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"HOSTILITY TO CHURCH SCHOOLS"— BUT NOT BY THE LORDS

Mr Van Straubenzee, Conservative MP for Wokingham, has claimed there is too much complacency about the agreement on church schools enshrined in the 1944 Education Act. According to a report in the *Catholic Herald*, Mr Van Straubenzee said in a speech in Winchester that "in many quarters and not often publicly expressed there is positive hostility to these schools." The Duke of Norfolk, recognised as leader of the Catholic laity, said the remarks of Mr Van Straubenzee, and also those of Mr Mark Carlisle, Secretary of State for Education, were "quite disgraceful" in suggesting the churches are claiming to seek "special privileges" over transport charges.

These comments arose from Clause 23 in the Government's Education (No 2) Bill, which sought to give local authorities the power to make charges for transport to and from school. Since church schools are often not the nearest to the homes of families who wish to use them, religious groups have been campaigning vigorously against the clause which they say would have an adverse effect on church schools by making them too expensive to reach.

The clause was defeated in the House of Lords on March 13, a rare case of the Lords throwing out a clause of a Government Bill. Opposition in the Lords focused on two main points: the penalties would fall heavily on rural areas and on parents whose children went to church schools. There was also the general opposition of Labour peers to Conservative attempts to reduce expenditure within the education service.

Although the defeat of the clause may be seen as a triumph for the religious lobby, especially Catholic campaigners headed by Lord Norfolk, freethinkers would not necessarily think the clause should have been retained (it would have struck against educa-

tional possibilities, and education has always been at the heart of secularist concerns). However, the lobbying and then the debate in the House of Lords give a powerful example of the strength which religious interests may bring to bear on government.

For some weeks before the Bill was debated the *Catholic Herald* had been running headlines such as "Education Bill attacked by Duke of Norfolk" and "School Transport charges—hope". (Presumably the extent to which Catholics were more prominent than Anglicans in campaigning against the clause has something to do with the fact that "the average distance which a Catholic child may travel is longer on average than that which the Protestant child may have to travel" as Viscount Ridley pointed out in the Lords debate.) The Catholic Teachers' Federation made a plea to Conservative MPs to remove the school transport clause. Mr Norman St John Stevas, a prominent Catholic and leader of the House of Commons, indicated that the Secretary of State for Education would consider "bringing forward an amendment at report stage if he thinks it necessary, to ensure that there can be no discrimination against children attending denominational schools".

Duke Defends Church Schools

The Duke of Norfolk said he was opposing the new Education Bill in the House of Lords debate "because the bishops and the cardinals have asked me to speak explicitly on denominational schools". He said: "I am speaking about church schools, which serve a great proportion of the country, and which give extra support to family life, on which I believe our nation depends so much for its integrity." He claimed to have received thousands of letters from all over the kingdom supporting him in what he was doing. (Is letter writing to politicians a

twentieth century equivalent of buying indulgences for Catholic congregations?)

Lord Butler, a respected Tory elder statesman, who was responsible for the 1944 Education Act, made a long speech opposing the Bill. He said that provision of transport was a vital part of the concordat with the churches in 1944: "The denominations and all those partners involved in that settlement were given that assurance that their children would be taken to school". He continued: "These extra charges are going to upset not just the noble Duke, the Duke of Norfolk, who might perhaps be held to represent the Roman Catholics, but also the Anglican community, the Free Church Federal Council, and the National Union of Teachers." He also referred to the "extraordinary galling towards denominational schools" shown by local educational authorities since 1944.

Lord Janner, speaking on behalf of Jewish denominational schools, made one of the clearest statements on the issue: "I see this as a question of principle which involves religious people to whatever denomination they may belong. The training of children in their particular religious morals and ethics is something which is of tremendous benefit to the world as it stands at present."

The Bishop of Rochester illustrated the less direct approach of Anglicans, with their tradition of humbug. Disclaiming any partial interest, he said: "I am concerned with the matter as a community and social matter rather than as a denominational issue." A few minutes later he protested: "I cannot believe that it is the firm intention of this Government to alienate deliberately not only the rural communities of England but the religious communities—Anglican, Roman Catholic and Free Church".

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, had a letter on the subject broadcast that week in the Radio 4 programme "Any Answers". She pointed out that a distinction should be made between rural families for whom there is no school within walking distance (often because of the closure of village schools effected on the promise of free transport) and families who chose to reject suitable state schools in their neighbourhood so as to have the sectarian home background reinforced at school.

Transport Clause Rejected

The transport clause was thrown out by 216 votes to 112. It is fair to say that much of the debate was about rural communities and the need for cuts in spending, as well as denominational schools. The Minister of Education subsequently indicated that he did not intend to try to reinstate the clause, but would seek economies elsewhere.

It is worth noting that later in the debate on the Education (No 2) Bill an amendment was introduced

to give parents the right to have advance details of sex education (including books) and the right to withdraw their children if they objected. Lord Halsbury, who can be relied upon to produce ripeness when sex comes up (remember his obsession with ordure at the time of the *Gay News* "blasphemous" poem) said "I do not think we can divorce sex education from religious education." Viscount Ingleby, who brought the amendment, attacked Jane Cousins' excellent sex-education book *Make It Happy* and criticised gay teachers who sought to teach that homosexuality is natural and normal. The amendment was withdrawn after the Government said that it would look sympathetically at the suggestion.

This sex education clause indicates the wide range of the Education (No 2) Bill and the extent to which amendments have introduced very diverse matters. Why did humanists miss a chance to introduce some discussion of statutory religious education and acts of worship in school?

The National Union of Teachers reacted to the removal of the transport clause by commenting: "The Government has been honestly defeated and should now have the good grace to make available the money which it was calculating to 'save' in this way. The NUT will almost certainly oppose any attempts to make further cuts in the education service as a consequence and we deplore suggestions from Baroness Young to the effect that the education of nursery children or handicapped children could be cut further."

Their Lordships, who opposed transport charges, did not feel so strongly about, say, the removal of local authorities' obligations to provide nursery schools. What a scale of values—transport to church schools protected, nursery education abandoned!

Norma Haemmerle, a committee member of the Enfield and Barnet Humanist Group and also a head teacher, commented in a letter printed in the *Guardian* (18 March): "The overthrow by the House of Lords of the transport clauses in the Education Bill shows an extraordinary sense of priorities. It would seem that local education authorities may charge what they like for school dinners (or cease to supply them); they may cut back drastically on the number of teachers or the amount of books and equipment in schools, so long as they continue to subsidise travel to distant denominational schools.

"Is it their hope that illiteracy or malnutrition matter less for the many so long as church school attendance is guaranteed for the few?

"I don't question that paying for transport will be a problem for many parents, especially in those rural areas where village schools have been closed. But fewer teachers, worse facilities, and dearer dinners will adversely affect all children, and this should surely be a greater cause for concern than possible falling rolls in denominational schools."

Billy Graham Goes To Oxbridge

Billy Graham, the big-time American evangelist, now in his early sixties, went crusading at Oxford and Cambridge earlier this year. His reception was mixed, reports indicated that he has lost some of his showbiz ebullience and sparkle, and opinions vary as to how many were converted.

Dr Graham was born again at the age of sixteen, when a wandering evangelist from Kentucky preached at a railroad track near his home outside Charlotte, North Carolina. He told his mother "I'm saved, Mother, I got saved" and he has spent the rest of his life trying to give others the same experience.

He is completely fundamentalist and has no subtlety of thought in his outlook: he persuades by repetition not argument. A recent biography of him (*Billy Graham: A parable of American Righteousness* by Marshall Frady, published by Hodder and Stoughton) quotes another evangelist's view of him: "I could certainly preach circles around Billy . . . and even today, the actual thinking in his preaching is simply dreadful, but somehow when it came to the altar call, nobody could touch him. . . An evangelist can't be complicated. They are great persuaders, no explainers. And all Billy really ever had was passion . . . What drove Billy on in his ministry and gave him power was precisely what drove me out of the ministry. I was unable to accept that you can refuse to think." The author of the biography, Marshall Frady, paraphrases Chesterton on H. G. Wells and describes Graham's sermons as like some vast stretch of sea that is only two inches deep.

His political views are equally shallow. He has constantly preached against communism—imagining it to be masterminded by the devil. Hob-nobbing and praying with politicians has been a favourite past-time of his—and brought him his biggest knock. He stayed with President Johnson on his last night in the White House, and stayed with Nixon on his first night there. It was difficult to avoid embarrassment for Graham when Nixon fell from grace. In 1974 Graham had a retreat in Switzerland ready for himself for two months. Nixon's foul language and evident trickery have been explained by "sleeping pills and demons"—how else could the good Christian Mr Nixon have become the terrible President Nixon?

Demonology—with all opposition to his simplified version of Christianity seen as a mark of the devil—remains a part of Billy Graham's world outlook. At a press conference in Oxford, he was asked whether demons had been temporarily located in

President Nixon, in his fellow conspirators, or in those who exposed him. He said: "I think that demonic forces are at work in the world. I think they are working at the moment trying to bring about confrontation . . . I believe they are in this room at the moment."

Billy Graham's crusade to Oxford was not received with unanimous welcome. The mayor, John Hamilton, who is a Buddhist, refused to authorise an official reception by the city. The Bishop of Oxford at first said that he would boycott the rallies, but then changed his mind and had tea with Dr Graham.

One meeting in the Town Hall was interrupted by anarchists, who heckled and, at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, cried "This is the psychology of fascism". Cables were cut and closed circuit television relays were blacked out; fire alarms were triggered off. Outside the hall a group held a placard with the classic anarchist slogan "Neither God Nor Master".

There was more serious opposition in Cambridge, which has traditionally taken its scepticism more seriously. A group called Students Against Mass Indoctrination organised silent demonstrations, lapel badges and an anti-Graham newspaper. Among the lapel sticker slogans were "Gays Against Graham", "Jesus Not Graham" and the most popular "Brian Not Billy".

Influence Challenged

The Chairman of SAMI, Jeremy Dale (who is also Chairman of the Cambridge Humanist Society, which joined the opposition to Graham) questioned the influence of Graham on Cambridge in a letter to the *Guardian*. He challenged a report suggesting that about 500 students were committing themselves to God each night. "If this had occurred, 4,000 students (half the undergraduate population) would have been converted during the week. After most meetings there were a couple of hundred students who stayed behind to reaffirm their faith together with the new converts who on at least one occasion could be counted on the fingers of two hands."

The letter also said that the report had "underestimated the activities of the students opposed to the Mission. Students Against Mass Indoctrination (SAMI) was set up as an umbrella group to channel and voice the dissent.

"From its inception, SAMI was against any form of violent opposition. However, by the end of the Mission other groups who had clearly become incensed by Graham's style used stink bombs and

(continued on page 53)

Conway Hall and Free Speech

PETER CADOGAN

The debate on the South Place Ethical Society's attitude to free speech continues. The London Borough of Camden offered a grant to Conway Hall on condition that it banned the National Front; the Society refused on the grounds that SPES stood for freedom of speech. Here Peter Cadogan, General Secretary of SPES, replies to Barbara Smoker's article in the March "Freethinker".

The values and principles of the South Place Ethical Society are not for sale. They have been established over a very long period (since 1793) and Barbara Smoker, plainly, does not understand them. How otherwise could she write about the Society's "original guidelines for a non-absolutist situational morality". When she herself joined the Society she declared her sympathy, in writing, for "a rational religious sentiment". That is what the Society is about. As our founder put it:

"As far as I know my own heart, truth in love is my constant aim. I am unconnected with any party, and not prejudiced in any thing that I hold, but that I would willingly be convinced in any thing by proper evidence; and when so convinced, I am willing to retract publicly."

Elhanan Winchester

"The Universal Restoration" (p.194)

To this William Johnson Fox, in 1817, added commitment "to civil and religious liberty all over the world". Then Moncure Conway, having successfully proposed the abandonment of prayer in 1869, then specified *belonging* and *the enquiry into truth* as the Society's sacred qualities, in place of worship of a personal God. Our present aims and objects are essentially as drafted by him in the 1880s. Barbara's "absolute" is an Aunt Sally of her own designing. The South Place word, used by Conway in his history of the Society, is "sacred".

Part of our present division lies in the fact that relativists like Barbara don't have a first principle to work from, a fundamental principle that transcends politics. There *is* such a thing as the truth; we shall never wholly comprehend it but it is out there ahead of us and we are in search of it. You can't do a deal with the truth, it is a religious (but not a supernatural) object. And a religious object is one that is inalienable and set apart, it gives substance to everything else. It is a foundation for living.

Freedom of speech, assembly and the press (and freedom from arbitrary arrest) have been fought for in this country for over 400 years, since the early puritans defied the Pope, the Bishops and the Presbyters. And South Place described in its Trust Deed of 1825 as "a congregation of Protestant Dissenters"

is part of that tradition.

Since conditions are always changing and new problems are coming up, every generation has to wage the struggle for freedom and justice all over again, but not from scratch. Some twelve generations of our forebears have left us a great inheritance and our job is to restate it in the particular context of our own special conditions. In the case of South Place the test is the Society's hiring policy for Conway Hall.

All sorts of people with whose aims and objects we profoundly disagree book Conway Hall regularly, religious fundamentalists, political sectarians, masonic orders, fanatics, gurus and weirdos in addition to all the "normal" people! To start to discriminate anywhere is to set up the principle of discrimination. We should have to sit in judgement on every letting—an absurd idea and lethal to the tradition of freedom.

Common Sense

And does Barbara have no faith in the common sense and intelligence of ordinary mortals? Are they not competent to make up their own minds on the subject of the National Front and other social aberrations? And have they not already spoken? What price the National Front today, discredited, divided, internecine and moribund? The thing to do is to confront them directly, expose their debased values, their shallow thinking and their ugly deeds. In a free, constitutionally governed society that treatment is both right in principle and it works in practice. Look at what happened at the last General Election. The real danger of authoritarianism in this country comes from much higher up in the social and political scale. Barbara, and other members of the anti-freedom lobby, do the NF too much honour.

Some years ago we met the National Party (a breakaway from the NF) in two open debates. You could see them crumble. Soon afterwards they disappeared altogether. Over the last ten years we have relentlessly hammered the NF. They have been banned for about half that decade for particular offences and set periods in accordance with the proper tradition of justice. Martin Webster once described me as "the worst enemy of the NF" for the hard time he had of it at Conway Hall, where it was and is my job to carry out the policy of the Society as laid down by the AGM of 1975 (confirming the then current practice):

"our policy, in accordance with our belief in civil and religious liberty, is to let the Hall without any discrimination beyond the terms of our contracts and the law of the land".

In view of all this it is absurd and childish to

pretend that South Place policy is the personal peccadillo of Peter Cadogan. When you are lost for an argument go for the man—an old and discredited resort! And personal comments, in a matter of this seriousness, are more comments on their author than on their subject.

We have dug our heels in at South Place and made it clear that there is at least somewhere in London where some people stand for something. We have put heart into others in so doing. We have had the support of the NSS and other humanist bodies to date—that is good—long may it continue.

Barbara Smoker writes: SPES hires rooms as a commercial enterprise, and (except rarely for deserving causes) has never given a platform to organisations unable to pay the hire fee. Speech at Conway Hall is not free in that sense! To accept commercial business from the National Front at a loss of £4,350 is thus absurd. As for the debates, I supported them. What I condemn is meetings at which one view only is allowed expression.

CORRIE WITHDRAWS

Mr John Corrie, MP, has abandoned his attempt to bring about an Abortion (Amendment) Bill, designed to make it more difficult for women to obtain a legal abortion. After the debate in the House of Commons on 14 March, in which the Bill failed to complete its course, Corrie's chances were waning. There remained only the hope of finding a few hours in the session for private members' Bills on July 4. A few days after the debate, Mr Corrie announced "I will be withdrawing the Bill, it's dead."

He said that he did not want to ask the Government for extra time since he did not wish to set a precedent. "What happens next year if a Bill for euthanasia is brought up and gets to the report stage and I have had extra time?"

During the parliamentary debate a proposal moving closure was defeated by 147 votes to 140. This meant discussion of amendments continued, with much debate on the word "substantially" as it referred to the extent of risk to a woman's health of continuing pregnancy.

Mr Corrie admitted he had made mistakes in his parliamentary tactics. He also indicated that there was not parliamentary support for a full-scale Abortion (Amendment) Bill: "The lesson must be learned by the general public who want the 1967 Act changed not to ask for too much next time because they simply won't get it through the House of Commons."

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EALING SCHOOLS

A new development in the row about the sale of a secondary state school in Ealing to the Church of England arose when a Southall Sikh Temple sent a cheque of £25,000 to the Chairman of the local education committee. They were putting in a bid to buy Villiers High School and turn it into a Sikh school.

Lady Henniker-Heaton, Chairman of the Education Committee, returned the cheque. She has said: "I would not comment on the possibility of the temple buying the school, or about the price, because the whole thing is extremely nebulous."

The President of the Temple, Mr Malkid Grewal, said: "We want to buy the school to provide religious education for our community." He said that if they were successful they would apply to the Government for a grant for the rest of the money.

Staff at Villiers High School have formed a committee to oppose the sale. The committee has said "This matter is already causing considerable anxiety and unrest among pupils, staff and parents." Is another school to endure the havoc and turmoil which the Church of England has brought to Twyford School?

There could be no stronger argument for preventing the sale of Twyford to the Church of England. In all fairness, the Sikh Temple and the Church of England must be treated equally. If we are to avoid the development of segregated education by the state both sales must be stopped.

LEADEN PRAYERS

Warning: rosary beads can damage your health. According to a report in the *Medical Journal of Australia* a girl of 18 suffered from lead poisoning as a result of her habit of kissing her rosary beads at prayer. Dr Taylor, who wrote up the case, said that this source might be a cause of anaemia among nuns and other Catholics.

(Billy Graham)

heckling to disrupt the meetings.

"Cambridge listened to Billy Graham and rejected him. Will Billy Graham now listen to Cambridge?"

Billy Graham's organisation has seen the Oxbridge crusade as a testing ground for a future nation-wide evangelical campaign. Like Jeremy Dale, we can doubt how lasting is Graham's impact on his hearers. However, anyone who has debated Christianity at universities in recent years knows that Christianity is a much stronger force than humanism. The vigorous and responsible opposition of Students Against Mass Indoctrination is a welcome sign.

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

Just over three years ago there was a holy dust-up over film producer Jens Thorsen's proposed saga on the sex life of Jesus. The Archbishop of Canterbury and other church leaders—less fearful of Mr. Thorsen's excesses than of what Mary Whitehouse would say if they did nothing — scurried around like frightened cockroaches; there were mutterings about blasphemy law; even the Queen, with uncharacteristic lack of judgment, became embroiled in the controversy over "the film that never was".

Mrs Whitehouse obtained a copy of the script from Denmark and employed a translator to prepare an English edition for the Home Office. She protected herself from contamination by holding a prayer session each morning before starting work on the document which, in her view, was "the ultimate in spiritual vandalism and corruption". But while Nanny was slaving away over the hot script of a non-existent film, the Monty Python boys were working on "something completely different". It was the first draft of *The Life of Brian*, which developed from an idea called *Jesus Christ—Lust for Power*.

Little has since been heard of Mr Thorsen's project and no doubt Christian pressure groups are confident that their prayers, petitions, even hints of violence if he set foot in Britain, banished the dirty Dane to outer darkness. But despite that famous victory it is now clear that the assorted collection of prudes and prodnoses in the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, Nationwide Festival of Light, Order of Christian Unity, Community Standards Association and the Responsible Society have lost the most important film censorship battle of the last twenty years. For if Jens Thorsen had made his film, and even conferred upon it a title like *Jesus Christ's Night in the Upper Room with Emmanuelle*, it is unlikely to have attracted a fraction of the acclaim and box-office success that *The Life of Brian* is presently enjoying.

As with gladness men of old, Did the guiding star behold . . . As with joyful steps they sped, Saviour to Thy lowly bed. . . Well, the Monty Python version of events is not quite like the one in Hymns Ancient and Modern. The film opens with the Three Wise Men journeying towards Bethlehem, but the star they followed must have been on the blink for it guided them to the wrong address. There they pay homage and offer gifts to Brian, infant son of The Virgin Mandy and a Roman centurion, while a few stables away reposes Jesus, infant son of The Virgin

Mary who had discovered some time previously that "she . . . was with child of the Holy Ghost" (an occurrence that would cause one of the Python television characters to exclaim: "Nudge, nudge! Wink, wink! Say no more!").

Brian grows up to be Brian Cohen and Jesus eventually became the central figure in Christian mythology.

The Life of Brian has been denounced as being blasphemous, obscene and offensive by Christian zealots who have been campaigning to get it banned. *CSA Newsletter*, published by the Community Standards Association, urges its readers to write to the local authorities about the film "and ask them to see it with a view to banning it". *Prophetic Witness*, which is described as the official voice of the Prophetic Witness Movement International, castigates Monty Python as "a shameless dealer in blasphemy. The lowness and loathsomeness of the serpent are in its latest film." (Such abuse will take no skin off the Python's nose, but it is rather hard on the poor old serpent who is only what the God of the Prophetic Witness Movement International made him when he created "every living thing that moveth".)

Derek Sangster, Editor of *Challenge*, an evangelical monthly, describes the film as "a parody of the life of Jesus Christ that suggests that Christianity began because of the credulous fanaticism of crazy, first-century Jews". But what probably upsets Mr Sangster and other festival of lighters is that many of Monty Python's targets closely resemble the credulous, fanatical, crazy twentieth-century Christians who want to prosecute publications and ban films they do not approve of.

Throughout the film Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin extract the urine out of Christianity with great gusto. And although the Monty Python team have denied that the film is a parody of Christ's life, cinema audiences will certainly interpret it as a send-up of the old, old story.

The Christian censorship lobby has missed the boat in failing to prevent the widespread showing of *The Life of Brian*. True, they have been able to do so in some places, but such isolated successes have been offset by the vast amount of publicity for the film which their self-defeating endeavours have generated.

The "Ban Brian" brigade suffered one of their biggest defeats in Sussex, a stronghold of evangelical and Right-wing pressure groups. Worthing's Highways and Environmental Committee voted in favour of the film being shown in the town. The vote was not unanimous, however, and one committee member, Councillor Mrs Daisy Rudd, said: "The film was dreadful and I want it banned. It was blasphemous." Councillor Daisy's colleague, Councillor Mrs Norah Prestwich, concurred.

Despite the personal intervention of Dr Eric Kemp, Bishop of Chichester, Arun District Council's Health and Control Committee decided that *The Life of Brian* was not too heady for the citizens of Littlehampton and Bognor Regis. Dr Kemp had not seen the film he was attempting to have banned.

In Eastbourne the clamour to ban "Brian" was led by Fr Christopher Spender, parish priest of Our Lady of Ransom Roman Catholic Church. In a newsletter to parishioners he claimed that showing the film "will give grave offence to a large section of the community . . . It is blasphemous and it offends God."

Judging by the large queues outside cinemas where *The Life of Brian* is being shown, it is evident that banning it would cause grave offence to a large section of the community. But Fr Spender's arrogance and enthusiasm for suppression is to be expected from a priest in the service of a church which for centuries terrorised human minds. However, he is likely to discover that even in Eastbourne people do not want to replace the Index of forbidden books with an Index of forbidden films. The Health and Protection Committee has agreed that "Brian" can be shown, but with an X Certificate.

Here in Brighton "Brian" played to packed houses during an extended run, although Councillor Jackie Barnes had issued this Awful Warning: "It could bring the wrath of God on the town." The only manifestation of Divine umbrage so far is that the Clock Tower is in danger of collapsing.

Religious opponents of *The Life of Brian* profess great concern that young people will be corrupted by some of the language and the occasional, very brief, full frontal scenes. Indeed no words are uttered in the film that are not heard in every school playground or after choir practice. And it is unlikely that the glimpse of a nude body will upset a modern teenager unless he or she has had the misfortune to grow up in a puritanical, evangelical Christian environment.

In fact it is neither the naughty words nor the nudity that really worries the various pro-censorship pressure groups, most of which are of marked Right-wing political sympathies. They fear the ideas expressed in *The Life of Brian*—think for yourselves; don't follow any Messiah; be critical rather than gullible; you came from nothing and you're going back to nothing. And it must be worrying to such groups that a large proportion of the "Brian" audiences are teenagers, contemptuous of compulsory classroom religion and resentful of the pompous, self-righteous prigs who tried to prevent them from seeing the film.

It will not escape notice that Brian Cohen, the unwilling Messiah, is a far more attractive character than the biblical son of God. Brian is loyal, sensible and modest. Those organisations which venerate the

family should look to B.C., not J.C., for their inspiration.

Brian lives with Mandy, his ratbag of a mother. She has a mouth like a hornets' nest and is constantly nagging him. Going to the stoning of a heretic is her idea of a pleasant afternoon outing. But at the age of 30 Brian continues to live with Mum. His filial devotion and sense of responsibility is in marked contrast to the attitude of Jesus who laid it on the line that if a man did not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, "he cannot be my disciple". (Luke 14.26)

Brian is followed to a remote spot by a crowd who are hailing him as the Messiah. When they complain of hunger he advises them to eat the berries of juniper bushes which are growing nearby. "The bushes are made fruitful by his word," cries a sappy female named Elsie. Another follower shouts: "They brought forth juniper berries." Brian retorts: "Of course they brought forth juniper berries . . . They're juniper bushes. What d'you expect?"

Brian's behaviour is far more rational than that of Jesus who petulantly cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season. (Mark 11.12-14)

When Brian addresses a crowd of followers he does not exploit their fanaticism but tries to reason with them. In response to their plea: "A blessing! A blessing!", he expostulates: "Look . . . you've got it all wrong. You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody. You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals."

Jesus, unlike Brian, did not encourage people to think and act rationally but to "become as little children". (Matthew 18.3) He fostered gullibility in his followers, and during one ego-trip proclaimed "all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth". (Matthew 28.8)

Many of the self-appointed guardians of public morality are convinced that the lampooning of religion in the television programme *That Was the Week That Was* ushered in an age of scepticism, irreverence and outright unbelief. It was bad enough when people ignored, questioned or even doubted the authenticity of "Christian truths". But it was surely a time of tribulation when they actually started laughing at them. Will social historians of the future regard the success of *The Life of Brian* as the starting point of a revival of anti-religious, anti-conformist, anti-authoritarian attitudes? In the words of the Bard of Avon: ". . . 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd."

At any rate it is gratifying to know that the absurdities and fatuities of Christianity are being blown hither and thither by gales of laughter in cinemas up and down the country. The Christian Censorship Circus is no match for Monty Python's Flying Circus.

FUNERAL PROTESTS

A secular funeral for a member of the Communist Party at Barnsley crematorium, Yorkshire, has roused the anger of local rector David Warner who says he was shocked to learn that the council was allowing individuals to hold any type of service at the crematorium, and choose any kind of music.

The rector of Wombwell was particularly incensed that the funeral for the Communist Party member had no minister present, and that political speeches, rather than prayers were delivered. "The crematorium," he complained, "should only be used for religious funeral services approved by the local authority. I cannot see how we can avoid offending public opinion and taste if people can take any material they want in there."

The rector was referring to the fact that instead of the normal tapes of organ and choir music, there was a song sung by the late Paul Robeson, who was a communist.

When Terry Mullins, secretary of the National Secular Society, read of the Rev Warner's objections, he wrote to the officer in charge of Barnsley's cemeteries and crematoria asking him to point out to the rector that "the public crematoria are maintained at the expense of all the citizens of Barnsley, and not just the Christian minority."

In a letter to the Daily Telegraph, Mr Mullins said there was no reason why non-religious ceremonies should not be held inside public crematoria, and asked: "would the rector like atheists and agnostics to hold their ceremonies in the open air?"

He added: "This society and other Secularist/Humanist organisations are often asked to send someone to officiate at non-religious funeral ceremonies in the London area, and we have never encountered any opposition to our proceedings either from the cemetery and crematoria officials, or from ministers of the various denominations who use the same buildings.

"Many of the public are unaware that they do not have to submit to the mouthings of nonsensical rituals in order to pay last respects to their dead. There is no need, in fact, to have any sort of ceremony whatsoever."

Meanwhile, Brian Parry, a member of the executive council of the NSS, took issue with Canon Paul Oestreicher over remarks he had made on the World Service of the BBC in regard to secular funerals.

Mr Parry pointed out that, while secular funerals need never be rigid or conventional, "a typical Christian funeral takes place in a large, half-empty and usually very cold church. It is attended by people who don't know when to stand or when to kneel, which books to find the hymns in, or when to say amen! It is conducted by a clergyman who says nice things about the dear, departed servant of the Lord,

NEWS

whom he probably didn't know from Adam and who had no time for churchgoers anyway. Depressing, hypocritical and downright embarrassing."

Mr Parry added: "You were right to say a secular funeral just wouldn't be the same. If it was we should all be ashamed!"

COUNTING THE SMUT

One of the year's most pointless and absurd exercises has just been conducted by a group of students on behalf of Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. For a whole week 20 students and graduates at Westminster College, a Methodist teacher training college in Oxford, monitored all programmes transmitted by BBC1, 2 and ITV in January and discovered that "a surprising number of programmes not only grossly violated acceptable standards of speech, decency and behaviour, but completely ignored the codes published by the broadcasting authorities and the recommendations of the recent Annan Report."

The monitors noted that during the week under review there had been 1,124 incidents of swearing, blasphemy, alcoholic drinking, smoking, violence, vulgar jokes and sexual activity. What's more 38.8 per cent of all "offensive material" was screened during family viewing time—ie before 9 pm—which meant that many children would have been watching.

The object of the exercise? To provide Mrs Whitehouse, who claims to dislike censorship, but advocates it ad nauseum, with enough material to produce a report entitled "£34 for this!"

One fact which seems to have escaped Mrs Whitehouse's panel of pet students and graduates was that television sets are all equipped with off switches.

THE GURU OF BOGNOR

An Irishman, whose followers claim he once resorted his pet goldfish to life, has set up in business as "God" in a two-storey bungalow in Bognor Regis.

Local religious leaders and parents are becoming increasingly concerned at the support he is attracting from young people—allegiance to his teachings is estranging them from their families and friends.

Known to his disciples as Ishvara, Herbert John Yarr, who is in his thirties, claims to be "the greatest incarnation of God in the history of man—a true Perfect Master."

AND NOTES

He tells his 100 or so devotees that he can bring them enlightenment, which qualifies them to rank as "saints" in his movement, the Spiritual Organisation for the Teachings of the Master.

Christianity is derided as preaching "a lot of hot air," and Jesus Christ is dismissed contemptuously as "dead and irrelevant". Only Mr Yarr, it appears, can show people the path to God.

Followers are asked to dedicate their "soul, mind and body" to Mr Yarr, once a member of the Divine Light Mission, in Cornwall, and formerly, it is believed, an Army clerk.

Many devotees imbue him with divine powers. One young woman no longer a member of the movement is convinced that she witnessed him use his mental powers to move a cloud against the prevailing wind.

Supporters also believe the Master can conjure up matter like a three-piece suite or a kitchen table.

They propound his teachings, largely based on a hotch-potch of oriental beliefs in the mystical powers of the mind, with unquestioning fervour and, occasionally, anger.

Earlier this year a young man and woman, who had left the movement and were reported to have questioned Mr Yarr's divinity and personal behaviour, received a visit from several of his supporters who struck them and warned that they risked being sent blind or being run down by a bus.

The incident was reported to the local police, but senior officers felt no legal action could be taken. They have warned, however, that Mr Yarr's devotees are expected to obey the civil law along with other mere mortals.

The young man who received the visit told me: "Mr Yarr promised me enlightenment, but he failed. I spent 10 hours in meditation one day and eight hours on each day of the following two days, according to his instructions, but it didn't work."

His girlfriend said that in sessions designed to cast her mind back to previous appearances on Earth, Mr Yarr asked her embarrassing intimate questions about her past sex life.

Another girl, who left the movement after objections to her having an unenlightened boyfriend, has moved to London because she fears the consequences of remaining in the Bognor area.

Parents claim that it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate or reason with their children once they are convinced of Mr Yarr's divinity, though the movement strongly denies allegations of brain-washing.

The local newspaper, the *Bognor Regis Observer*, received many complaints from parents saying their

children are passive zombies after meditation sessions in which they constantly repeat the same words over and over again in an attempt to see a 1,000-petal lotus flower, which is said to appear as a burning bush.

One parent said: "It really is a most pernicious organisation. It is causing much distress."

The movement says it encourages parents to discuss its beliefs, but a father who asked too many questions was urged to leave.

Many of the followers of Mr Yarr are in their 20s or older, which limits the control parents can exercise over them, but does not diminish their concern at the obvious obsession with the self-proclaimed divinity of Mr Yarr.

The rules of the movement are so designed that he can keep a tight control over devotees, who are not encouraged to discuss any doubts or problems they may have among themselves, but to deal directly with a trusted "saint," thus preventing the possible spread of dissension.

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Seen on Catford railway station, writ large in chalk: "JESUS IS COMING". Added, in different hand: "—AT LEAST, HE'S BREATHING HARD".

BOOKS

A NEST OF TEACHERS by Edward Blishen. Hamish Hamilton 1980, £6.95.

This is a most interesting and enjoyable book. It is also somewhat disturbing. In 1949, Edward Blishen, after five years in agriculture, followed by three as a private school teacher, "massively unqualified", enrolled for the emergency training to be provided by the Ministry of Education. This was part of a scheme which represented the first step to restore something like a normal teacher force after the disruption of the war. The college to which Mr Blishen went was in a Victorian Working Men's Institute which, as he put it, owed its existence to distinguished philanthropists, "the monumental art critic, the socialist parson, the great mid-Victorian melancholy poet". It seems to have been in North London and perhaps it is not too difficult to identify. Mr Blishen gives it the name of Isleden Emergency Training College and now, many years after, in a state of comparative tranquillity, he has recollected the emotions, stresses and strains of the course on which he embarked. There were two hundred students and the course lasted for thirteen months only. This period included three spells of teaching practice, which the author describes as different kinds of execution. Insofar as any objective judgment is possible, it seems that historians of education agree that the emergency training scheme, despite the "crash" nature of the courses, represented a timely and essential provision at a period of great difficulty and the benefits certainly exceeded the disadvantages.

Mr Blishen kept a diary during his training months and he quotes directly from it on some occasions. The book is given the description of "an autobiography" and there is no reason to doubt that it is a genuine attempt to share with the reader the feelings of those days of a third of a century ago. Yet, if memory has not dimmed the author's view, his growth as a man and writer has certainly changed the colour to some extent and his book reads in many places more like the work of a gifted novelist than that of a mere chronicler of the past. Certainly many novelists would be pleased to have created the gallery of teachers that pass through these pages. The course is opened by introductory remarks from Mr Trellis who emphasised that windows were to be opened in the souls of the children that the new teachers were to teach and that sweetness and light were to be brought into their lives. From the theory to the practice, these remarks were followed by the comments of Mr Jepp who was more concerned with people attending his tutorials than with what effect the training might have upon them in the long run. Blishen comments: "We were to move between the notion of opening theoretical windows, and a

FREETHINKER

counter-notion of keeping actual windows from breakage." Theory and practice thus jostle together in these pages but never quite succeed in interpenetrating each other. Here a Mr Small, a music teacher, has become "simply a bundle of queer tired habits" and his teaching was "one long plaint, in growling Cockney". Yet when he was playing the violin in a singing lesson he had "the most strange, affectionate expression on his face". At another school, a teacher called Hatt was, what some people tried to impress on Blishen was always necessary, a "squasher". Blishen thought Hatt something like the war itself, "something that on the hugest scale was negative and nagging". Yet, to his surprise, the boys seemed to like Hatt; they found him what they thought a teacher should be. On his last teaching practice, he found a teacher who was both hard and generous and this teacher, Buller, seems to have left him with a more favourable view of his chosen profession than he might otherwise have had at the end of the thirteen months.

Yet, this period does not seem to have left him with the feeling that he was wholly fitted to be a teacher. Mr Blishen seems to be a kind man, disposed to take the better view of anyone else if he possibly can. Again and again throughout his training and teaching practice, he felt himself disillusioned or let down. In the beginning, when enthusiasm was, presumably, at its highest, he recorded that the course was boring throughout and conceived the idea that the students, preparing for an occupation in which ideas were of importance, were being subjected to a kind of aversion therapy in the matter of having ideas of any kind. Fortunately, he was not driven into total despair, despite his growing sense of inadequacy and unsuitability. Among the most charming pages in the book are those in which he writes of his wife Kate and their new-born son, Tom. In many ways, the delights of watching the growing child compensate for the disappointments in his encounters with the ready grown variety in the class-rooms. The passages on the private, as contrasted with the more public life, remind the reader that a profession is not everything and perhaps call to mind some lines in the best known poem of a "mid-Victorian melancholy poet", Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach". Certainly, in the last lines of the book, with completed training behind him, Blishen, thinking in 1950 of the possibility of another war, is at one with Arnold in finding private happiness as the nearest to realisable good.

One of Blishen's fellow students, Trimmer, makes

REVIEWS

at one stage some harsh comments on Butler's novel, *The Way of All Flesh*. In that bitter masterpiece, there is a passage of savage criticism of a Victorian headmaster, after which Butler warns all school-teachers to be careful for, in a few years, one of their charges will write a book, showing what kind of a man he was. *A Nest of Teachers* is, in some ways, an example of the reverse type of book, as it were. There is, beneath the surface a note of great sadness and it seems to rest in the failure of many teachers and the failure consists of "the earnest adult being reduced to a ludicrous, howling idiot by, at most, forty tiny creatures". Mr Blishen has already written elsewhere of his later teaching and it is to be hoped that he will write more. To repeat, his book is enjoyable but, because teaching presents an unhappily insoluble mystery, it is disturbing.

T. F. EVANS

OPTIMISM: THE BIOLOGY OF HOPE by Lionel Tiger.
Secker and Warburg, £6.95.

"The basic emphasis of this book is to explore why human beings are made happier by optimistic thoughts than by despairing ones. Happy thoughts make us feel good." "This book is a tour of the forms and functions of personal optimism and of the social groups and patterns that it nourishes and sustains." This book is actually nothing of the sort; its evident aim is to display the "very rigorous intellect" of the author, who confides in us his prejudices and intuitions on a range of deeply meaningful contemporary situations. These include the use of abortion and contraception, narcotics, breastfeeding, diabetes, Watergate, feminism and chain-stores. There are passages resembling the commentaries to especially bad home-movies, describing the author's visit to the caves of Lascaux; the horse-races of Campo di Siena; and (of course) people who go around making especially bad home-movies.

The author is an under-employed American academic (a "Professor of Anthropology") who strives painfully to show his human feelings. The first chapter opens with an account of the death of the author's mother. The attendant surgeon, a clever man with "soul" (who went to College with the author) appears "flushed with fatigue" (sic) as an "alchemist in green". As his mother sinks back upon her pillow, the author reflects meaningfully on life and death. The book continues unevenly through a further 270 pages.

If you still want to know what the author has to say on the relation between religion, science and "human nature", and on the value or otherwise of

"sociobiology", read on.

The idea that some religiosities (e.g. predicting the imminent collapse of the world) might be pessimistic, is glossed over. Indeed, there is no account of the relationship between pessimism and optimism—merely a low-grade "medicalised" piece on "depression". The author cannot see that a brave pessimism might be better, both subjectively (for the individual) and objectively (for society) than a facile optimism. Religion is seen as the formal embodiment of an optimistic tendency rooted in the human genetic inheritance. If this strikes you as being codswallop, you are taken to task for not taking sociobiology seriously, for seeking in vain to shield "human nature" from "the forces of scientific rigor". "If humans are unique culturally," he continues, "and of course they are, then this is a feature of their biology and therefore subject to both the rules of biological events and of biological sciences."

The author does admit that optimism in religious form may be nasty and vicious (the Crusades and all that). "Many communities have strong rules to inhibit people who spread panic and hysteria and who incite their fellow-citizens to extremes of distress, fear or despair. Purveyors of optimism may be as extreme in their offerings—heaven is extreme after all—but they appear to be much more acceptable than doomsayers." Sadly, this argument is not developed as it might have been. A notion of the "leisure class" is advanced for the priesthood, but there is no criticism of such parasites. There is instead much waffle about cathedrals as "monuments to human hope", ignoring the hopeless oppression on which such monuments all too often depended. There is a remarkable passage about Mosaic Law as a key innovation in human history, in which the ban on saying God's name (Jehovah, or "Carrot-Face" between friends) is presented as some kind of Great Achievement. Worst of all is a fatuous comparison between "religious" and "scientific" thought, in which it is claimed that religious thought predominates among young children. This is insulting to infants, whose development of a system of concepts for dealing with the real world is properly to be seen as a marvel of scientific enquiry.

The bits directly relevant to the title (of which there are four or five, a few hundred words in all) are printed in italics. They amount to a thesis which consists of premature or even downright silly speculations about the function of "naturally occurring opiates". (By which the author actually means "opiate-like compounds found in the human brain" not "narcotics derived from poppies".) These opiates, we are told, do not exist to control pain (as hitherto believed) but "optimism" possibly located in "hope centres". This optimism is a "purely subjective" phenomenon which the author seems unable to distinguish from paranoid delusion or even from rational calculation of gains and losses.

"It is as optimistic for a Hitler to assert that killing Jews and Gypsies will purify Aryan communities as for a donor of a collection of art to expect the gift to enrich and please the population."

You may be wondering whether there is anything at all to be said for this book. While a brief answer might be "no", a more cautious answer would suggest that if the author had set himself a simpler task—modelling his book, perhaps, on Lewis Thomas's *Lives of a Cell*, there might now be something worth reading. Looking on the bright side, this may well be the last bleat of the Desmond Morris man-as-a-red-blooded-mammal school of writers. However, Lionel Tiger lacks the power even to exasperate. I found his book saddening, as a sign of the television-induced decline of American culture. If I had £6.95 to my credit, I would spend it on something else.

JULIAN MELDRUM

ISLAM AND CAPITALISM by Maxine Rodinson. Pelican Books, £1.25.

The followers of Islam claim the support of Islamic doctrines for all sorts of political and social ideas. If modernist Islamic socialism as represented by Nasser is on the decline, there are other schools of Islamic socialism in Gadafi's Libya and in Algeria. Then there are two schools of Baathist socialism in Syria and Iraq respectively. On the other hand, fundamentalists of the conservative trend rule in Saudi Arabia, while the military type prevails in Pakistan. Most vociferous of all, of course, is the massive fundamentalism of Iran, while the moderate Sadat claims that the Iranian students' seizure of the American hostages is a crime *against* Islam.

In the middle of these claims and counter-claims, one needs someone with a detached and scholarly outlook and the opportunity to study the languages and institutions of the Middle East on the spot. Maxine Rodinson is uniquely qualified to be such a guide. He is a Frenchman who lived and worked for many years in Lebanon and Syria. He is of Jewish origin but is the reverse of being a Zionist. He joined the Communist Party of France in 1937 but left in 1958. He believes he still belongs to the Marxist Left, though he is neither an institutional nor a dogmatic Marxist and his book is an attempt to speak to the people of both Europe and the Islamic world on the basis of humanity and reason.

It would be impossible and unwise to try to summarise the author's data, arguments and conclusions in the course of a review of a book which "must be read". The author tells us in one chapter what the *Koran*, The Word of God to Muslims, prescribes; that it has nothing against private property, or wage-labour, and that the idea of treating the means of production separately never even occurred to the author of the *Koran*. In describing the actual economic practice of the Muslim world, he tells us

how the prohibition of usury (*riba*) by the *Koran* was got round by clever ruses, from Morocco through Mecca to Java.

The latter part of the book is lengthy dialogue with the Muslim Left on whether Islam could be the basis of a modern economic reconstruction. Rodinson argues that the imprecision of the sacred writings on economic matters must make a "progressive" interpretation very difficult. The ruling classes, he maintains, will always have an advantage because they can appeal to the archaic traditions sanctified by Islam and that religious fanaticism can be easily mobilised by them against those who would interfere with these archaic traditions. Prophetic words written before the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini!

G. N. DEODHEKAR

TESTIMONY The Memoirs of Shostakovich. As related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov. Hamish Hamilton, £7.95.

This is a puzzling book. So many unanswered questions and yet, given that Shostakovich was so enigmatic, these reminiscences do seem to be authentic. The terribly oppressive nature of Russia under Stalin comes through only too well, if we think of the appalling Witch Hunts of the '30's and the constant gear changing that this entailed from creative artists in order to keep up with the whims of Joseph Stalin. How Shostakovich hated Stalin! Yet, why in that case did he stay when Prokofiev and Stravinsky escaped? It would have been difficult with family and friends left behind but the others managed it. One can understand the love of one's homeland but is such love worth the sacrifices that Shostakovich had to make in order to keep himself and his family intact? He adopted the guise of the wise-fool or Yarodiviy, a traditional Russian ploy for those who wished to be allowed to criticise and still save their skins. These characters have traditionally been licensed by superstitious rulers in that country, and according to Shostakovich, Stalin was exceedingly superstitious. Shostakovich believes that it was only by adopting this role that he was enabled to survive while many of his friends and contemporaries such as Meyerhold and Zoshchenko perished.

Perhaps the most puzzling thing about this book is why Shostakovich decided to entrust his manuscript with its exposé of Stalin's regime to the comparatively unknown Mr Volkov. There were any number of distinguished musicians and artists in the West with whom he had especial ties which he was able to develop after the death of Stalin in 1953. I am thinking particularly of his association with Benjamin Britten and his circle at Aldeburgh. Then there were the numerous expatriate Russian artists such as Rostropovich and Ashkenazy whom it would seem were more likely to be given credence in face of strong Soviet denials. In the last two decades of his life the composer's son Maxim had been one of

THEATRE

THE ICEMAN COMETH by Eugene O'Neill. National Theatre (Cottesloe).

the most important interpreters of his father's works yet one finds hardly a reference to him at all. This is strange even allowing that Maxim Shostakovich still has to live in the Soviet Union and it may be that reference to him was deleted in order to safeguard his position in that country.

There are some curious statements in the book which may be due to bad translation, one that caught my eye was that an audience of sixty thousand gave a rapturous reception to Shostakovich's 7th Symphony at the Royal Albert Hall in 1943. Apart from the size of a capacity audience at the Royal Albert Hall (more like six thousand than sixty thousand) has there ever been a vast audience for contemporary music? I very much doubt it. Incidentally I am gratified to find that a part of Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra which has always reminded me of the Maxim's tune in the *Merry Widow*, is in fact a quote from one of Shostakovich's symphonies and was used by Shostakovich as a reference to his son (Maxim)—a quote twice removed! How nice to know that even the greatest of composers can unbend to a Lehar melody!

Shostakovich did not have a very high regard for humanists from the West who visited Russia in the 1930's and were easily duped by Stalin. Perhaps it was because he was a humanist himself that he felt so badly let down by the likes of Shaw and Russell who went away singing the praises of the revolution. But then not all those who were taken in were humanists, Lady Astor certainly wasn't. It is only the humanists he attacks and does not allow that they may have been ready to accept as fact what they had hoped so fervently would happen if their cherished theories were put into practise. Perhaps they just had too much good-will. In spite of his many troubles and persecutions he did not forsake his fundamental humanist viewpoint and says plainly "I don't have much faith in eternity". He quotes the famous Russian humorist Ilya Ilf speaking of "everlasting primus stove needles": "What do I want eternal needles for? I have no intention of living forever."

As I said, a puzzling and a very bitter book. To me it certainly rings true and possibly, as time goes on, and many of those still living who might be harmed by the truth will have died, we shall then learn the answer to many of the puzzles. One realises after reading this book why there are such changes in style and content in Shostakovich's music and especially in his symphonies. It was in these works that he tried to hide his true self.

TERRY MULLINS

No doubt there have been finer, more polished American dramatists than Eugene O'Neill, but none greater. Though dozens have been able to avoid his mistakes, no one has yet matched his dramatic intensity and sheer staying power. His plays are unreadable, and yet on the stage they provide audiences with heavyweight theatre and actors with the parts they were "born to play". If you are willing to surrender yourself to his Leviathan talent, then he has the power to transport you into another world and leave you reeling.

We are twice blessed in the current O'Neill Season at the Cottesloe. Not only have Bill Bryden and company chosen to revive one of O'Neill's three masterpieces, but they have invested it with all the dedicated expertise at their command. It is a singular tribute to great drama. I can think of no better way to summarise its success than to reiterate what a member of the audience said as we left the theatre after five hours of strenuous viewing: "I could stay here till midnight."

The Iceman Cometh encapsulates all of the author's passionate despair for the human race. Set in a waterfront dive on the West Side of New York in the summer of 1912, it is a threnody to the misbegotten played on a pianola. The inhabitants of Harry Hope's saloon have got beyond hope. They live out their fantastic "pipe dreams" in the bottom of a bottle of rotgut and haven't even the strength to climb the stairs to their louse-ridden beds. They spend their days and nights in a besotted stupor, hooked on the illusion of everlasting tomorrow and a return to former good fortune, their dreams fuelled by the bi-annual visits of one Hickey, a panhandling salesman with enough goodwill and ready cash to keep them all paralysed for a week. Hickey has always been able to enliven the atmosphere with his steady flow of hooch and humour, the tireless joke about finding his wife *in flagrante delicto* with the iceman.

Yet this time it is different. On Harry Hope's sixtieth birthday Hickey has returned sober, with cold wrath of truth on his tongue. With the pitchman's best sales talk, he urges each "inmate" to abandon his pipe dream and face the truth about himself at last: that there is nothing to live for and no use in pretending there is.

Religious symbolism abounds in this play. Harry Hope's birthday celebration is at once the last supper and the characters are Christ's disciples. Yet there is little divinity in them, and Hickey is no Christ figure. His road to salvation is not paved with faith in tomorrow, but the realisation of life as it is

Audrey Williamson's second Richard York detective novel on theatre and racing, "Death of a Theatre Filly", has just been published by Granada (£4.95).

today. The action is a prolonged working out of each man's character: from once diehard socialists and a former British officer to pimps who pretend they are barkeepers and their whores who pretend they are tarts. The truth behind Hickey's own conversion is revealed in a long monologue in the last act when he confesses to killing his wife. With nothing more to live for, he is at peace with himself for the first time in his life.

Guilt and the absence of redemption were perennial themes in O'Neill. He wrote this play at the outbreak of the Second World War and set it immediately before the First. The drama is one long confessional, relieved only by humour and a boundless compassion for those he is writing about. What on the page seems leaden becomes life-charged by familiarity. As we sit with these people and overhear the story of their lives for the umpteenth time, they become real to us and we find ourselves caring about them as much as the author and actors do.

It is always a mistake for an English audience to attempt to play O'Neill straight. His excesses are altogether foreign to those who would see them as strictly American. A number of his characters are Irish American, and emphasising this is perhaps the only way to communicate the intensity to an English audience. This is what the National players have done, and it is the one reason the production works so well. There is always the feeling that the actors have got under the skins of the characters and so brought them to life. J. G. Devlin as Harry Hope and Niall Toibin as the old socialist, betraying a real benevolence through his pose as a grandstand observer, are especially convincing. Jack Shepherd, in the pivotal role of the salesman, propels the evening with his lightning-like switches from easy-going banter to tempestuous self-reproach. The period detail is fine, and the theatre has been transformed for the production to a proscenium-arch stage, comfortable seats and a supper-long interval. You will not see a longer play than this at the moment, but I have strong doubts that you will see a better one either.

JAMES MACDONALD

LETTERS

KNOCKING RUSSIA

I notice from your March issue that the Warwickshire Humanist Group has sent a letter of support to the Russian dissident Dr Andrei Sakharov.

Whilst I have every sympathy for the sentiments expressed in the letter and deplore the treatment meted out to Russian dissidents, I am puzzled as to why the group has singled out this case for its attention when there are, unfortunately, very many regimes all over the world far more tyrannous and cruel than that of Russia, which treat their dissidents— even those who, unlike Dr Sakharov, remain fairly passive— in a most abominable and inhuman manner. I respect the courage of Dr Sakharov, but would point out that

he is fortunate to live in Russia and not one of those other countries where his "crime" would already have been punished by prison, torture or possibly death.

Surely it is not the present fashion in the media to condemn any Russian action as evil, whilst overlooking the inhuman crimes of "friendly nations", which has prompted the Warwickshire Humanist Group to send their letter?

JOE BURMAN

SECULARIST "MOLES"?

As the mover of the motion at this year's National Secular Society AGM to set up a secular political party, I feel I should state for the record my reason for this, as I am a little frightened at the implications of certain correspondence that I have received and read in "The Freethinker" over this.

My claim that a secular party should be set up was not, as Mr D. Readhead writes in March's "Freethinker", "... a most pertinent recognition of the political influence of the Papist camp..." but a recognition that the present policy of "secular entryism" of the Labour Party was a complete failure.

Basically, the present idea was that secularism could be best advanced by trying to influence the Labour Party, rather than forming an entirely separate political body, and this idea received majority support at the AGM.

Quite frankly, if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

The Labour Party has had plenty of years in government in which it could have secularised the state, but as we know, it didn't do so; indeed, it increased religious privilege in several areas. The reason it didn't do so was that it didn't want to. This idea that the Labour Party is at heart a secularist party flies in the face of all evidence. We should not forget that the influence of Methodism and Non-Conformity has historically always been at the heart of the Labour Party, and has always been much greater than the influence of any secular group such as, say, the Marxists.

That was the reason for this motion and no other. I resent the way that some members of the NSS have used this idea for their own distasteful brand of "papist bashing".

Undoubtedly, the Roman Catholic Church has considerable political "clout" in Britain, but the Protestants have just as much, if not more. Why single out the Catholics? Have we perhaps, some Protestant "moles" in the NSS? (The term "papist", a Protestant invention, is a dead giveaway).

I am not some kind of atheistic Ian Paisley, nor would I welcome any attempt to make such a political party, or indeed the NSS, the atheistic equivalent of the Orange order; or perhaps, even worse, the atheistic equivalent of the National Front, with the "papists" substituted for the Jews and blacks.

By all means attack religion, but don't single out any particular group. They are all as bad as one another, and I am horrified at the way some people are attempting to use present, and proposed future, secular organisations as a "hate machine" against Roman Catholics.

Yours faithfully,
R. W. ALDRIDGE

MOTHER TERESA A DANGER

Barbara Smoker is spot on in her criticism of Mother Teresa. Having just heard her being interviewed on ABC radio, I have come to the conclusion that not only is Mother Teresa not good but is a positive danger to the human race.

Her activities remind me of a modern poet's words: "They make the wounds, and then sell the salves", I don't think I have heard so many clichés packed together per second in my life.

She mentions god about every three words. If her god exists why on earth do we need Mother Teresa's efforts at all. Why doesn't he shower food on India from the sky?

Mother Teresa is just a Roman Catholic Barbie doll, capable of about six statements, which she repeats endlessly. I remember Albert Schweitzer being described as a saint by the press. Later on it turned out that he treated the blacks like dirt and was doing very little good—just part of the band-aid brigade.

I feel certain that the same applies to Mother Teresa.

You might be interested in a quote by George Orwell: "One cannot be a Catholic and be truly adult".
COLIN MAINE

ORIGINS OF "MORTALISM"

In your January issue an article raises the question of "mortalism" and suggests that the term is of recent coinage.

In 1640 the ending of strict censorship brought a flood of heretical books and pamphlets, so much so that one wonders whether mediaeval times were a period, not so much of simple belief, as of suppressed unbelief.

In a vain Canute-like attempt to stem this tide a Blasphemy Ordinance was passed in May 1648, fixing the death penalty for mortalism, for those who denied the Trinity and for those who rejected the Scriptures as the Word of God.

M. M. WILES

WESLEY CRITICISED

It is sad that "The Freethinker" (March 1980) should accept more or less at its face value Stanley Ayling's laudatory biography of John Wesley, and that Margaret McIlroy should make the astonishing assertion that Wesley was not to blame for his High Tory stance since democracy was unknown in the eighteenth century!

As "The Freethinker" itself has stocked my biographies of Thomas Paine and John Wilkes, it should hardly be necessary to point out that the eighteenth century was the Age of Reason and not only Wilkes and Paine but a whole body of democrats were particularly active at this time, advocating universal suffrage and other reforms not achieved until well over 100 years later. Even Edmund Burke (who changed his attitude only at the time of the French Revolution, with the help of a Government pension) was one of these democratic reformers; so was General John Burgoyne, a notably liberal MP as well as leader of the Government forces against the American Revolutionists. Wilkes in 1776 actually brought a Bill into Parliament demanding universal suffrage!

Wesley may have advocated "charity" to the poor, but he was a firm believer in their position in society being unchangeable by God's will; and alas it was his view which was carried over to and adopted by the dreadful nineteenth century and Victorian "godly" regimes.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

Margaret McIlroy's review of a biography of Wesley ("The Freethinker", March) is strangely adulatory in its conclusion. He may have been well-intentioned and worthy in some ways, but surely the movement he founded has not been wholly beneficent, with its boost to Victorian prudery and emotional evangelism which has not yet spent its force.

Margaret McIlroy apologises for Wesley's lack of sympathy towards democracy and insensitive schooling methods, but would not a man as remarkable as she presents have been able to look beyond the mainstream attitudes of his period? Was there a mix-up in the post and this review intended for the "Methodist Recorder"?

J. HOSKINS

REPLY PLEASE

As Mary Whitehouse is such an assiduous reader of your columns, may I ask her if she will enlarge upon her mysterious statement in "The Controversialists" (BBC 1, 16 March) that she had received communications from non-Christians threatening a breach of the peace as a result of "Gay News" publication of the Kirkup poem. It would be most interesting to know from whom these communications came—and whether if she considered them to be serious, Mrs. Whitehouse took any action about them.

ANTONY GREY

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?

The proposal, made by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society last Autumn (see *The Freethinker*, December) to publish a booklet giving practical advice on how to commit suicide if you are suffering from an incurable terminal illness, has caused a resurgence of interest in euthanasia. At a crowded debate in Lewisham Concert Hall recently, Nicholas Reed, secretary of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society stated that membership of the society which had hovered at around 2000 for several years, had increased by 100 per cent in the two months following the proposal to publish this booklet, and was steadily increasing.

The debate: "The Right to Die in Dignity—Euthanasia or Hospice Care", between Nicholas Reed and Dame Cicely Saunders, director of St Christopher's Hospice Sydenham, attracted an audience about equally divided between supporters and opponents of voluntary euthanasia. Nicholas Reed was fulsome in his praise for the work in care of the dying performed by hospices, but Dame Cicely, although admitting there were some people who would prefer euthanasia, was opposed to legislation that would make euthanasia a possible alternative.

Dame Cicely Saunders is no newcomer to opposition—she spoke at a NSS Forum in 1968—but is unsympathetic to the opinion of others; during the debate she showed slides—one of a war-damaged crucifix from Warsaw—to encourage the audience, which included nuns who felt horror at the very mention of euthanasia, to feel that there is life in death. Nicholas Reed pointed out that proper hospice care could not be provided for everyone, and that a recent opinion poll had found 62 per cent of the public in favour of euthanasia, with only 22 per cent definitely opposed. Over 30 per cent of GPs

were in favour of assisting in voluntary euthanasia, according to a BMA poll. Despite reassurances about proposed legislation, some members of the audience felt that if a change of law was introduced it could be the thin end of the wedge, especially during a period of economic "cuts", and maybe a decision to "remove" folk over, say, 75 years old would come into force!

Dame Cicely seemed reluctant that people should be allowed to take responsibility for their own lives, and thought that social pressures might force some people to feel it was their duty to commit suicide. But Nicholas Reed pointed out that there were always disagreements on questions of duty, and who felt guilty, but no one was being forced to die, and in an unsympathetic climate there seemed little hope that the law would be changed in the near future.

Even Dame Cicely did not claim that all suffering, during the dying process, could be avoided, and Mr Reed saw this booklet as the next best option for some people. As it is possible its publication may lead to prosecution, precautions had been taken and it would only be available to members of VES of some 3 months standing.

DENIS COBELL.

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. John Boyd: A Playwright looks at the Irish Theatre. Thursday, 10 April, 8 pm. Grand Parade, Castlereagh Road, Belfast. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co Antrim. Tel: Whiteabbey 66752.

Berkshire Humanists. David Williams: Humanism—the Rational Successor to Christianity. Friday, 11 April, 8 pm. Council Chamber, Town Hall, Wokingham.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Dr James Hemming: The Search for the Authentic Self. Sunday, 4 May, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Harrow Humanist Society. Lord Banks: Disarmament. Wednesday, 8 April, 8 pm. Gayton Road Library (nr Harrow on the Hill Station).

Havering and District Humanist Society. Terry Lambert: Hypnosis a Valid Science. Tuesday, 15 April, 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Dr Harry Edleston: People Are People Are People—The limitations of a Scientific Psychology. Tuesday, 13

Lewisham Humanist Group. Terry Mullins: Humanism and Secularism—What is the Difference? Thursday, 24 April, 7.45 pm. Lee Centre, 1 Aislibie Road, Lee.

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. Terry Mullins: Humanism and Secularism—What is the Difference? Sunday, 20 April, 7.30 pm. BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Discussion of Bertrand Russell's book "The Conquest of Happiness". Monday, 21 April, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. Mr F. Frost: Joseph Conrad. Monday, 28 April, 8.30 pm. 48 Rhodes Avenue, London N22.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday Morning Meetings, 11 am. 13 April, Mervyn Jones: My Approach to the Novel. 20 April, Lady Medawar: Life Class—People and Things. 27 April, Peter Heales: The Occult Tradition. Sunday Forums, 3 pm. 13 April, The Arms Trade. 27 April, Politics and Sport—the Olympic Games. Tuesday Discussions, 7 pm. Theme for month—A spectrum of morality (no meeting 8 April).

Sutton Humanist Group. Nicolas Walter, Editor of "New Humanist". Wednesday, 9 April, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton.

Tyneside Humanist Society. O. D. Hamacher: Overland Trek to USSR. Wednesday, 23 April, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle 2.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Group Forum on Abortion Law. Friday, 11 April. Peter Cadogan: The East-West Peace Charter. Friday, 25 April. Both 7.30 pm. S.C.V.S. Meeting Room, 4 Gloucester Place, Swansea.

Worthing Humanist Group. Open Discussion. Sunday, 27 April, 5.30 pm. Adult Education Centre, Union Place, Worthing.

THE FREETHINKER

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