens of distributors.

The magic lantern was far more popular in the latter part of the last century than most people are aware; thus it was also being widely used at the time in both Protestant and Catholic religious services. Some manuals on the subject also emphasised the supernatural effects which a lantern could produce: e.g. *The magic lantern: how to buy and how to use it, also how to raise a ghost*, by a Mere Phantom (London, 30th thousand 1880). Hence it is not surprising that the magic lantern hypothesis was

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From the *Weekly News*, Dublin, 7 February, 1880. This seems to be the first published illustration of the alleged apparition, and as such it has an importance not dissimilar to the early verbal statements of the witnesses. One could hardly imagine a more lantern-like depiction.

Secularists Rally in Israel

BARRY DUKE

Recent events in Iran have provided a terrifying illustration of what happens when religious fanaticism runs riot through a society. But rampant clericalism is by no means confined to Islam and Iran. A new secularist movement in Israel shows that Judaism has provided zealots with the motivation and the means to impose their will on Israeli citizens too.

Despite the progressive image the state of Israel is keen on fostering for the benefit of the outside world, that country, in certain respects, "has still not entered the 20th century. Many of its present internal, legal and political arrangements represent a cruel and oppressive danger to the quality of life and freedom of conscience of many Israelis."

The assertions above are contained in Issue No. 1 of the Israel Humanist Review, published by the newly-formed Israel Secular Association which is "committed to the cultural, social and political progress of Israel and its people on the basis of struggle within a framework of rational thought."

Prime examples of the tyranny of Israeli religious laws relate to marriage and divorce. "These laws," states the ISA, "are based on what must be called legal religious intolerance. The Orthodox religious stream of thought dominates and determines this important part of the lives of Israel's Jewish citizens. In innumerable cases the laws of the Orthodox, sanctioned as they are by the state, produce human disasters . . ."

"Some Israelis, out of an exaggerated sensitivity to notions of so-called national unity or survival prefer to avert their eyes to the danger to Israeli society created by legalised religious coercion, accompanied by Orthodox political aggrandisement and social neaderthalism."

The ISA states that while it has no argument with those who personally adhere to religious viewpoints, provided that they do not impinge on the rights of others, religion—be it Judaism or any other—is contrary to the secular association's basic tenets.

"Moreover," it claims, "religion as an organised force leads to schisms, each claiming its exclusive toehold in paradise. In fact the ignominious bickerings among the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform (liberal), to name only the major Jewish religious streams, may yet require the services of the Israel Secular Association as mediator, since they don't seem to be able to talk to one another about God, Judaism and the Jewish people!"

In an open letter to "friends abroad," Professor Gershon Weiler, B. Phil (Oxon) of the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University, writes:

"It may well be true that organised humanism and rationalism survive in the West out of sheer inertia.

For the great battles of the 19th century have decisively determined that the legal and constitutional structure of the state should be based on a secular equality of all citizens. Once this principle has been established in practice, not only in theory, there remains but to keep a wary eye on surviving pieces of, perhaps harmless, superstitions.

"Not so in Israel. It would be nice to be able to report that we are somewhat slow in developing and that such matters as separation of religion and state are progressing slowly, but progressing. It would be nice, but things are not like that. Israel, ever since independence, has firmly maintained the Ottoman-feudal system of personal status written into the law and thus never granted her citizens full equality.

"However, since the last General Election things have gone from bad to worse in all things pertaining to religious freedom and equality of citizens. The country is now in the grip of a veritable clericalist take-over. It should be understood that violations of the principle of freedom of religion pertain exclusively to the Jewish population. Others, Moslem and Christians of all denominations, are quite free to conduct their cults as they please.

"Not so the Jews. The legal situation is that all citizens deemed to be Jews by religious criteria are subjected, by act of Parliament, to the jurisdiction of Orthodox Religious Courts. In this way not only secularists, humanists, etc. are coerced to act against their conscience but, no less importantly, Jews of the Reform Conservative persuasion find themselves reduced to an inferior status.

"Their rabbis are not authorised to perform legally recognized marriage-ceremonies, nor are they deemed to be qualified to sit in Religious Courts while, of course, there is no question at all of allowing them to set up their own.

"The subject is vast and much exceeds the confines of a letter. But the interested reader may find a detailed and scholarly presentation of the history and practice of religious coercion in Israel in the book of S. Z. Abramov, former Deputy Speaker of Israel's Parliament, entitled 'The Perpetual Dilemma'.

"Lastly, a small request to our friends abroad. If ever you chance to a meeting in which spokesmen for Israel tell their audiences of the achievements of liberalism and democracy in this country, please do not fail to ask them to explain in detail matters relating to religious freedom, such as the 'Who is a Jew?' law, etc. In this way you will have helped a nation that lives, as far as basic liberties of conscience go, somewhere in the very remote past."

Barry Duke has edited this edition of "The Free thinker" while the Editor is on holiday.

Pinning God Down

GEOFFREY H. L. BERG

Geoffrey Berg thinks freethinkers must not neglect the arguments about the existence of God. He believes that the nature of any concept of God should be clearly examined to see how logically consistent it is. The article suggests that it will be more conclusive to rigorously scrutinise a concept of God which has meaning than to emphasise the meaninglessness of the concept of God, as in much twentieth century philosophy.

"I can't prove God does exist . . . you can't prove God doesn't exist. But . . ." How often has any freethinker who troubles to discuss his sceptical view of the existence of God heard that?

Worse still, most are prepared to accept without further consideration that the idea of God is actually beyond the possibility of proof on either side. At this stage the argument probably descends to the circumstantial evidence of this world, with the theist evoking the wonders of the world and the sceptics evoking the horrors of the world, both to further their firm beliefs on the probability of the matter.

I am bound to say that this hopeless stalemate over whether the existence of God can be proved or disproved has never satisfied me. I cannot see the virtue in accepting an impasse (our inability to prove anything), without even bothering to give the question a second thought. Even as a teenager I set out to think of ways of disproving the existence of God, and have tried my hardest to succeed in subsequent years.

I believe my approach was right even—at worst—should an attempt be doomed to failure. Also I commend the person who tries his best to prove that God exists. What I have no time for is the person who refuses even to give the proposition a second look. The human race certainly did not get where it is today by despairing of a solution to problems without even making an attempt to investigate them.

Unfortunately some eminent modern freethinkers have done the cause of argument in this field no good by attempting to demonstrate that the concept of God is meaningless. Their arguments are akin to saying, if transported 10,000 years back into the past, that because primitive man had no means of knowing whether or not electricity exists, the concept of electricity is meaningless.

In any case, I believe the fundamental mistake of Professors Ayer and Flew is to concentrate on what is meaningless in the concept of God (meaningless to us because human power is limited and inferior to that of God, if such exists), rather than to concentrate on what the concept of God does actually mean.

Now let me make two things clear. First of all, I am not pretending that the limited human intellect can reproduce in a picture or a description all the features and all the details of what God would be. But we can say with certainty that if God were to exist it would have certain qualities, qualities essential to it being God. For instance, it could not be ephemeral but must be eternal, it would be omnipresent rather than local, omnipotent rather than partially impotent, and good rather than bad or even indifferent.

As a matter of interest, I would list the necessary qualities of God if it existed as being omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, eternal, controlling, good and the provider of purpose. Charles Bradlaugh suggested in 1880 (*A Plea for Atheism*) God's qualities as being transcendent (of the universe), personal, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, infinite, immutable and perfectly good—which is not very different from my list.

The second point which will emerge is that "God exists" is a blanket statement which does not just mean one thing (e.g. an abstract entity exists) but several, if not many, things. You would be saying in one and the same statement that there exists an entity that is eternal and that that same entity is the most knowledgeable entity in the universe; that same entity is the best entity in the universe and in fact gave purpose to the existence of everything in the universe.

Now that we have pierced the shroud of mystery surrounding God and pinned the concept down to considerably more than the word "God", the argument about the proof or disproof of the concept can begin in earnest.

I am bound to admit that I cannot see how it is possible for anybody to prove or even set about proving that God exists as an entity. For instance, how can the mortal prove immortality in the future as well as in the past? How can a race that is not omniscient prove omniscience in another entity?

However, the position is somewhat as in science. You cannot actually prove general rules by particular examples, but you can disprove general rules if they do not apply to particular examples. Even more to the point, logical inconsistency over a limited range of examples can disprove a principle. Even though our knowledge will be limited, if we can use it to good effect to demonstrate internal or inherent inconsistencies of logic we will have won our case and achieved the disproof—beyond reasonable, logical and conceivable doubt.

The "Muppet Show" was taken off the air in Turkey for the Moslem holy month of Ramadan. Moslems consider pigs unclean, and it was feared that the character of Miss Piggy might give offence.

WORLDWIDE

IRAN

A council at present reviewing Iran's draft constitution has approved a clause naming Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism as the only minority religions that will be officially recognised in the Islamic state.

Before the revolution the three religions enjoyed official status. In terms of the council's clause the three will be permitted to exercise their religious rights within the principles of Islam.

The same council earlier approved a clause making the Shi'ite sect of Islam the official state religion.

A census in 1976 revealed the existence of 310,000 Christians in Iran, most of them belonging to the Armenian community. There were a further 80,000 Jews and 30,000 Zoroastrians, who adhere to the faith of pre-Islamic Persia.

THE VATICAN

Vatican employees, dissatisfied with their working conditions, have decided to form a union and have sent a letter to Pope John Paul II asking for pay rises.

It will be the first time a union has been formed among the Vatican's 3,000 workers.

A spokesman for the group seeking to form the union said traditional Vatican benefits like reduced prices on food, medicine and petrol were no longer adequate.

USA

Freethinker fans of Bob Dylan who hoped they would be spared the awful evidence of this American singer's recent conversion to Christianity are being disappointed daily since the release of his newest album, *Slow Train Coming*.

For the LP is littered with newly-acquired Christian sentiment and reflects an overwhelming obsession with heaven and hell. All of this appears to have been acquired by Dylan through Christian Bible classes; a pilgrimage to the "Holy Land"; and his association with the Boone family, well known in the United States (but not in Britain) for their Christian singing activities.

Dylan—born Robert Allen Zimmerman—was brought up in the Jewish faith. His was the most radical voice on the rock scene during the turbulent sixties, and his uncompromising stance against bigotry, social injustice and racialism earned him a world-wide following of millions.

SWITZERLAND

Freethought organisations in Switzerland are campaigning for a complete separation of Church and State. According to Swiss law in most cantons, the

Protestant and the Catholic churches are able to tax their members according to their income. This begins from the point of earning, unless individuals send a registered letter to the ecclesiastical authorities in their canton saying that they want to leave the church.

Last year freethought societies deposited with the government a constitutional initiative—a form of petition—with the necessary 62,000 signatures to ask for a change of constitution. A demand was made for a new article 51 to be introduced stating: "Church and State are completely separated". Parliamentary discussion has shown most MPs are against the move. The referendum is expected to take place at the end of 1979.

USA

The United States Supreme Court has been accused by the Reverend Lester Pack, a Christian fundamentalist, of being "controlled by devils."

The Rev Pack's ire has been roused because he has lost an appeal against the court's outlawing the handling of snakes and the drinking of poison—practices he felt ought to be allowed to continue so that people could prove how strong their faith was during religious services.

It is a claim of fundamentalist preachers that the bible asserts that faithful believers can handle poisonous snakes and drink poison with impunity. Those that die are dismissed as having insufficient faith.

Among the many who have died as a result of these practices was the preacher's brother. He said his congregation had drunk 10 gallons of strychnine since 1973, and his flock would continue to handle snakes and drink poison. Those who didn't like what was happening in his church could go to other churches, he said.

ANTI-ABORTION BILL

Join the national demonstration against Corrie's anti-abortion Bill. Organised by the TUC, the demonstration takes place in London on October 28. Assemble at Reformer's Tree, Hyde Park, London W1 (near Marble Arch) from 11.30 am. Rally in Trafalgar Square, 2.45 pm.

The Reverend Alan Male, an Australian vicar, wants to have the Eros statue in Piccadilly Circus re-christened. He has written to the Duke of Edinburgh and the Greater London Council requesting a change of name. The winged bowman was erected in memory of the philanthropic work of Lord Shaftesbury. According to Mr Male it was intended to be an Angel of Charity dispensing kindness and good works. Goodbye Eros, hello Angel of Mercy . . .

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

"Oh dear! Not another good man fallen among 'positive' humanists". That was my immediate reaction when Francis Bennion informed me several months ago that he was preparing a discourse on "Pastoral Humanism". It was first given at South Place Ethical Society, London, on 1 May and published in the September issue of *New Humanist*.

Readers who have been actively involved in the humanist movement over the last two decades will understand my wariness. Prefixes like "positive" and "constructive" have frequently been used by those humanists (some of them holding key posts in organisations) seeking an excuse to avoid the hard slog of combating religious pressure groups, exposing the fraudulent claims and money-raising activities of imported sects, and challenging Christianity's privileged position in national life. Mr Bennion has now presented those who prefer to lead the regiment from behind with another will-o'-the-wisp.

Francis Bennion, let me hasten to add, is certainly not a humanist Duke of Plaza-Toro. He is a doughty fighter against irrational and intolerant elements in society, and is genuinely concerned about the future of the humanist movement. I happen to believe that on this occasion he is on the wrong tack and hope that his interest in Pastoral Humanism is a temporary aberration.

Mr Bennion describes his scheme as being "severely practical". Restriction on space compels me to be equally practical when considering his thesis which occupied over five pages of *New Humanist*. And I trust it does not sound too severe when I say that he appears to be quite unaware of the vast amount of "pastoral" work carried out by secularist organisations and individuals during the last 120 years; that he makes some rather questionable claims about human needs and desires; that he wrongly assumes there is a great hunger in the population for humanist rites and ceremonies.

It seems that the national organisations, although important, would play a secondary role in the implementation of Pastoral Humanism. Mr Bennion refers to specialist groups and, by implication, the National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association and British Humanist Association. Now it is my clear impression that once established, the specialist groups prefer to keep the humanist movement at arm's length, although they are not averse to occasionally using it as a milch cow (no pun intended). The NSS concentrates its resources on campaigning work. The RPA is likely to remain a pub-

lishing concern. And if the BHA's capacity for action and innovation is reflected in its latest annual report—a most woebegone document—then little is to be expected from that quarter.

At any rate, Francis Bennion visualises the implementation of Pastoral Humanism as "a grassroots operation" by a movement that has "a local, active and visible presence", presumably based on existing humanist groups. He admits that they "tend to meet only once a month, with perhaps an occasional outing or an annual dinner thrown in". It could be added that few such groups make the slightest attempt to establish an active and visible presence in the community by sending reports of their activities, such as they are, to the Press and radio news rooms. Even fewer issue statements on local affairs that are of relevance to the humanist movement, or encourage members to make their views known to MPs and Councillors. Virtually nothing is done to promote sales of the movement's literature or to ensure that works by humanist authors are on the shelves of the public library.

The existence of a humanist group is no guarantee of an active and visible presence in the locality. It often could be cited as evidence of life after death. Yet it is such groups that Francis Bennion expects to "take on the sort of activity that is now largely confined to the Churches: relief of the poor and needy, visiting the sick and lonely, counselling those in difficulty or distress. Club facilities would be provided for the young, for the lonely and for other groups. Working-parties would be organised for decorating old people's flats or weeding the gardens of the disabled. Bigger enterprises would be embarked on: local housing associations, hospital units, community homes."

Mr Bennion declares that there is nothing new in his proposals; one can agree with him on that point, dolefully recalling similar schemes that occasioned much excitement in humanist circles. Their promotion, followed by failure or abandonment of over-ambitious objectives, caused considerable disillusionment among rank-and-file humanists and almost certainly contributed to the decline in membership and activity.

Rationalists and secularists, who tend to be uncomfortably realistic about such matters, are often criticised for not joining in the general euphoria over such concepts as Pastoral Humanism. Yet ironically it is the "sterile" secularists and not the "positive" humanists who have been most active in "pastoral" and "missionary" work, although they may choke on the words because of their religious connotation.

In the mid-nineteenth century secularists took practical steps to eradicate illiteracy by arranging instruction classes for children and adults. Funds were set up to alleviate distress caused by poverty or bereavement (the London secularists registered their

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SECULAR BOOK DEBATED

In the London Broadcasting Company's Sunday radio programme *Sunday Supplement* on 26 August, Jim Herrick discussed the American booklet for children *What About Gods?* with John Bradford of the Church of England Children's Society. John Bradford is author of the pamphlet for the International Year of the Child called *The Spiritual Rights of the Child*.

John Bradford said *What About Gods?* was a "somewhat slippery book" and "destructive because it is trying to subvert beliefs that young people may already have". The interviewer, Beth Webb, asked him if there were not Christian books equally designed to subvert atheist beliefs; he thought this was challengeable.

Jim Herrick said that John Bradford's reaction to the book demonstrated how there was a need for the book. Churches very often act from the assumption that the position from which a child starts is a religious one and when there is a book starting from another assumption suggest that it is subversive or destructive. "Many parents," he said, "would be delighted to have this book, because it fulfills a real need in putting across ideas which some parents would like to see put across."

John Bradford thought the booklet was less reasonable than Jim Herrick said and was too dogmatic to be acceptable for children. While it might do for undergraduates it could be "Highly disturbing for primary school children and disruptive to home nurture."

When Beth Webb asked John Bradford whether he did not agree that children had a right to atheist culture, he replied that they had a right to a more charitable presentation of religion than this book, which sided completely with Marx and Freud in saying that religion is an illusion and churches are a social plot. Jim Herrick thought that he was misrepresenting the book if he implied that it was a handbook of marxism or freudianism, but agreed that it was materialistic and stressed that there was a real need for a book for children which started from this point. "Given the limitations of presenting different and difficult ideas to children," Jim Herrick concluded, "the booklet puts across an alternative to mainstream Christianity very well."

"What About Gods?" by Chris Brockman is available from G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd., 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL: price 75p plus 12p p&p.

NSS SPEAKER CHARGED

Ken Wright, a regular speaker on the secular platform at Tower Hill and a contributor to *The Free-thinker*, was charged in Hyde Park on Sunday, 7 July, under Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1936 with insulting behaviour and intention of breach of the peace. He was heckling, as is customary in that

NEWS

place of robust debate and controversy, an evangelical speaker.

Pleading not guilty at Bow Street Court on 8 July, Ken's case was adjourned to 22 August. Defending himself, Ken Wright explained in the magistrate's court that the gesture, which was alleged to be insulting, was merely a way of questioning the speaker and was the kind of behaviour that he would expect if speaking on a platform himself. Questioning the police constable who brought the charge, Ken asked why the speaker who was supposed to have been insulted had brought no complaint, and why there were no witnesses to the alleged intention to breach the peace. The police constable gave no answer, and the case was dismissed.

REV PICKET PICKETTED

Members of the Elim Pentecostal Church Union congregation in Brighton were involved in a spirited debate recently with a delegation from the newly-formed Gay Humanist Group who visited the church to challenge the Reverend Robert Picket in regard to an anti-homosexual statement published in the Brighton Evening Argus.

Picket was one of 22 Evangelical clergymen who signed a half-page statement opposing the staging in Brighton of the 1979 Campaign for Homosexual Equality conference.

When confronted, after his Sunday morning service, with some of the more dangerous lies and distortions contained in the statement, Picket said he was prepared to apologise—but not publicly—if it could be shown that information contained in the statement was false.

He also admitted not checking the "facts" contained in the statement. The discussion, which also involved a number of Picket's congregation, ended on a predictable note—it was not homosexuals they objected to, but the sin of homosexuality which God had clearly condemned.

UNION PROBLEMS AHEAD?

The 1980s already look as if they will bring problems for the Right Reverend Robert Runcie, shortly-to-be-installed Archbishop of Canterbury.

For the Archbishop elect, who succeeds Dr Donald Coggan in January next year, is facing a challenge from clergy within the ranks ASTMS (the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs)

AND NOTES

to review the Church of England's secret file on black-listed clergymen as soon as he is enthroned.

In an open letter to the next Archbishop, ASTMS clergy members demanded that the Church of England should bring its disciplinary code into line with those of other professions, such as teachers and doctors.

They want clergy to be told if they are being placed on the blacklist, and given the right to receive an explanation, together with the opportunity to appeal.

The list is one of the most confidential documents in the Established Church. Its circulation is strictly limited to bishops, their chaplains, a small number of legal advisers, and registrars in the 43 dioceses. It contains the names of clergymen whose conduct is thought to make them unsuitable to undertake priestly duties. In the past its existence has at times been denied by the church authorities.

ATHEIST VIEW BROADCAST

The following script, by the President of the Australian National University Atheist Society, has been broadcast and rebroadcast over the Society's programme heard every week on community radio. We reprint it, as a forceful statement of the atheist position, with acknowledgement to *The Atheist Journal* of the Atheist Society of Australia.

Some people believe in God. Some do not. (Most do not care.) God cannot exist and not exist at the same time. If it exists, we atheists are wrong. If it does not we are right. We believe that we are right. Our belief is as legitimate as that of believers', since nobody has been able so far to prove conclusively the existence or non-existence of God. We believe that it does not exist because, if it did, its infinite perfection would not have allowed it to create imperfect beings (like men), its infinite benevolence would not tolerate the existence of evil in the world (like disease), its infinite omnipotence would not prevent it from revealing itself unmistakably just now, and so save us the trouble of having to write and read articles that deny its existence. In short, our belief in the non-existence of God is based on the obvious conclusions afforded by that most exclusive definer of man—Reason.

We believe in man. We believe in you, women and men, who are capable of realising yourselves as thinking entities by facing boldly and responsibly the evidence of reality. In other words, we oppose

religion. We cannot but deplore the fact that millions of people sink into mythological reverie through fear and childish self-interest. Nevertheless we do not condemn the person who decides independently and responsibly on his own beliefs. Every human being has certain psychological needs to satisfy. One of the most common and therapeutically helpful is that of cultivating the conscious or subconscious illusion of a being living in his heart to whom he can refer for protection and reprehension (an "exalted father" as Freud says).

We understand that such fantasies may be necessary for some, we justify their existence as means to establish one's ethic convictions, we respect the woman/man who wants to dream. What we cannot understand nor justify is the continuous assault of organised religion on the good faith of people, the grim record of crimes perpetrated in the name of God throughout history, the philistine interference of the churches in the development of civilisation, the indoctrination of children in systems of morals based on class and sex discrimination, the fomentation and exploitation of ignorance and superstition, the brazen hypocrisy of the self-appointed ministers of God, their shameless avarice of power, influence and money, their fraudulent manipulation of society to attain, preserve and increase that power through unjustifiable privileges, their blatant collusion with other dream sellers as pernicious as themselves, and many other sins against human dignity and freedom that a just God would not tolerate if it existed.

Even if God existed its existence would not justify the existence of institutionalised religion with its legion of visionaries, retrogrades, dictators, swindlers, bludgers and hypocrites. We agree that there are many good-willing admirable people in the lower ranks of the churches. We think they are blind. You should not be fooled by propagandist veneer like the Salvation Army. You do not need God as a pretext to be good.

We respect you as an individual. We want to be human. We shall care about the after-life when we get there.

Freethinker Fund

We thank the following for their kind donations to the Freethinker Fund: A. Avery £2.60; D. Batten £1.60; R. J. Condon £7.60; P. Davis 40p; P. A. Forrest £1.23; S. Fuchs £3.00; B. M. Goodale £2.60; P. Harding £2.00; E. Henderson £7.60; E. J. Hughes £1.00; A. Howarth 75p; C. F. Jacott £2.60; S. E. Johnson £25.00; J. T. Meldrum £2.60; N. O'Muraille £1.42; G. Robishez 40p; D. M. Robbins 35p; G. Stewart £2.60 W. G. Stirling £1.00; H Stopes-Roc £1.20; J. Summersgill 60p; J. Tarran £1.60; L. W. Wright £4.00; Anon. £1.60. Total: £75.35.

THE THOMAS PAINE COLLECTION AT THETFORD, AN ANALYTICAL CATALOGUE. Norfolk County Library, Norwich, £4.80.

This catalogue has long been in the publication pipeline, so it is good to see it at last appear. The Paine collection at Thetford is perhaps the best publically owned assemblage of books on Paine and his ideas and influence in Britain, and it is fitting that it should be housed in the new library in Paine's hometown.

In the main this collection has been brought together since the end of the last war, the impetus perhaps being the gift to Thetford of the very fine collection of Paine books formed by a member of the National Secular Society, the late Ambrose Barker. A few years after the receipt of this collection in 1963 the Thomas Paine Society made over its own library and part of its archives to Norwich County Library on permanent loan, and has continued to add to it since. In addition to this the County Library itself has been active in acquiring interesting Paine items.

Both the Barker and TPS collections are particularly rich in Freethought material that relates directly or otherwise to Paine, the latter collection also including some personal relics such as a lock of Paine's hair and a document containing his earliest known signature (twice).

It is to be doubted whether the world of scholarship has realised just what a wealth of Paine material Thetford has, so this catalogue should draw attention to it. It is also pleasing that such a collection should be in a public reference library, as so many university libraries impose restrictions upon access to their material by non-academic researchers.

Naturally some errors creep into a publication of this nature, while there are several entries one would like to have seen expanded, for example the fact that it is volume two of the *Moral and Political Magazine* of the London Corresponding Society which is unique not volume one. The xerox copy at Thetford is of volume two.

One final point. As this catalogue is being issued in an edition limited to 250 copies, it could well become a desirable collectors' item in its own right eventually.

R. W. MORRELL

TERENCE RATTIGAN: THE MAN AND HIS WORK by Michael Darlow and Gillian Hodson. Quartet, £11.95.

Academics, be it said, can come up with some fairly improbable bedfellows as they seek to trace a connection between Archimedes and Alger Hiss or Beethoven and the Boom Town Rats. One of my lecturers once said he was just waiting for the day when some

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clever clog came up with the doctoral thesis entitled, "Marx and Spenser". He may not have long to wait. For if the plays of Terence Rattigan can be placed in a humanist tradition of Huxley and Russell, perhaps anything is possible.

As unlikely as the prospect seems, it is precisely on such a premise that Michael Darlow and Gillian Hodson have managed to base this first, full-scale study of arguably Britain's top playwright during the first half of this century. And even if they do not entirely convince, they do succeed in filling a gap in our dramatic history and fill it with interest and enthusiasm. The neglect of Rattigan is one of the oddest phenomena in modern day letters, perhaps because his talent was so odd.

Rattigan emerged from a middle class, Oxford upbringing to become the most dazzling playwright of his generation. Indeed he distinguished himself by having a play on in the West End while still an undergraduate. From thence his star continued to rise until one fitful day in 1956 when the "revolution" was declared and his name became synonymous with all that was effete with the British *status quo*. His previous successes disappeared from repertory, and his new work, if produced, quickly closed following a torrent of critical abuse. So memory dictates, and the impression, on the whole, is accurate. What remains hazy are the circumstances surrounding Rattigan's rapid decline and the reason for it.

This critical biography attempts to answer these questions by giving us a play-by-play account of his career in conjunction with what personal details the authors deem relevant. So the repressed quality of his characters is traced to his own sexual repression; the latent homosexuality in the work is rooted in his difficult relationship with a bulldog of a father. The picture, when completed, is that of a man frustrated by inhibitions who allowed these inhibitions to decisively come between his ambitions and their pale reflections in the finished plays. He was not an over-reacher: one senses in the plays genuine potential. Yet in the end Rattigan is destined to remain the major figure in a minor period of development.

The abiding appeal of this book, therefore, is the reflection it sheds on the cultural movement between the wars. Rattigan, as a man of his time, depicted the stagnation of British thought. Consciously or not, his characters continually shirk such monumental dilemmas as the imminent threat of nuclear holocaust, European fascism, the concomitant loss of spiritual faith, with nothing more substantial than steadfast John Bull reserve. Rattigan refuses to caricature. He insists on their credibility as worthwhile

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human beings. It is in such dogged persistence that we may detect his creative demise. He remained, to the end, an apologist for the morally myopic.

If there is something inherently cowardly in these empty heroics, this cowardice is resident in the man himself. Time and again Rattigan failed to measure up to his own ideals, whether as an undergraduate radical who supported the pacifist motion in the great King and Country debate or as a playwright refusing to pursue the political implications raised in his own plays. He would always settle for the soft option of fashion until, ironically, he became out of fashion. Finally he was the image of his own creation: a lonely figure refusing to display any chink in his emotional armour.

The evidence of a "humanist" thread is clear and fully explicated by the authors. They correctly detect in Aunt Edna, Rattigan's parody of a matinee prude, the origins of Mary Whitehouse. Rattigan, they maintain, portrayed a world without God in which the individual would have to devise for himself a moral system if he continued to coexist with his fellow human beings. These points are well made in their defence of *The Deep Blue Sea*, Rattigan's best play. There the heroine is denied death and fulfils a real tragedy, life without meaning. For a resolution of this kind, Rattigan deserves recognition as having anticipated Beckett. Similarly, the doomed heroine of *After Lydia* evinces our respect when she dies with the certain knowledge that her husband does not love her and there is no such thing as an after life. In a post-war epic Rattigan even displayed a concern for environmental welfare as he opposed technological advances at the expense of human sacrifice. These radical insights into an establishment figure of Rattigan's stamp are as worthwhile as they are startling, and we would be the poorer without them. But they do not amount to a definitive portrait, and the authors, whatever they conclude about his talent, do not suggest that they do. His radicalism was always tempered by good taste, infinite pedigree and an unwillingness to "buck the system no matter what cost". The cost of staying within the system was genuine greatness, and we have to regret that Rattigan paid it with interest.

JAMES MACDONALD

THIS SIN AND SCANDAL: AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION DEBATE 1891-1911. By Neville Hicks. Australian National University Press, £10.95 (cloth), £6.50 (paper).

In the 1890s the Australian states were struck by a severe economic depression which drastically cur-

tailed immigration, public works and job opportunities. During the same period there was a marked fall in the birth rate, and in some colonies there was even a nett loss of population. Neville Hicks summarises the statistics in these words:

"[An Australian] woman who began her childbearing in 1911 would probably have four children or less. Her mother would have had five children and her grandmother, completing her childbearing in 1891, would have had at least seven."

The change in fertility patterns was regarded with concern by conservatives and pro-natalists. This, after all, was the period when a new country was created (1901) by federation of the Australian colonies, a time of political instability in the Pacific, of rampant racialism in most parts of Australia — coupled with fear of the "yellow peril" from the north and west. The result of these anxieties and prejudices was the populist doctrine, in the new Commonwealth of Australia, of "populate or perish".

In 1903, concern over population trends led to the establishment of the New South Wales Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth Rate, under the chairmanship of Dr. Charles Kinnaird Mackellar, president of the N.S.W. Board of Health. Appointed to the Commission were "safe" government bureaucrats, medical men, and successful merchants and entrepreneurs, all of a conservative turn of mind and hardly likely to be sympathetic towards any diminution in population growth. The only exception was a token Labour man, William A. Holman. To prejudice the outcome of the inquiry even further, chairman Mackellar would send prospective witnesses briefs which virtually instructed them as to the "facts" and implicitly told them what answers were expected to the Commission's questions. For example, Point 18 of the Brief for Clergymen announced:

"He will say that he knows: (a) That during the last eight years the law of NSW has created greater facilities for divorce. (b) That the great number of petitions for divorce . . . indicates that serious conjugal disagreement is very prevalent. . ."

And the witness was then told that he might next be asked whether the divorce and separation figures indicated "a disordered social state"!

The result was, of course, that most of the witnesses were overtly or covertly manipulated into telling the Commission just what it (or Mackellar) wanted to hear. Not all, however, were so suggestible. Dr E. T. Thring, for instance, refused to accept or imply that contraceptive techniques were being employed simply from selfish motives; and William McLean, from Victoria, rather disturbed the applectart by saying that he saw "no solid reason for alarm in respect to the birth-rate in Australia".

Predictably, however, the Commission ran along

its preordained tramlines. It concluded that reasons for family limitation "have one element in common, namely selfishness" — which had been effective in this area because of the decline in religion and the impact of neo-Malthusian propaganda. In the latter case:

"The adoption of these doctrines was unduly encouraged by the judicial sanction . . . in the case *Ex Parte Collins*. . . The remarkable coincidence between the promulgation, in 1888, of . . . this judgement, and the sudden fall of the birth rate in 1889 . . . cannot, we think, be considered fortuitous."

(William Whitehouse Collins, a vice-president of the National Secular Society, had been convicted in Sydney of selling Annie Besant's *Law of Population*, but appealed successfully to the Supreme Court of New South Wales where the liberal and enlightened supporting judgment of Justice W. C. Windeyer became recognised as a milestone in the history of birth control. Windeyer's views were understandable: he was a friend of Moncure D. Conway—of South Place Chapel and Malthusian League fame.)

After reading this book I can quite understand why, a few years ago in Britain, there was such a ruckus over the composition of a Parliamentary Select Committee dealing with the 1967 Abortion Act. The tactics, the clichés, the melodramatics of Australia's population debate at the turn of the century are closely paralleled by events in our own time on this and similar issues. If nothing else, this volume shows just what can be done to bend statistics and manipulate inquiries.

The Mackellar Commission's recommendations were fairly predictable: encourage people to settle in country, rather than urban, areas (Australian Immigrants had always tended to make their homes in major cities, and do so to this day); encourage primary industry (agriculture and the like); "check the idleness of youth"; counteract increasing employment of women in factories; control of abortifacients and of advertisements for contraceptives; compulsory registration of still births; and the clergy were advised to "devise some means of instituting a general crusade . . . to arouse the conscience of married people". To be fair, the Commission did propose better public hospital care for poor mothers and improved regulation of city milk supply. The chapter entitled "Conclusion" in the report plies. However, Neville Hicks says, rightly I think, was "not a conclusion, in the accepted sense of a summary of the evidence . . . but the conservative's cry of concern at the advent of a permissive society".

Although written probably for an Australian academic readership, *This Sin and Scandal* deserves wider attention. It should certainly be examined by anyone in Britain and the United States involved in the fields of law reform relating to birth control, population policy and the status of women. The

book will undoubtedly appeal to anyone with a facility for statistics and who is interested in the history of this discipline. But even a mathematical illiterate like the present reviewer can gain a good deal from it. The text is readable, typographical errors are virtually nil, and errors of fact are rare (Mrs B. Smyth, the North Melbourne advocate of birth control was not "Bessie"—a common misconception; James Jamieson was not a Professor of Medicine). There are a reasonable selection of illustrations, exhaustive footnotes, a detailed bibliography and a competent index. The book also provides some useful background to the Commission, particularly in the chapters on religious opinion, and "The Evidence Makers". Neville Hicks's ability to interweave statistics and personalities is fortunate: he is working on a biography of Timothy Coghlan, the New South Wales Government Statistician whose publications prepared the ground for the Mackellar Commission (and who served on it).

Although the 1903 Commission probably inhibited the advertising of contraceptives, its notes of alarm created little response from the Australian public whose birth rate, while fluctuating over the decades, has never again risen to the levels of the 1870s and early '80s. Nevertheless, Neville Hicks thinks "there is every prospect that the ghosts of Mackellar and his supporters will be heard again within the next ten years". The author concludes with a warning appropriate for this paper:

"The Mackellar-ites clothed their economic and political concerns in the rhetoric of Christian moralism. With *that* system moribund, the next pro-natalist campaign may be more strident and the measures taken more vicious than was the case between 1880 and 1911."

H'mmm!

NIGEL SINNOTT

THEATRE

SORE THROATS by Howard Brenton. RSC Warehouse.

This play began life as a commissioned BBC Play for Today some five years ago. Like *Scum*, it was never transmitted. If the present production represents the full unexpurgated version, some awfully red faces *would* have resulted, to say nothing of the countless singed ears and bruised sensibilities. It is violent in tone and brutal in its effect, and the author deliberately sets out to shock. But there is nothing to suggest that the violence is gratuitous, and the ending is in fact defiantly hopeful. Howard Brenton is one of Britain's most concerned dramatists, and this is among his most disturbing examinations of "our deep cold", as he calls the condition of England.

The title is taken from Brecht and refers to the inevitable pain that results from trying to reconcile such polarised forces as money and sex in a human

CINEMA

NORMA RAE, directed by Martin Ritt. General release.

relationship. Comfort always comes with the price tag attached, and in attempting to pay for it, one inflicts pain both on one's partner and on oneself. The play deals with the corrosive effects of such a price on a twenty-year marriage.

"Trouble with the English—we all go round with a Sunday school teacher in our heads". So says Jack, the divorced husband of Judy, who wants to quit the Metropolitan Police and go off to Canada to be free. Trouble is he interprets this freedom as licence to beat his wife senseless. An underwear fetish compels him to sniff frilly knickers for kicks while on night duty. Trouble is even freedom costs something, and Jack will stop at nothing in order to get it.

A perverse psychological phenomenon among the truly evil is that they somehow contrive to shift the blame for their actions onto the victims. Those in charge of the concentration camps were said to agonise over the sheer strain involved in enforcing the final solution. And much in the manner of an SS Storm Trooper, Jack administers savage blows to his wife's body and then pleads with her not to torture him by crawling on all fours. His assault on her is the culmination of "an exhausting day". Why don't they forget all about it and go out for a meal?

Such a casual response to unprovoked violence has become, Mr Brenton suggests, a part of our national habit. Clearly intended to speak for us all, this couple epitomises the degenerate nature of life on a five-year plan, a materialistic bedrock. The alternative would seem to be a life devoid of such trappings. The second half of the play, then, sets out to consider such an alternative, first by presenting the wife in partnership with Sally, a young women's libber, and then by introducing Jack back into the menage. The trip to Canada was a failure, and he is now destitute. He makes a final attempt to prise money from Judy, but the women merely laugh in his face. Stripped of his dignity, his very maleness, Jack can only watch dumbstruck as Judy proceeds to set fire to the last of her savings. The ending augurs new beginnings, with the principals assuming different social and sexual identities.

As a solution, this wants a certain sophistication. Indeed there is something almost evangelical in the notion that any arrangement involving these three as we have seen them would last more than thirty days. They are all but entrenched in the national malaise. But to have presented the malaise so boldly, as Mr Brenton has done, to have given us such a searing portrait of post-imperial Britain is nothing short of courageous at a time when national leaders offer us nothing but more candy floss. It is hardly accidental that Jack's son has gone off to Africa and that Judy has gone on a spree to America. As reference points, these countries adumbrate the direction in which Mr Brenton believes the nation is heading, and he has every reason to voice his concern.

JAMES MACDONALD

In 1949 Kenji Mizoguchi made *My Love Has Been Burning*, set in Japan's troubled 1880s and '90s. The heroine, Eiko, joins the fight against feudalism, suffers penal servitude, and leaves her husband because of his lack of respect for women. This passionate, dignified film arose from the occupying Americans' edict that all new Japanese films should promote women's liberation.

Ironically, almost 30 years later, American director Martin Ritt made *Norma Rae*, set in the Baptist South in 1978. The heroine, a sharp-witted young widow, working under abysmal and dangerous conditions in a textile mill to support her two children, marries a dull but dependable workmate. Reuben, a labour organiser, arrives to unionise the mill and Norma Rae becomes his keenest recruit. When her husband accuses her of neglecting the housework, Norma Rae, usually quick with repartee, rages, but more out of exhaustion than indignation, never suggesting *he* pull his weight. When a woman workmate is prevented by her husband from attending a meeting, Norma Rae is silent. The script, elsewhere so preachy, is silent too, as the oppressor here is also one of the oppressed. (Yet if women are not fully represented in their union from its inception, they will remain the more exploited section of the workforce—and stay slavishly dependent on their men . . .)

Things come to a head when the mill bosses play white workers off against black. Norma Rae, standing on a work-table, defies them, while her mates silently down tools. She is arrested, and bailed out by Reuben, who tells her husband, "She's a free woman now; she's stood up on a table."(!) The workers vote for unionisation. Triumph! (But isn't this just the start of battles, sacrifices, internecine conflicts, disappointments? And why no hint at the contamination of American unions by big business and the CIA?)

As entertainment, this neatly-rounded, manipulative film is superb. Sally Field is magnificent as Norma Rae. It's refreshing to see a working-class woman at the centre of a commercial film. The painful love between Norma Rae and her father is well realised, and her awakening, guided by the New York-intellectual labour organiser is joyous. The mill scenes are vivid: trickling heat and, literally, deafening clatter. But that's all. True, the racism of a Baptist minister *is* shown, and there *is* disagreement between union officials (quickly resolved, though), but *Norma Rae* remains a touching "realist" tale of ogres and dear little people. Racist remarks and actions don't really hurt. Reuben never puts a Messianic foot wrong. Unionisation is the instant cure for society's ills. Stand on a table, and you're a free woman.

This mawkish over-simplification, common, alas, in politics-made-accessible films, is dangerous. We leave the cinema glowing with fuddled comradely warmth, only to feel betrayed when strife and disruption shatter our cosy peace. Betrayed, too, by those who believe with Eiko, that "There can be no freedom till all women are free."

VERA LUSTIG

LETTERS

NO DEIST, EINSTEIN

Regarding the statement ("The Freethinker", August '79) that Einstein was a religious believer "who held to a kind of pantheistic determinism". While not necessarily agreeing with Einstein's views, I think that the quote cited, "Human beings, vegetables or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper," does not necessarily imply religious belief.

Far from being a religious believer, in 1947 Einstein wrote: "It seems to me that the idea of a personal God is an anthropological concept which I cannot take seriously. I feel also not able to imagine some will or goal outside the human sphere. My views are near those of Spinoza: admiration for the beauty of and belief in the logical simplicity of the order and harmony which we can grasp humbly and only imperfectly. I believe that we have to content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and understanding and treat values and moral obligations as a purely human problem—the most important of all human problems."

While Einstein had similar views to Spinoza, it cannot be said that he was a deist, or religious believer as Chapman Cohen partly explains in his book "God and the Universe."

In the first quote, the words "invisible piper" may be taken as a metaphysical allusion to God, but it would be much more consistent to think the words are a metaphorical analogy of a purely physical interpretation of the actual fundamental forces and interactions of the universe, both that we "know" and that we do not yet "know". Hence the term "invisible".

P. T. BELL

DARWIN'S THEORY—A FALLACY?

Hare Krishna Das's article on Materialism and Evolution at last puts in strictly scientific terms the fallacy of the theory commonly (but very loosely as regards accuracy) believed to be proved or even expounded by Darwin.

If one thing is clear from natural selection, it is that although there are multitudinous variations within species, there is no known case of one species developing into another.

To my mind this has always made nonsense of the theory that man, so different mentally and in literally every way except the ability to move on hind legs (a characteristic also of some dinosaurs, and even on occasion bears) is descended from apes. It is not even true that apes are the most intelligent of the mammals.

The reason for the appearance of man is still unsolved; and the much-derided theory of Von Daniken that at some time in remote history more developed creatures from space crash-landed here seems to me just as likely, or unlikely as any other.

As denial of a belief in evolution and man's descent from apes is so often equated with religious deism, I must add that I am an atheist, and have no belief in any individual after-life whatsoever. In other words, I

believe the process of life, whatever it is, to be scientific, not supernatural.

Life does, however, remain a mystery, whatever way we look at it. If "humanism" means anything more, as Peter Cadogan suggests, then I am no humanist and joined the South Place Ethical Society, at his suggestion after I had lectured to it several times, under a delusion.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

ATHEISTS "PARASITICAL"

If militant atheists were ever entirely successful in their principal aim—the elimination of religion—they would thereby have been successful in destroying their own philosophical *raison d'être*, atheism. After all, the unprejudiced observer cannot help noticing that the atheist propagandist's relationship to organised religion is both ambivalent and parasitical. To combat religion, the atheist must presuppose the preservation of the very thing he professes to detest. Somewhat inconsistent!

Atheism, basically, is a dogmatic creed. Whether atheists regard the concept of God as unintelligible or simply non-referential, the fact remains that their categorical unqualified denial of God (whether real or possible) is undisguisedly dogmatic. Of course, a doctrine like creation "ex nihilo" is logically inadmissible, but what of the Hindu view that the material cosmos is cyclic and that consequently matter itself is co-eternal with God, albeit subordinate to God, as one of his energies? Would an atheist find this view of the relationship between God and matter so easy to defeat, I wonder? After all, co-eternity is an intelligible idea.

Atheism, I repeat, by attacking religion and earnestly desiring its abolition, is committing philosophical suicide. Where would militant atheists be in a world without religion? Twiddling their thumbs!

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

ENGLISH POPE

My answer to John Watson is that, if an English Pope had been elected, no doubt some Englishmen would swell with national (not Catholic) pride, as they did when Britain's footballers won the World Cup. Luckily England has produced more notable freethinkers than popes. We should remember, too, that Poland has its other side—Copernicus, the first Unitarians and logicians like Tarski.

He also asks "how many people would give up everything they have for the sake of humanism?" Apart from the famous humanist martyrs such as Servetus and Giordano Bruno, many non-Christians died in the last two world wars thinking they were defending human rights against dictators supported by the Church. As for the millions devoted to Catholicism, they are somewhat cancelled out by the millions devoted to Protestant sects, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, etc.

"Can the rational ever hope to defeat the irrational?" This is a serious problem. When we consider smoking, alcoholism, dangerous driving, military spending, etc. which resemble religion in many ways, it seems unlikely. But when we consider the past perils of the human race (cannibalism, slavery, plague) I feel there is a grain of hope.

SAMUEL BEER

A prejudice is a vagrant opinion without visible means of support—Ambrose Bierce

benevolent society under the Friendly Societies Act as long ago as 1859). They assisted and looked after the interests of Continental radicals who were exiled in Britain. Secularists often helped to establish and run co-operative stores at which the poor could buy their supplies at the lowest possible prices. They organised entertainments on Sunday—the only day when workers had free time—and when, at the Archbishop of Canterbury's request, military bands were forbidden to play in public parks on the Sabbath, it was the secularists who hired and paid others to do so.

Above all there was the "missionary" work of those who propagated the "gospel" of family planning by distributing leaflets to people in their homes and by holding meetings at street corners. Peter Fryer writes in *The Birth Controllers*: "They would descend on working-class areas for systematic house-to-house canvassing. They would thrust tracts and leaflets into the hands of women who came to the doors, and give verbal advice to all who would listen . . . Open-air meetings started in the working-class district of Southwark in South London . . . All the speakers were secularists".

Contrived

This "pastoralism" and benevolent work contributed enormously to human welfare and also met the needs of members, many of whom had come into the movement from church or chapel. It developed naturally from the campaigns that brought secularists into conflict with religious interests. And secularists have continued this work, taking into account the changing social conditions and operating within the bounds of possibility. Pastoral Humanism, on the other hand, is contrived and grandiose, envisaging the humanist movement taking on an immense programme of welfare work for which it neither the financial resources nor professional expertise.

Francis Bennion puts much emphasis on the need for rites, ritual and ceremonial "to cover individual events like birth, puberty, coming of age, betrothal, divorce, anniversaries and death". And if you have time and energy to spare after that, there are seasonal celebrations, national events and international occasions. He appears to believe that without ceremonial there can be no celebration. But in fact birthdays, engagements, school-leaving and other milestones along life's rugged path are celebrated by a wider spectrum of society than ever before. Christenings may be falling off, but not so the popular and enjoyable ritual known as "wetting the baby's head".

The majority of British weddings now take place in register offices, an unthinkable situation even twenty years ago. One contributory factor to this development is the transference of the register office from the dowdiest cubby-hole in the town hall to the attractive and pleasant surroundings of a marriage

room. Humanist groups could accelerate the move to non-religious weddings by investigating the facilities for such ceremonies in their locality, and, if necessary, submitting suggestions for their improvement to the appropriate quarter.

Those who eschew Christian ceremonial are unlikely to replace it with a humanist movement equivalent. Funerals are an exception, and the majority of people still feel that there should be some kind of ceremony to mark the committal. Relatives and friends who are under stress are seldom able to conduct such ceremonies, and here the humanist movement could offer a service to the community. The present inadequate network of officiators should be expanded. Local groups should provide undertakers in their area with the names and telephone numbers of members willing and able to conduct services. They should also inspect plans when a new crematorium or extensions to existing buildings are being erected, and ask the authorities concerned to ensure that religious emblems are easily removed or covered during non-religious ceremonies.

Seminars

The humanist movement has a special role to play and it can do it through both the written and the spoken word. I suggest that rather than embarking on fruitless discussions about Pastoral Humanism the humanist movement gives serious consideration to the whole question of public relations and the exploitation of opportunities to really establish an active and visible presence. It should not be beyond the wit of national organisations and local groups to arrange seminars in London and regional centres to consider what practical steps can be taken to disseminate humanist views through the Press and broadcasting services.

There is a disgraceful neglect of humanist journals by the movement which they serve. Those which are published regularly are kept going largely because of the generosity of past generations and the unpaid or underpaid services of a few dedicated stalwarts. But how often does a humanist group organise a fund-raising function for the humanist Press? And how many beneficiaries of humanist social work would raise a finger to save *The Freethinker* or *New Humanist* from extinction?

The suggestions for action proposed in this article are rather humdrum when compared to the dazzling promises of Pastoral Humanism. Nevertheless they are realisable and they are necessary if the humanist movement is to even start on the long trudge back from the wilderness.

It is useful and healthy that old favourites like Pastoral Humanism are taken out of moth-balls from time to time and given an airing. However, if humanist activists become bogged down in futile attempts to implement such schemes, our religious opponents will dance a jig.

(Knock)

mooted at an early stage. And it is difficult not to see MacPhilpin's version of the depositions as an attempt to resist that hypothesis—by (1) pushing the time of the apparition earlier in the day when a magic lantern would not be effective, and (2) suppressing that the figures seen were so strikingly like statues, which were known to be such good subjects for lantern slides.

Once again, I know that there are difficulties with the lantern hypothesis. Most of these are summed up by Francis Lennon, the Maynooth professor asked to investigate the apparition. He asserted that the hypothesis was:

“Highly improbable, indeed, I may say, morally speaking impossible—keeping in mind some statements of the witnesses, the position of the buildings, the part illuminated, and the facility of detection, by even the most ignorant.”

But what were the statements of the witnesses when Lennon questioned them? Were they in keeping with (S) or (M)? And could not a lantern have been mounted from the nearby schoolhouse? That position would have had two advantages: first, it would have concealed the hoaxer or hoaxers; second, its relatively oblique situation would have prevented shadows being cast by the spectators. It may be noted that Lennon was not a believer in the apparition, and one of his suggestions was that it was caused by “phosphorescent” paint on the gable. But if the people could be fooled by that, why not by the magic lantern? In short, the magic lantern hypothesis is far from “highly improbable”. But even if it were highly improbable, it would still be more rational to believe it than its miraculous alternative.

“What you and I know as Eternity,” commented a Radio 2 disc jockey recently, “has been reduced to a state of on-goingness.” He was caustically referring to the note on the sleeve of the latest Beach Boys’ offering, the Light Album. “The word light,” it informs buyers, “refers to the awareness of, and the presence of God here in this world as an on-going loving reality.”

EVENTS

The Gay Humanist Group. The newly formed Group's first London meeting takes place at the Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, on Saturday, October 27, at 7 pm. Guest speaker will be Nicolas Walter of the Rationalist Press Association. Title of his talk: “Is Humanism Synonymous with Tolerance?”

The Annual General Meeting of the National Secular Society Ltd., will be held on December 8, 1979, at 2 pm in the Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1, followed by a book auction.

Belfast Humanist Group. Meets on the 2nd Thursday of each month at 8 pm, 8a Grand Parade, Castlereagh. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, County Antrim. Telephone Whiteabbey 66752.

Worthing Humanist Group. Barbara Smoker—Death—The Taboo Subject? at the Burlington Hotel, Worthing, Sunday, October 28 at 5.30 pm.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. The Hazards of Nuclear Power—Do we Need It? Speaker John Fremlin at Room No. 22, Faculty of Art and Design, Lanchester Polytechnic, Gosford Street, Coventry, on Friday, November 9 at 8 pm.

Havering and District Humanist Society. The Baha'i faith explained. Tuesday, October 16. On Tuesday, November 6, Jack Smith, Eastern Area Organiser of the London Co-operative Society, explains why the last three years have seen such an expansion in the co-operative movement.

South Place Ethical Society. A. Lyon on Dualism, Materialism or a Third Alternative, 11 am, Sunday, October 28. The Sunday morning meeting on November 4 features Harry Stopes-Roe on Good Happiness and Bad Happiness.

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

Humanist Holidays. Easter 1980. Sole use of private hotel, AA and RAC listed. Near the sea—Sandown, I.O.W., 3-10 April. £50 (OAPs £45) £5 deposit Apply to the Secretary, Mrs B. Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 0NA. Telephone 01-673 6234.

THE FREETHINKER

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