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MICHAEL FOOT PAYS TRIBUTE TO NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

The Right Honourable Michael Foot, Labour leader and statesman, paid tribute to the National Secular Society and wished it another 100 years of advancement at its Annual Dinner on 29 March 1980. He spoke of his early appreciation of freethought and of his admiration for Heine, the German poet and freethinker.

Also speaking at the Annual Dinner, held at The Gunner (Cannon Street, London), were Brian Sedgemore, former MP, Nicolas Walter, editor of the *New Humanist* and Jim Herrick, editor of *The Freethinker*. Barbara Smoker, the Society's President, was in the chair.

Introducing Brian Sedgemore, Barbara Smoker referred to him as "between Parliaments" having lost his seat at the last election. He might be, in actor's terminology, "resting", but he was still very busy writing and broadcasting. He had completed a book *The Secret Constitution*, shortly to appear, and also a novel.

Brian Sedgemore said that he usually refused invitations to speak at dinners because he was told "No religion and no politics". But on this occasion he had been told "Only religion and politics". It was appropriate that the National Secular Society should hold its annual dinner the same week as the new Archbishop of Canterbury was enthroned. He had suggested to a television producer that they do a programme about disestablishment on the same day and had been amazed to find that an intelligent colleague did not understand the phrase. So Sedgemore felt the NSS had much education to do. He had heard that Dr Runcie was not totally against disestablishment—provided the church endowments were not taken away. He suggested that this would be a good occasion to launch a campaign to bring about disestablishment of the church and the disassociation of God from the British state.

"We live in an age that is corporative and verging on authoritarian," said Sedgemore. Michael Foot, he emphasised, stands out as a beacon of rational thought always pointing in the direction of greater democracy. There was a great deal of rationalism about Foot, and it is dangerous to be rational in an irrational world. You are thought odd, said Sedgemore, and instanced the difficulty people had obtaining senior appointments with "odd" views.

In Sedgemore's view, one of the greatest dangers to democracy was the growth of the corporate institution, of a system whereby leaders in industry, in the city, in scientific establishments, in trade unions, argued out their case in secret, bypassing the Parliamentary system. The re-introduction of the crime of blasphemy, and of other legal restraints, were part of this pattern and could be seen as a frightened response by the tightly knit British establishment to dissent in our society. We need a greater understanding of the way the modern corporate state works in order to get back to a more rational and democratic society.

Brian Sedgemore praised Michael Foot as a lifetime dissenter, and in toasting him especially praised his eloquence as a public speaker.

Michael Foot said that Brian Sedgemore was a great loss to Parliament and the struggle for liberty in the "monumental disaster" of the last election.

"My first introduction to the NSS," said Foot "was when I came to work in London soon after the 1935 election." He recounted how he had heard the spokesman of the NSS in Hyde Park Corner. He also recalled a speaker who had made a great impression on him—Bonar Thompson, who used to make his living by making three speeches a day on Sunday.

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Bonar Thompson had "preached no religion, advocated no cause, upheld no interest: he was solely concerned with commenting on what was going on around him." In the thirties there was introduced an appalling edict forbidding collections in the Park, and Bonar Thompson would then end his perorations with an invitation to discuss financial matters outside the gates.

Michael Foot referred to a recent biography of Heine by an American academic. The biography contained a misleading account of how in his final days Heine had returned to God his Father. In fact, Heinrich Heine had taken steps before reaching his mattress grave to ensure that future American academics should not be misled. He had said: "So many freethinkers, you may say, have been converted on their death beds. But do not make too great a boast of this. Such stories of conversion belong at least to the department of pathology and are very doubtful evidence of your case. After all they only prove that it is impossible to convert the freethinkers so long as they move about under God's open sky in the enjoyment of their healthy senses and in full possession of their reasoning faculties."

Death Bed Conversions

Heine took further precautions in his final years when tortured by disease on his mattress grave. He wrote: "What is publicly reported of my sickness is insignificant in comparison with my actual sufferings and I bear it all with religious patience. I say religious because I cannot altogether dismiss what is being said about my present faith. But I must assure you in this connection that there are great exaggerations on the subject and I do not remotely belong to the so-called pious souls. The main thing is that I have long felt a repugnance towards German atheism, have long cherished better convictions with reference to the existence of God, but have waited a long while before manifesting these things perhaps to give God a pleasant surprise." He wrote a series of articles and poems in that vein; and also his own final epigram: "God will forgive me, c'est son métier."

Foot said that Heine, in his opinion, never returned to a faith, but embraced the whole universe as he saw it around him and did it with a courage, bravery and wit that has never been excelled and will outlast and challenge even the gravest injury that can be done to him by American professors.

In paying tribute to the NSS, Foot also recalled the work of Charles Bradlaugh and wished the Society successful advancement in the future.

Nicolas Walter in proposing a toast to the NSS, said that one of the most constant criticisms he came across when talking about rationalism was that "We're wasting our time, and the battle was won years ago." He disputed this.

He quoted an article by Bernard Levin in *The Times* titled "A Challenge to Believers", which was about the research of Alistair Hardy into religious experience. Apparently one third of the population experienced something which could be identified as a religious experience. He quoted what he described as a "childish" plea for all agnostics and atheists to experiment with a prayer: "God, if there is a God, help me to find you and having found you, help me to have the strength to do what I feel to be thy will." "And this was supposed to be a serious article!" commented Nicolas Walter.

There is still work to be done because day after day after day religious nonsense appeared in reputable newspapers and day after day after day radio produced thought for the day and prayer for the day. And we were constantly regaled with arrant tosh persuading us to believe, to trust, to put everything into the future.

He referred to the battle over the attempt of the Church of England to buy a school in Ealing. "It is time that the Labour Party returned to its attitude before the first World War, when secular education was part of its policy and not shuffled away, as now, because of the Catholic vote."

One third of the nation apparently suffered the misfortune of religious experiences, but Nicolas Walter pointed out that about one third of the population suffered at some point from mental illness. What is the difference between the two, he asked. Should those who suffer religious experiences be proud of it—or should it be the other way round? Those two thirds who are free from so-called religious experiences can feel all right and must fight to be recognised as all right.

Nicolas Water concluded by saying that "At the NSS our name is the same, our policy is the same, we haven't changed our principles for over 100 years, society is slowly changing, and one day it will recognise our name, our principles, and that we are all right."

Jim Herrick, editor of *The Freethinker*, replied on behalf of the NSS. He said that the extent to which secularism should ridicule Christianity had always been controversial—some of the arguments between Bradlaugh and Holyoake were about this. "I think our attitude is that there are times when such attacks are irresistible: you have to call a spade a spade, and humour is a good way to highlight nonsense."

He said that it was important to rehearse the arguments about the nonexistence of God, the significance of the teaching of Jesus (if any), the position of the churches, afresh each generation. "This is important to clear the ground for a rational perspective, and it is important to debate the new arguments (or often the old arguments in

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Pinning Down Square, Circular Gods

B. J. REID

In an article entitled "Pinning Down God" in "The Freethinker", October 1979, Geoffrey Berg argued that it was more useful to examine concepts of God which have meaning than to emphasise the meaninglessness of the concept of God. Here B. Reid suggests that the philosophical idea of "meaninglessness" is useful in the demolition of deism. He stresses the value of a variety of approaches in arguing against the existence of God.

I agree entirely with Geoffrey Berg that it is important for those of us who think that belief in the existence of God has done and continues to do more harm than good to take every opportunity of confronting deists with the inadequacy of all of the arguments for the existence of deity. However, I believe he is misleading in implying that those who assert the meaninglessness of the concept of God instead of its non-existence are in some ways avoiding the issue and conceding that God may exist, but be beyond the scope of our limited human understanding.

Most modern philosophers who say that the concept of God offered to them by believers is "meaningless" intends this comment to be as dismissive of deity as a demonstration of the invalidity of all the arguments for its existence; indeed, "meaningless" may be regarded as a technical way of saying that the concept contains internal self-contradictions or that, for the believer, there are no empirical states of affairs the existence of which would disprove the existence of God. If there is no empirical evidence allowed to count against the postulation of an in principle unobservable entity, then the meaningfulness of the concept of that entity must be doubtful.¹ It follows that the deist is mistaken in thinking that he is asserting anything at all.

Mr. Berg's analogy between the meaninglessness of the concept of electricity and primitive man's ignorance of its existence, on the one hand, and those who hold the concept of God to be meaningless, on the other, does not hold. "Electricity" may be thought of as a "theoretical construct" invented as an explanation for a number of observed phenomena, such as lightning, sparks emitted from wires, etc, etc. If any of the logical consequences entailed by the existence of electricity were to fail to be empirically observed the existence of electricity would be called into doubt.

Deity may be thought of in the same way, but in the face of conflicting empirical evidence, the deist tends to say "He does exist, but His purposes are mysterious and His ways are not our ways". In such circumstances, where it is difficult to know in what

way the deist would say things would be different if there were no God, it is reasonable to call the assertion of its existence "meaningless" in this somewhat technical sense.

Just as Christian apologists vary in level of sophistication from home-spun Billy Graham to casuistic Jesuit, arguments against deity must vary according to their presenters and their audiences. Differences in style and level of sophistication are inevitable. Some people may find the straightforward knock-about argument of the early Russell appeals most forcefully to their mind, and certainly I find his philosophically uncomplicated demolition of the arguments for the existence of God in, say, *Why I am not a Christian*² extremely cogent and convincing still, and quite sufficient to satisfy me, without the later convolutions of the logical positivists and linguistic philosophers. In fact, it is surely the obligation of the serious atheist to commit to memory the six main arguments for the existence of God and their corresponding logical flaws: viz, ontological (existence is not a property), causal (leads to infinite regress and establishes no characteristics of God), from miracles (proves only indeterminism), from utility (shows only the effect on the believer), from religious experience (no criteria of objectivity), and the teleological (problem of evil and invalidity of design analogy), in order to be able to produce them when needed.

Meaningless Concept

However, to some minds the meaninglessness of the concept of God constitutes a more effective negation and I think that we should welcome variety of approach. After all, some theologians seem to go out of their way to delineate a concept of God which is meaningless, rather than one which just does not exist, for example Emil Brunner, quoted by C. B. Martin:

"Hence God can never be found along any way of thought; for indeed this idea of God bursts through and destroys all the fundamental categories of thought: the absolutely antithetical character of the basic logical principles of contradiction and identify. To want to think this God for oneself would mean insanity."

Martin comments: "There is no argument against the . . . position stated by Brunner. It is its own *reductio ad absurdum*."

Perhaps, in the last analysis, it is simply a question of whether you think the believer's concept of God more like that of a unicorn or that of a square circle. I think the latter, but we must choose the analysis which seems most convincing to us, only

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Censorship in the Media

A meeting on the subject of censorship in the media was held by the National Secular Society on 17 April 1980 in Conway Hall. The speakers were Stuart Hood, who has worked in television and lectures in communication studies, and Antony Grey, former Director of the Albany Trust and campaigner for civil liberties.

Stuart Hood began by pointing out that censorship is a complicated subject. He gave a summary of the legislation which covered censorship in broadcasting. The BBC was under restraints from its licence to operate, and over and above this a Minister (the Home Secretary) may at any time require the BBC to refrain from broadcasting any material that is offensive or controversial. Although this power has never been used, it acts as a kind of ultimate deterrent.

The history of the BBC shows that there have always been difficulties with controversial topics. Sir John Reith, a strange and contradictory man, fought for the right to broadcast on matters of controversy. A famous example of censorship is the case in the 1930s of an ex German sub-marine commander who was not allowed to broadcast about his pacifism.

Commercial television was governed by Act of Parliament and must satisfy itself that nothing offends good taste or decency, incites to crime, leads to disorder, or is offensive to a living person's reputation. At the time that the Act was renewed the BBC undertook voluntarily to abide by similar restrictions.

Broadcasting institutions, Stuart Hood pointed out, have a role in society and are governed by licence or Act of Parliament; they must therefore be seen as having a direct relationship to the state.

The theory that the BBC was independent because it was financed by the public's licence fees was incorrect. Payment of money collected by licence fees does not go directly to the BBC. It is collected by the Post Office for the Government and then an agreed percentage goes to the BBC—sometimes as much as half has been withheld. The total finances going to the BBC can be used as a regulatory device.

During the 1960s in the never-had-it-so-good post-Korean war boom, the number of television sets went up by one million a year. The revenue from licence fees was increasing by £8 million a year. At that time Hugh Greene was Director General of the BBC and took a liberal and open-minded approach. Programmes such as "That Was The Week That Was" tapped a reservoir of discontent under the surface. It would now be more difficult to do this. The BBC is now badly in the red and

always goes to the Government with pleas for money, always getting less than it needs. It has been suggested that the BBC would be in trouble obtaining adequate finance as a result of interviewing a member of the organisation that killed Airey Neave.

There is a constant pressure on broadcasters to stick to a supposed consensus of mid-stream Christianity and mid-stream politics. Censorship occurred when people from outside the consensus tried to get their views on the air. The spectrum of the consensus as seen on television varied in range and shifted from left to right according to the time and circumstances.

In practice the BBC runs by self-censorship. Individual programme makers are encouraged to "know what is acceptable". If there is doubt they refer to a chain of superiors leading up to the governors. The IBA is more careful in the sense that programme executives are required to submit plans to authorities, who may ask for scripts and request alterations. They have broad powers and can censor in strange ways. For instance the play *The Glass House*, concerned with conditions in a military prison and including a homosexual rape, was rewritten to be set in the Ruritania army, but it may still never go on the air. There are numerous cases of programmes stopped or not repeated.

It is bad faith to suggest that the decision about what to put on the screen is simple. There is a difference between the privacy of the darkness of a cinema or theatre and the openness of the home. The most violent letters of complaint come from those who are put in a position they cannot cope with by programmes which they are embarrassed to watch in the presence of other members of the family.

In the last analysis, it is not possible for any society to be totally free in what is permitted to be broadcast. We must hope for as wide a range as possible, but accept that society will need limits on freedom of expression—Stuart Hood said he would like to live in a society where racists and monetarists were banned from television. The danger at present is that the borders will not be as wide as possible.

Political Censorship

Antony Grey said that however censorship disguised it is always essentially a political activity. A censor says I do not propose to let you see or read or do this. Sometimes there may seem good reasons for not allowing things to be seen or done, but once phrases like "offensive" are used as criteria we find ourselves in deep waters.

EXORCISM

Details have emerged about the circumstances surrounding the death of a North London woman who died violently after an exorcism ritual.

The woman, 31-year-old Miss Beatrix Rutherford, died because of "mutilation" of the body, a post mortem examination has established. Police believe that she had suffered internal injuries as a result of having been jumped upon.

Inquiries indicate that she was obsessed with the idea that she was possessed by the devil, and was wicked. She belonged to a small group which followed the teachings of a cult. A "preacher" of the cult lived in the same house as she did.

It is believed that in an effort to exorcise the devil, members of the cult jumped on her body as she lay on the floor. When she appeared to become unconscious those taking part lifted her onto a bed and tried to revive her without success.

When it was realised she was dead, two men went to the police and told them what had happened.

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Antony Grey referred to the Williams Report on Obscenity and Film Censorship. He praised the quality of writing in the Report, while commenting that its conclusions were far from satisfactory. He said it was quite unprecedented for a Government Committee to be assailed with complaints of bias in the way that the Williams Report had been attacked by Mrs Whitehouse and her friends. The Report had thoroughly demolished Mrs Whitehouse's pet expert, Dr John Court; it showed that it was not plausible to claim that an increase in sex crimes resulted from pornography.

The Report had not solved the problem of defining "offensive" by their device of talking about "anything which is offensive to a reasonable person". There was difficulty in defining a reasonable person. The line will be drawn in a conservative way since the reasonable person will be defined by magistrates and judges.

Antony Grey said that the Report treated soft and hard porn in the same way, by taking account of the total content as well as the cover which is seen in a shop. Objectionable material would be sold in separate shops. As a result, magazines which are now sold in blameless newsagents like W. H. Smugs, could be relegated to porn shops. This was like selling heroin and cannabis through the same channels.

The Report's attitude to film censorship was also criticised by Antony Grey. The present system was open to attack because it was so unofficial, but formalising a system under a National Board of Film Censorship would inevitably bring in more ostensible political considerations.

Antony Grey considered the politics of censorship. He said he didn't like conspiracy theories, but the most active advocates of censorship could be seen in this way. The people from Moral Re-armament and Mrs Whitehouse's organisations propounded self-fulfilling prophecies, and created paranoia. Those who believed in freedom were not as well organised as its opponents, like the Community Standards Association which had many local organisations complaining about the books used in schools.

If the political climate is based on an assumption of consensus, the people who shout loudest can shift the centre. An unrepresentative group can try to influence matters behind the scenes. Changes can affect the "silent majority" for many years. Humanists and democrats are the silent majority and they should speak out and put the censors in their place.

"Did God invent nuclear warfare? If so, who are we to oppose God's divine will?"—Letter in "Daily Telegraph", quoted in "This England" in the "New Statesman".

Death of a Princess

VERA LUSTIG

"One of the most striking shortcomings in Arab societies is that we are not accustomed to examine critically . . . the values that we have inherited from past generations, and particularly those related to women, sex and love. Many people think that these values have descended upon us from the Heavens whereas they are in fact no more than reflections of patriarchal and class society . . ." writes Nawal El Saadawi in her excellent book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Ms El Saadawi goes on to point out that, while Mohammed was relatively liberal, and the Koran preaches equality for all, the name of Islam has been used over the centuries to justify the perpetuation of a repressive feudal system. Shades of papal exploitation of the poor. Alcohol and free sex are taboo in the Arab world, so a demand for illicit drink and porn has been created, which Western capitalists have been quick to satisfy.

Likewise the Arab world has been able to satisfy the West, offering oil, trade and jobs for the boys. This gives us a strong motive for trying to silence any criticism of a system for which, ironically, we are in part responsible. Hence Lord Carrington's grovelling attitude towards King Khaled over ATV's screening of the intelligent and fascinating film, *Death of a Princess*. Apart from the fact that the film exposed the hypocrisy behind the "observance" of the Koranic law on adultery, Khaled probably felt uncomfortable because *Princess* made it clear that the Koran states that kings should be chosen democratically, and it does not demand the veiling and seclusion of

women. Symptomatic of our current paranoia about Islam, and our preoccupation with the macabre, most commentators on the film, whether for or against, focussed on the execution itself.

The screening of the film may cost us hundreds of millions of pounds in lost trade. The price of integrity, of journalistic freedom and of concern for the oppressed cannot be calculated. To curtail press freedom in deference to economic or political considerations would be to create an extremely dangerous precedent. Interviewed on the radio the day after the screening, right-wing MP Mrs Jill Knight, who blithely admitted she had not seen the film, said that "innocent people" would suffer because of it. She went on to talk emotively of Mrs Arnott who faces a caning in Saudi Arabia for serving alcohol at a party. The Arnotts, dear Mrs Knight, went to Saudi Arabia out of their own free will, presumably to line their pockets. If they were foolish enough to flout Koranic law and to get caught, tough. It is contemptible even to propose we gag our press in order literally to save Mrs Arnott's skin.

Some critics have suggested that it is patronising to criticise the ancient cultures of the Third World. I find that suggestion patronising. Our press freely criticises undesirable aspects of our own culture, and it also censures Nazism, American materialism, etc, etc, cultural idiosyncracies which, like the veiling of women, have roots way back in history. No, ATV didn't have a right to screen *Death of a Princess*. They had a duty.

MONTY PYTHON

The Monty Python comedy team should turn their "acid" on Islam and then run for cover. That's the opinion of an Anglican clergyman who saw the controversial film, "Life of Brian"—and found it "blasphemous and in bad taste".

"Only a fool could miss it," wrote Canon Ken Quine in his Leicester diocese's magazine. He thought the Python team was funny "without this sort of thing", and suggested: "Let them turn their acid on Islam and events sacred to that religion, and then run for cover. They will get stiffer opposition."

Meanwhile, it has been revealed that the Python team are planning a movie called "The Film that Dares Not Speak its Name." Could this have anything to do, one wonders, with the private prosecution for blasphemous libel brought against *Gay News* for publishing James Kirkup's poem "The Love that Dares to Speak its Name?"

SCIENTOLOGY

A petition and other representations made on behalf of two leading members of the Church of Scientology failed to prevent them being deported back to the United States to face charges of burglary.

Jane Kember, guardian of the sect's headquarters in East Grinstead, Sussex, and Morrison Budlong, an investigator from the Scientologist newspaper, *Freedom*, were deported after the Home Secretary, Mr Whitelaw, refused to reverse an extradition order granted last year at Bow Street magistrate's court.

A *habeas corpus* application to the Divisional Court was rejected in November and leave to appeal to the House of Lords was refused last month.

A spokesman for the movement said that they are both expected back in East Grinstead "before very long."

WORLD DISARMAMENT

A conference on world disarmament was organised by the humanist Fenner Brockway and filled the Westminster Central Hall on 12 April. The main speakers were Fenner Brockway, Mr Noel-Baker, Cardinal Hume, Lord Soper, the director of OXFAM, the president of the United Nations Association, the Chairman of the Scottish TUC, and a member of the Dutch Parliament.

All speakers referred to the grim contrast between the amounts spent on war and on relieving poverty. The arms race is proceeding at a truly alarming rate. Two particularly interesting speeches were made by Elizabeth Sigmund about the development of germ and nerve warfare research, and Nigel Calder about the new theology of deterrence. It is now believed that weapons can be more accurate and that it is possible to *not lose* a nuclear war. Many speakers stressed that the militarists are exploiting public ignorance: pamphlets are available which give the facts about the arms race. There is much lying about such subjects as poison gas. In schools there is a move to replace Humanities by War Studies.

Arms expenditure is the principal cause of inflation and one delegate proposed our withholding taxes. A small girl from Hiroshima spoke at the conference and there was entertainment from a group, the Eleveners, who sang songs about Selfridge's war toys.

Report from Betty and Sam Beer, who were the British Humanist Association delegates.

OBITUARY

Mrs Phoebe Collette

On Thursday 17 April, Barbara Smoker officiated at the funeral at Beckenham Crematorium of Mrs Phoebe Collette (75), who had expressed a wish for a secular humanist ceremony.

Thomas Connor

Thomas Connor died at the age of 70. He was a retired Property Manager to the Thames Water Authority, on whose reservoirs he had been instrumental in enabling the sport of sailing to take place. Since his retirement he had been active in the Shaw Society and the Labour Party. Barbara Smoker officiated at the funeral on Tuesday, 8 April at New Southgate Crematorium.

Mrs V. W. Lumsden

Vera Winifred Lumsden, who died in hospital last month at the age of 57, was a prominent figure in the political life of Crawley, Sussex. She was chairman of West Green Ward Labour Party and a former secretary of the constituency party.

There was a large attendance at the funeral which took place at the Surrey and Sussex Crematorium, Worth, on 21 April. Mrs Lumsden had no religious beliefs and there was a secular committal ceremony.

George Stewart

George Stewart, who had been a life-long free-thinker, died recently at the age of 79. He met his wife, Edith, in his teens and they shared a secularist outlook. They had an exceptionally close relationship for 57 years. They were both a great support to the almost legendary Edith Vance, who was General Secretary of the National Secular Society for 35 years, and who had been brought into the Society by Annie Besant and had worked under Charles Bradlaugh himself.

George's many interests and activities included reading, cycling, rifle-shooting and horticulture. During his retirement he enjoyed travel to many countries including Russia, Bulgaria and Scandinavia.

At a secular funeral, Barbara Smoker, who was officiating said: "Descriptive adjectives that have been used about him by those I have spoken to who knew him most intimately include: modest; balanced; temperate; industrious; utterly reliable; firm but courteous; wise; widely read and well-informed; patient; optimistic; and absolutely straight—his integrity being a byword. But the word that recurred again and again, and was used by everybody I have spoken to, was gentle. He was a gentleman in the truest sense."

George Arthur Woodcock

Mr Woodcock died in a nursing home at the age of 94 on 1 March. He has meant a lot to members of the organised Freethought movement in Manchester for many years. He was a tireless worker in the best of causes. In the sixties an account of his activities appeared in *The Free-thinker*. He regularly distributed many copies of *The Freethinker*.

Mrs Rogers, who had worked closely with him, made an address at Oldham Crematorium and referred to his services to secularism over many years. Sympathy is offered to his widow and other relatives.

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CHRIST TAPED

Christ is alive and well and living anonymously "in an adult physical body in a well-known, modern country."

This startling revelation comes from an organisation parading under the unlikely name of The Reappearance of the Christ and the Masters of Wisdom, based in a far less exotic sounding Dartmouth Park Road, London NW5.

In an astonishingly confusing newsletter, the organisation seems to be claiming that "on July 19, 1977, the Christ re-appeared in the world." Since that event, which appears somehow to have been overlooked completely by the media, the Christ in question has made no fewer than five public appearances—the last of which took place on February 16 when he, she or it addressed 1,000 people at an un-named place.

Principal purveyor of the Christ-has-Re-emerged tale is one Benjamin Creme, described in The Reappearance etc newsletter as "an artist and esotericist . . . who has been in conscious telepathic contact with one of the Masters of Wisdom in the Himalayas."

BC—that's how he's referred to in the newsletter—has apparently been travelling around the world trying to convince the credulous that the tremendous changes currently taking place in the world are all the work of the Christ-Maitreya (that's the Buddhist term) and the Masters. He offers as evidence of their influence President Sadat's "remarkable inspiration" to visit Israel; the extraordinary recent history of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia; the tempering of hard-line apartheid policies in South Africa; and the toppling of many dictatorial regimes since 1977.

But the most "convincing" bit of evidence BC has for his assertions that JC is back is an item that appeared last year in the Washington Post. Under the headline "Major Quakes Show Decline in First Half of 1979," the newspaper reports that there were only 20 significant earthquakes reported in the first half of the year, as compared with 36 in the previous six-month period.

"This report," says the newsletter "is certainly newsworthy." Why? Because "for years, BC has asserted that the presence in the everyday world of the Christ makes possible the mitigation of the effect of earthquakes and other similar disasters."

Apart from the Christ's alleged ability to reduce America's earthquake count, the Re-emerged One is said to have an extraordinary talent for magnetising on recording tape certain energies which are released every time the tapes are played.

The voice, however, is that of BC, chatting away at public meetings in the Euston Road, London, while being "telepathically overshadowed by the Christ."

The cassettes are £1 each, plus postage.

NEWS

PLAY DISGUSTS

Mary O'Malley's play, *Once a Catholic*, an hilarious look at life in a convent school during the rock 'n' roll era, has not been rocking or rolling 'em in the aisles in Guildford, Surrey.

Quite the contrary. The play, a West End smash hit which gave members of the NSS a ready-made excuse for handing out secularist literature to theatre-goers, has provoked a Life-of-Brian-type storm in sedate Guildford, Surrey.

The outcry began when the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre announced it had decided to stage *Once A Catholic* in Holy Week. The management anticipated a bit of bother, and diligently pointed out in their advance publicity that the play, dealing with a girl growing up in a convent "is not recommended for those likely to be offended by religious or sexual matters written in a humorous context."

The advance warning did nothing to take the fury out of the storm. A flurry of letters reached the local newspapers from "Yours Disgustedlies" from far and wide. "Shocking beyond words," wrote one, "perhaps they think Britain is no longer a Christian country."

SCOTTISH AYATOLLAH

One person who does think it is no longer a Christian country is the Reverend Angus Smith, otherwise known as "The Ayatollah," of the Free Church of Scotland.

"I dare say I have been called a lot worse in my time," said the Rev Smith in a recent interview with the *Sunday Observer*.

He added: "The Ayatollah Khomeini's attitude towards Western society and its moral standards are the same as mine. Many of his criticisms are fully justified. Most men today will not face up to the truth. The truth is that the values of Western Society are decadent and rotten.

"For many, freedom does not mean liberty, it means licence. Licence to sin. It is not a Christian society. It is a post-Christian society."

In the Rev Smith's ideal world there are no Sunday ferry sailings, Sunday drinking—or even Sabbath sex among barnyard animals. And now the Wee Frees, as the staunchly sabbatarian ministers of the Free Church of Scotland are known, are protesting at a move to have Sunday courts in Scotland

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to deal with the backlog of roistering Saturday night offenders.

What happens when the likes of the Rev Smith gain the power over the lives of lesser mortals is there for all to see on the Isle of Lewis off Scotland's west coast. The ministers are said to have thrown a "brimstone curtain" round its rugged coastline.

On Sundays, bars, cafes, shops and all places of entertainment are closed down. Cars are not driven except in cases of emergency. Television sets and radios are turned off in the homes of the faithful. All food is cooked the night before. And over-ambitious cockerels are placed in lobster creels!

POST OFFICE PORN

The pro-censorship lobby has received a brush-off from an unusual quarter—the Post Office. Dr Alex Reid, Director of the viewdata system known as Prestel, has indicated that the Post Office had no intention of preventing "dirty book" guides from being included in the Prestel service.

Dr Reid's remarks followed a call for an inquiry into a decision by Prestel to carry a guide listing "dirty books" stocked at five Soho shops.

He said that the Post Office had decided from the beginning that it should not censor or exercise control over the contents of information supplied by those providing news or advertisements to the system.

Consequently, Prestel would feature advertisements from "lonely hearts, homosexuals" or any other source that may offend sensibilities, but did not contravene existing laws, Dr Reid said.

TEACHER SACKED

The governors of St Joseph's School, in Newport, Wales, have been condemned by the Gwent Education Authority for sacking a divorced Roman Catholic teacher who had remarried.

A committee of the Authority criticised the governors—three priests, a nun, and four lay members—for taking "precipitate action" against Peter Morgan, 38, and ordered that his sacking be "expunged from the records." He was given "a clean slate" to begin a new career at another school, but with a higher status than his post as head of history at St Joseph's where he had worked for 11 years.

The Authority has also set up an inquiry into policy on dismissals at church schools "where teachers' actions conformed to the law of the land, but not to the teaching of the church."

MOONIES LEAVE

Residents in Nightingale Square, Balham, South London, have expressed huge relief over the recent evacuation of a house in their neighbourhood by a nest of Moonies—members of the Unification Church cult.

The Moonies left the premises after they had been served with a notice of entry by Wandsworth Council, which had received numerous complaints by local residents about noise in the middle of the night made by chanting members of the sect.

One resident said: "We wanted to see the backs of them. Between 2 am and 4 am one could hear a master's voice droning in the house, and screams of reaction."

Another said: "Soon after they moved in late last year a Japanese boy ran away from the house. He was very afraid, so we took him in to one of our houses. The Moonies came out and stood on the doorstep and only went away when the police came along."

PRAYER FAILS TO CATCH PORN

Members of the Nationwide Festival of Light were recently asked to pray for the success of a court action brought by one of its members to compel the Metropolitan Police to take more stringent action against sellers of "pornography."

But a very different sort of Lord took a hand in the action, and Mr Raymond Blackburn's action failed in the Appeal Court, after Lord Denning, the Master of the Roles ruled that the police could not be blamed for the widespread sales in shops and bookstalls of "pornography" and the showing of "blue films" in clubs.

The judge said he was shocked by the "prevalence of pornography in London," but even more shocked by the prevalence of violence and burglary. He thought, however, that the police were carrying out their duties in the best possible way with the resources at the command.

Blackburn had sought orders directing Sir David McNee, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, to take more urgent and direct action against "pornography" merchants. He wanted station commanders and police officers to be able to take action without having to refer, as at present, to Scotland Yard and the police solicitor.

BOOKS

NAPOLEON III AND EUGENIE by Jasper Ridley. **Con-**
stable, £12.50.

This massive book of over 700 large pages is by an ex-lawyer who was once a Labour candidate and is already the author of biographies of Lord Palmerston and the Italian revolutionary, Garibaldi. This firmly places its author in nineteenth century politics and this concentration on a period, as work by other modern historians shows, does make for a certain weakness. History is not a series of isolated phenomena but a continuous process, and Mr Ridley's attempt to draw in the background of the preceding century and French Revolution is sketchy and long out-dated.

Robespierre was not a dictator, his Committee of Public Safety was not the principal instigator of the Terror, he was made President of the Convention only just over a month before his death, and most notable recent historians agree that it was Robespierre who was attempting to stop the Terror and who in a speech in the Convention had threatened far more dangerous and violent men. In other words they struck first.

Ridley gives no indication of having studied the work of our own Professors J. M. Thompson and George Rudé, or the French Professor of the Sorbonne, Albert Soboul, all of which has thrown new light on the Revolution; and he does not even mention Fouché, who as President of the Committee of Public Security was directly responsible for the acceleration of arrests that formed the Terror. Fouché was later Napoleon I's chief of police.

In other words meticulous and exhaustive study of a later period does not ensure accuracy elsewhere. Yet the seeds of the past come to flower in most periods and it was Thomas Paine who first (in *Rights of Man*) suggested National Workshops for the Unemployed (Louis Blanc, given credit here with Fourier for the idea, was a fanatical student of Paine) as well as a number of other ideas propagated by the nineteenth century socialists and Chartists (the Chartists republished a volume of Paine's works as well as a biography by W. J. Linton). Indeed Robespierre himself brought forward motions for free education, universal suffrage, the abolition of capital punishment and other socialist ideas still proliferating 100 years later.

The other defect of this dual biography is overpowering detail of every domestic as well as political action. It is p.246 before Louis-Napoleon and Eugénie meet and then only fleetingly: it is another 100 pages before they meet again, when Louis has become the Emperor Napoleon III, and marry. The book is less a dual biography than a full biography of each: a monumental task which leads Mr Ridley at times into dullness. It is a fault of much biography

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today under the influence of modern academics, and apart from the arm- or rib-crushing physical weight of this kind of book it is extremely difficult to read in full (I did so, but it took me long sessions over three weeks). The Bonapartist relationships are alone almost impossible to disentangle (there is no genealogical table) and so are the dates. I echo Nigel Sinnott in his review (*Freethinker*, February) of A. L. Morton's book on this absence of the actual year over not only pages but whole chapters.

That said, there are wonderful lessons even for today in this study of a professed democrat, bordering on revolutionary, who in his youth suffered imprisonment for his views yet on seizing power in a coup d'état was responsible for the death by execution, transportation to Cayenne or imprisonment without trial of thousands of radicals, all in the name (we still hear it today) of law and order. Even the long-erected "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" notices were ripped down. Yet such was the extraordinary schizophrenic mentality of this man, divided by only two generations from Corsican nobodies, that even while elevating and maintaining himself in royal power, he could be accused by many of being untrustworthy because he was still at heart a revolutionary democrat! It is summed up very aptly by Ridley: "Ever since the time of Napoleon I, Bonapartism had presented a double-face of a popular revolutionary movement, under a leader elected by votes of the people, and of a royal family acutely conscious of its privileges."

Eugénie, of good Spanish family but no royal line, could be equally ambivalent: a hoydenish and beautiful red-haired tomboy, flouting the conventions in youth, who became even more obsessed than Napoleon III by the royal prerogative. Yet like him she was capable of gestures of real generosity to working-class people and extreme personal courage. Both monarchs insisted on personally visiting the cholera hospitals and speaking to the patients; and Louis-Napoleon's escape from imprisonment in his socialist days showed boldness and ingenuity and is the most exciting episode in the book.

The war fetish devastated Europe: it is extremely difficult to see why Napoleon III felt he must attack Prussia, a gesture which ended in his exile and the Siege of Paris. Britain (ignoring her own little *contretemps* with Zulus and Indians) in this took a sour view of Napoleon, as in his dictatorship. Ridley also. I think, tends to pass over the Paris Commune and blame both sides equally, with which many left-wing historians would not agree.

Louis Napoleon, both as prince and Emperor, was a compulsive and it seems irresistible womaniser,

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numbering the great Jewish-French actress Rachel among his many mistresses; he was passionately devoted to Eugénie, more so perhaps than she to him, but they had only one child, the Prince Imperial, who did not long survive his father in English exile, dying bravely in the Zulu war at the age of 23. This unintentional royal death created another storm of controversy, in which blame was freely scattered.

His mother, grief-stricken, outlived him many decades, and all three are buried at Farnborough. She lived there until 1920, surviving a fall downstairs at the age of 92, and the zeppelin raids over Farnborough in World War I. She insisted on watching from the tower. (Could Bernard Shaw have known of this when writing the last scene of *Heartbreak House*?)

The book is most fascinating of all for its incidental social history—the Saint Simonian socialists with their communes, free love, and long hair (*plus ça change*); Louis Napoleon, travelling for the first time on the railway at a breathtaking 27 miles per hour (“all objects flash by at an incredible pace”); and religion presenting its most hypocritical, right-wing political stance (“the hand of God”, according to a Cardinal, was evident in the executions and shooting down of radicals following the coup d’état).

It will come as a surprise to some that it was not until December 1854 that the Pope declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. On the other hand, the storm over the Hebrew scholar Renan’s declaration that Christ was “an incomparable man” was surely nothing new; it dated back at least to the Unitarians and Thomas Paine’s similar description in *The Age of Reason*, “an amiable man” (doubtless Renan too knew his Paine). Yet at seven years old, when the 94-year-old Empress Eugénie died, I was still being taught at school and in the Anglican church that Jesus Christ was literally Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity (I asked who the third was and got a dusty answer), and born of a virgin (whatever that was: we did not discuss these things in 1920). Thus quickly do all Christian religions assimilate myths long after the event.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

IMMACULATE MISCONCEPTION

In common with many other people of non-Catholic background, Audrey Williamson has confused the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth. The Immaculate Conception refers not to the conception of Jesus, but to the withholding of original sin from the soul of his mother at the time of her own conception. (Barbara Smoker.)

In her comprehensive introduction to a collection of fifteen essays on related aspects of Killing and Letting Die, Bonnie Steinbock summarises the views of writers and suggests that the contributions fall into three areas: that which is desirable, that which is practical within the law, and that which is compatible with religion or acceptable by moral philosophers.

The Editor points out the special relationship of doctors to patients. Doctors have special responsibility to patients in supporting life, but may, for instance, withdraw a respirator in terminal cases. Turning off a respirator by a doctor can be regarded as an omission of a form of treatment and therefore not culpable in law, or even deemed to be morally wrong by most people; whereas if a nurse or relative turned off a respirator, that would be condemned as homicide.

The scope of a doctor’s responsibility is clearly seen in the decision taken in cases of severe spina bifida. Surgical intervention probably means that the infant will survive with life-long deformity and varying degrees of disability. Alternatively, to “let nature take its course” is in effect to allow the babe to die within a matter of days.

A recurring point of discussion is whether or not a decision for non-interference, ie letting die, is as positive a decision as one for actively killing.

It is claimed that some people fear that active euthanasia can be abused more readily than passive euthanasia and that active euthanasia might have a brutalising effect on those who carry it out. Others deny that this would be the case and argue that a quick and painless death is surely in the best interests of dying patients as well as for the defective newborn.

That a whole chapter is given to a factual report of the case of Karen Quinlan is not surprising or misplaced, because it was the surge of a shocked public conscience surrounding this case, which provoked renewed discussion. As is generally known, Karen Quinlan at the age of 21 ceased breathing for two 15-minute periods and consequently suffered severe brain damage. This was in April 1975. Extensive life support appliances and ministration were instituted at a hospital where four nurses give 24 hour service. A number of specialists have examined and diagnosed Karen as “being in a chronic persistent vegetative state”. This an expert witness defined as “a subject who remains with the capacity to maintain the vegetative parts of neurological function but who no longer has any cognitive function”. Karen’s father, who is recognised as an ethically sincere, sensitive and devout Catholic, after many weeks of agonising indecision and consultations with priests, decided to seek authorisation to

have the life-supporting apparatus withdrawn. The application was bandied about from court to court for months, with appeal and cross appeal, until qualified permission was granted. It so happens that when the respirator was removed, Karen did not die and at the time of writing is still living as a contorted being in a coma. The effect on caring relatives of this futile waste of inhumane technology cannot but perturb and horrify people of good sense and emphasise the need for a change in law.

George Fletcher, a professor of law, deals at length with the vexed question of whether turning off a respirator is permitting death to occur or causing death. Legal attitudes in the United States vary, but Fletcher concludes that doctors are in a position to fashion their own law to deal with cases of prolongation of life. By establishing customary standards, they may determine the expectation of their patients and act accordingly. Such action implies that it is, or would be, the expectation of the patient.

Support for this is provided by James Rachels, a professor of philosophy, who incidentally is one of only two professional philosophers among ten contributing to this symposium who truly grapple with the application of euthanasia. Rachels argues that with a life that is better ended there is no moral difference between active euthanasia which is forbidden by law and passive euthanasia which is gradually coming into practice. He further declares that the policy concerning severely defective newborn babies of allowing them to wither and die over hours and days, instead of giving an injection that would end life without suffering, is patently cruel. Most humanitarians would endorse this.

Bonnie Steinbock relates that if these cases are "left unoperated, these children usually die of meningitis or kidney failure within the first years of life"; and continues "This is not the intentional termination of life, but the avoidance of painful treatment." It seems to have eluded Steinbock that those few years without treatment could be painful and considered pointless. Indeed, she states, "Waiting for them to die may be tough on parents, doctors and nurses—it isn't necessarily tough on the child." . . . (Here the reader is invited to insert her or his own comment. . . .)

Similarly, David Smith, a professor of religious studies, hesitates to do other than advocate attempts to salvage the defective infants irrespective of their future disability. These, he theorises, the family and the community should be prepared to love and nurture. Viewed dispassionately and objectively, this might well be regarded as sadly misplaced and only expected of simpletons. By contrast, Tristram Engelhardt, a professor of the Philosophy of Medicine, opines that it "is reasonable to speak of a duty not to treat a small child when such treatment will prolong a painful life or would in any event lead to a painful death", and favours active euthanasia in

these circumstances.

The professional philosophers, as might be expected on any matters of this sort, tend to vacillate and argue on hypothetical instances. Rather more than half the book contains philosophical problems set out by nine essayists. With two exceptions they evade direct discussion of active/passive euthanasia. Their theories are largely fantasies quite unrelated to the factual needs of those whom euthanasia could benefit.

A fair summary of their submissions would be that there is no moral difference between killing and letting die, because killing and letting die are both ways of being responsible for death. As John Casey of Cambridge declares: "To say that there is no decisive moral difference between killing and letting die is to say that there is no moral principle which covers both." In other words, expressed positively, there is no clear moral difference between doing X and letting it happen. If all this is to be taken as logically correct, then those who would countenance passive euthanasia should support active euthanasia.

Fortunately, medical practitioners in the main have an increasingly sensible attitude to terminal illness and seriously deformed babies. Fortunately, too, Catholics accept the doctrine of double effect. As repeated by St John Stevas "Pius XII has said that a pain killing, life-shortening drug may be used if there exists no direct casual link, either through the will of interested parties or by the nature of things, between the induced consciousness (sic) and the shortening of life."

Strangely, nowhere in the book is euthanasia definitely given its true value as shortening the process of dying in one whom *nature* is already *killing and letting die* cruelly and crudely.

CHARLES WILSHAW

CINEMA

KRAMER vs KRAMER (A) General Release.

Couples both sides of the Atlantic are beginning to recognise the importance of the father's rôle in bringing up children. Inasmuch as it should help this trend to catch on, *Kramer vs Kramer* is commendable. Unfortunately, while it is in parts a joyous celebration of fatherhood, it is also a celebration of the status quo, and a petulant slap at Women's Films. There is no room for antagonism or for negative feelings in as wholesome a film as this. *Kramer vs Kramer* would be better occupied showing how men and women must work together to produce radical change in the way we live our lives and bring up our young.

Joanna Kramer (Meryl Streep) walks out on her husband Ted (Dustin Hoffman), a highly successful advertising executive, leaving him in charge of

their six-year-old son Billy. Ted copes unaided with fads, sulks and playground hazards, neglecting his work. He loses his prized job, but quickly finds another, though less well paid. At this point Joanna returns from therapy and self-discovery in California, and claims custody of the child. After a tense hearing, Joanna wins. Ted is heartbroken, Billy confused. At the last moment, Joanna bravely relinquishes her claim.

Kramer vs Kramer is like so many American films currently enthralling the box office with their message of courage and love. Behind the glossiness, the homey moralising, the clean-cut structure and dialogue, the play on our emotions, lie sloppy thinking, smugness and the might of the dollar.

That power is evident in the assumptions which underlie the film. Director Robert Benton does not distance himself from the kind of society in which the size of a parent's income has to be a decisive factor in granting custody, or from the metallic world in which Billy and his like have to grow up. Kramer appears to have no family, few friends, no interests outside his work. The only things we see him teach Billy are those that relate directly to his, Ted's, existence. Father and son adopt a kind of buddyish complicity in a sequence I found rather depressing. In it, Ted takes Billy one Saturday to the skyscraper where he works. They steal past a conveniently dozing security guard in the lobby, through deserted corridors, to the labelled door. "Kramer—that's us!" exclaims the child, duly awed. None of Ted's colleagues is there for Billy to meet, of course, but then the object of the exercise would seem to be for Ted to prove himself in his child's eyes. As Linda Blandford, *The Guardian's* New York correspondent, wrote recently, "The young of Manhattan have no concept of childhood. They are small men and women who learn early to be watchful, suspicious . . .". Yet the film pretends to be about the growth of Ted's sensibility, not his ego.

All the same, *Kramer vs Kramer* is very good entertainment, part moving, part funny, riveting in the courtroom sequences. Streep and Hoffman lived up to my expectations of these outstanding actors. Jane Alexander as the friend who unhappily shifts her allegiance from Joanna to Ted gives a beautiful, restrained performance. Newcomer Justin Henry is amazingly good as Billy.

Despite Benton's powerful and assured treatment of the court scenes, I was left feeling decidedly uncomfortable. We know that Joanna was not a big earner before she had Billy, but then we hear that, as a fashion designer, she is earning more than Ted. I find it hard to believe that, after six years out of the employment market, she could have outstripped Ted in just one. This sort of licence only serves to belittle the sacrifices so

many women make when bringing up their children. Swinging adman Ted Kramer lets Billy catch him virtually *in flagrante* with a woman the boy doesn't even know. Billy's calm acceptance of the naked lady makes for a hilarious moment. Back on the witness stand, solid family man Ted pleads his eighteen months' devotion to Billy, ". . . listening to him when I was too tired to listen . . .". Inadmissible evidence. We all know that a six-year-old is far more stimulating company than a gurgling toddler, as well as being away at school all day. While Ted was building up his career and his self-esteem, Joanna was at home doing the spadework that made Billy into a secure and resilient person, able to handle the family split-up and to relate to the woman who, however briefly, supplants his mother in his father's affections.

"Ninety per cent of the time they give (custody) to the mother," Ted's lawyer tells him. Incomprehensible and harsh, maybe. Surely, though, the court's ruling just takes to their logical conclusion the centuries of legislation, propaganda and teaching, which have all militated to keep mother and baby together day and night throughout the early formative years of baby's existence and mother's adult life.

I urge you all to see Alain Tanner's latest film, *Messidor* (X) (Academy Cinema, Oxford Street). Two young Swiss girls hitch aimlessly along their country's sleek grey freeways. What starts off as a kind of defiant adventure escalates into tragedy when fear, hunger and a growing sense of dislocation make the girls resort to violence. *Messidor* is a memorable portrayal of friendship, and it subtly exposes chocolate-box Switzerland, in whose bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie coldness, parsimony and lack of imagination struggle for dominance.

VERA LUSTIG

LETTERS

INTELLIGENCE AND HEREDITY

I should like to comment on James Lawler's defence of his book "IQ, Heritability and Racism" in the March "Freethinker".

Both Mr Lawler and his critic Mr Findlay seem to assume that differences in the speed of learning and using knowledge are relatively unimportant. This is surely a mistake. If I take ten times as long to learn a theory or a skill as does Mr Lawler then I may never learn it. For suppose he takes 10 minutes—one burst of concentration—to master a point. The same point will take me over one and a half hours during which time I may be distracted, or bored, or I may decide that the value to me of the point is less than that of the time. In any event I shall fail to master it. Again, an appropriate response to a situation produced after a minute's thought may be useful, ten minutes later it may no longer be very useful. The application of this argument to, say, a three year degree course I shall leave for the reader.

In short if it be accepted that there are substantial differences in people's speed of assimilation and response then they will, in practice, lead to major differences in people's actual capacities. But this brings us back to the key issue in another form: are such differences due mainly to heredity or to environment? In short Mr Lawler has succeeded in defining away the form of the problem but has left its substance untouched.

I believe that there is a further, unrecognised, problem in this area. Mr Lawler supposes that teachers (for instance) will treat slow children better if they believe their "slowness" to be due to environment than if they believe it to be due to heredity. This may be true—though some evidence would be required before I would accept it—but it is certainly not logical. The environment is likely to exercise its most pervasive influences in the early years of the child's life. Even later the home and peer group will be major influences. To the teacher per se these are almost as fixed as the child's heredity. The teacher who is also a politician may have a political programme for the improvement of both, but the programme is unlikely to be successful during the school life of his present charges. This follows not only from the difficulty of making any political change but also from the delay before a change becomes effective.

In fact, the view that an "environmentalist" orientation encourages good treatment appear to be a simple prejudice.

DAVID FLINT

CONWAY HALL'S ETHICS

In her interesting article "Money Matters at Conway Hall" ("Freethinker," April) Barbara Smoker defends the concept of a "non-absolutist situational morality". Yet at the same time she seems to take an absolutist stand regarding the immorality of incitement to racial hatred, on which her whole case denying the right of the National Front to hold meetings in Conway Hall is based. Could she imagine a situation in which incitement to racial hatred would ever be justified? If not, she is surely conceding that racialism is absolutely wrong in every circumstance.

JOHN L. BROOM

With reference to Barbara Smoker's excellent article on the difficulties and present policy of the South Place Ethical Union: children have a right to freedom as well as adults, yet what freedom can children have if exposed, without even the state's qualified protection, to seduction, psychological assault and hard-to-define violence by adults? The SPES, under the direction of Peter Cadogan, has allowed the Paedophile Information Exchange to use its premises. In my opinion this is just as much an idiot expression of absolutist ideas on freedom as allowing the National Front use of the premises.

BRENDA ABLE

SAKHAROV'S HUMANISM

Dr Andrei Sakharov describes himself in his book "Sakharov Speaks" as a liberal humanist, and it is clear from the opinions he expresses in that book that it is a correct description.

Friends of Dr Sakharov in the West asked sympathisers to write to him following his forced and sudden exile from his Moscow home, so the Warwickshire Humanist Group sent him a letter.

Christians give vocal support to other Christians if they suffer harassment, should humanists do less?

Certainly there are worse régimes in the world today than the present Soviet government, and I would not

describe the treatment of Dr Sakharov as barbarous as is the treatment of many supporters of human rights in other parts of the world, but the Russian government has acted arbitrarily because no court has found him guilty of breaking any Soviet law. It has been suggested that he is guilty of "slandering the Soviet Union", but it is a complete defence against this charge if the statements are true, so this is perhaps why no charges have been brought against him. Such a crime in any case seems to me to be akin to the British crime of blasphemy—and we oppose that!

Certain sections of the British media will use every occasion they can to denigrate Russia but humanists must not use that as an excuse for not speaking out when the occasion warrants it.

ROY SAICH,

(Secretary, Warwickshire Humanist Group).

SECULARISM AND CATHOLICISM

Apropos the letter in March's "Freethinker" from I. S. Low, subject war's causes, and D. Redhead, subject the Secular party proposal, I beg to comment. At the 58th Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society, quotation from "The Freethinker": "After a splendid meal, Mr David Tribe, the President, proposed the toast to the Guest of Honour, his predecessor Mr F. A. Ridley, paying tribute to Mr Ridley's work as President. Mr Ridley in his reply recalled some of the eminent past-presidents of the Society, and said that his aim had always been to expose the Roman Catholic Church as the main enemy of freethought today." Is this still the "official" attitude, or belief, of the National Secular Society? Years ago that giant of a man, intellectually, Joseph McCabe, spent a lifetime exposing the Roman Church, especially in the political field: Chapman Cohen damned "Christianity" plenty, and effectively, but only rarely singled out the Roman Church for special attack. Several of Joseph McCabe's works could do with being reprinted.

In the 1914-18 war the Kaiser—German for Caesar—had as his chief ally the then leading Roman Catholic power in the world, the Hapsburg Empire. That is enough, isn't it, to tell us what side the Papacy was on in 1914-18? The No 1 traitor in the 1914-18 war was Casement; and the No 1 traitor in the 1939-45 war was Joyce; and Casement and Joyce died with the "last rites" of the Roman Church. Salazar, Franco, Petain, Hitler, Mussolini, and Pavelic, were all Roman Catholics. Every Fascist dictator had a Concordat or "Treaty of Harmony" with the Pope. Nazism was born in RC Bavaria; and as has been mentioned in "The Freethinker," Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, Frank, von Neurath, Streicher, von Papen, Seyss-Inquart and Kaltenbrunner, for example, were all Roman Catholics. The Jesuits spawned Fascism. The fact that the British public knows literally nothing about this shows their power—their power of censorship—in the British media today. There are some people in Britain who believe that taking their power as a whole in British society, that Britain secretly is under "Roman" rule today. Or very nearly anyway. Hitler had five objectives: (1) to destroy and plunder the Jews in Europe, (2) to smash Freemasonry, (3) to revive the Holy Roman Empire, a Europe ruled by Papal ecclesiasticism and Teutonic militarism, (4) to defeat the Soviet Union, and (5) to dictate, if not to destroy, Britain. In these "ends" Hitler had the full backing of the Papacy.

Briefly it can be proved that the Roman Church has been the chief cause of wars in Europe: and of persecutions and assassinations too.

Which brings me to Mr. Readhead's letter. The Jesuits are the financiers and politicians of the Roman Church; and the Roman Church's authority is in proportion to its financial and political power. Doctrine (or brain-washing) gives it its army, which is grossly

over-estimated, ie numerically, and deliberately: Money and political power gives it its power. It was recently stated in a leading British paper that Roman Catholics have almost a monopoly of the Foreign Office. Surely that calls for some explaining? I believe it would take more than a page of "The Freethinker" to list the Roman Church's secret societies, male and female. It is mainly through these secret societies that the Roman priests place their adherents in positions of influence. It is amusing that we hear plenty about Marxist and Trotskyist infiltration of the Labour Party, but nothing about Catholic Actionist infiltration of it. More proof of "Roman" power.

If the officials of the National Secular Society do not want the Society to be associated with a Secular political party, are they not prepared to take part in forming and organising such a body outside the Society? What is really required is a secret Free-thought society. If it is true that it takes a diamond to cut a diamond, then the best way to counter secret RC political activity is by secret anti-RC political activity. Is that not elementary?

ROGER SANTERRE

As regards the correspondence about a secular political party—R. W. Aldridge, in the April "Freethinker", criticises Mr D. Redhead for wanting such a party to oppose the Roman Catholic Church.

I don't think Mr Redhead is a Protestant mole or an atheistic papist bashing Nazi. In the north east of England, the counties of Durham and Northumberland, where he (and I) live, the Roman Catholic Church has a lot of influence. I know Mr Redhead is very concerned about this, and wants to oppose the power of the Roman Catholic organisation. He does not want to stir up hate against individual Catholics.

Mr Aldridge says that in Britain the Protestants have as much political clout as the Catholics. Have the Protestants as much in the world? I doubt it. The Roman Catholic Church has a lot of money, even if some statements on this point are exaggerated.

I think the best reason for wanting a Secularist political party is that we need a new party anyway—all the existing ones are rotten.

I. S. LOW

SHOSTAKOVICH

It is depressing to realise that those enlightened enough to question organised religion can be gullible politically.

Terry Mullins (April "Freethinker"), although he notices many discrepancies, does not question the authenticity of the so-called Shostakovich "Memoirs", even although there is no existing MS and they are openly presented "as related to and edited by" a Russian dissident living in California, the most anti-communist of USA states. And that exiled dissident a very minor musician who could only earn much money on a book using Shostakovich's name. (Who gets the royalties? Not Shostakovich's family in Russia—for the simple reason that it is not Shostakovich's work.)

I am old enough to have been present at the first performance in England of Shostakovich's "Leningrad" symphony at the Albert Hall, under Sir Henry Wood, during the War, and no one then doubted its pro-Soviet attitude to the siege, in which the composer took part. In many subsequent visits to this country Shostakovich made no attempt to propound anti-Soviet views: if he did so in private, no one has come forward to say so.

As for his son Maxim (conductor of the Moscow Radio Orchestra) and his family, they have totally repudiated this book and in fact Maxim has an-

nounced, through the Moscow correspondent of "The Times", that he is counter-attacking with an authentic life of his father.

In the case of Stalin, his "atrocities" too have vastly grown across the years since the time when he was honoured by the West as an ally. Of course there were some "treason" trials and a power struggle (I remember them) in the late thirties, though not on the scale now so successfully (and without evidence of valid checked figures) used as political propaganda. Some of us even remember Stalin's fair and balanced obituary in "The Times", which could not happen in today's press climate.

No one ever points out his achievement, in the end of vast material benefit to the Soviet people as a whole: that of wrenching a medieval-style agrarian, royalist and religious system into the twentieth century and building an industrialised society providing work and wages for all—a process which in Europe was achieved only slowly over several hundred years. This cannot be done without ruthlessness; but all our ideas of the Soviet Union are derived from dis-sidents and this is not the way to historical truth, especially when the influence of the C.I.A. is realised.

I am not a communist, but I was a music critic, and our government-sponsored rush towards nuclear war, with all the political propaganda involved, appals me, as it should all secularists.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

(Annual Dinner)

new guise) which the churches bring forward. Religion survives in a secular society by constant adaptation; how long before it ends one of its most blatant forms of discrimination and lets women into the priesthood?"

He said that secularism's especial role was to combat religion in society where "it mitigates against social reform, social justice, social well-being." He referred to the particular example of the Catholic opposition to abortion law—and the campaign against the Corrie Bill.

Secularism was also concerned with freedom of speech. Jim Herrick mentioned the attempts to censor the film *The Life of Brian*, and said that the film's wide popularity among the young is a hopeful sign that they will think for themselves.

Monty Python, he said, gave people something to think as well as to laugh about, and quoted their parody of a well-known hymn:

"All things dull and ugly
All creatures short and squat
All things rude and nasty
The Lord God made the lot."

"Christians," he said "have never resolved the contradiction that their benevolent God created such an imperfect world. Secularists accept the imperfections of the world—and try to do something about them. We are a reforming not a revolutionary Society, a wide ranging and not a narrow Society."

He said that Bradlaugh had set the tone of the

Society and he would not have wanted us to forget the larger aims: "we must not forget aims like disestablishment even if they seem impractical for the near future."

He concluded by quoting Bradlaugh's address to the annual congress of the NSS in 1885, saying that while secularists did not believe in inspiration from above they did believe in the inspiration which their fellow humans can provide:

"We have no creed, but we have much faith; faith in the possibility of human progress; faith in digging after truth; faith in searching after truth; not in looking backwards to yesterday but in working for the morrow; not in lying prone on the ground, but in climbing upwards towards the light. We believe in the decrease of human woe, as men hate less, as they love more, as each helps the other to make his grip the firmer. We believe in the lessening of human hatreds, as men recognise that varying opinions may be held with equal honesty. We believe in the use of reason instead of force, in peace instead of war. . .

"We do not pretend that we are always right; we only try to be. We do not pretend that we have truth, but that we search for it. Our motto is: 'We seek for truth', and with Lessing we believe that he is most ignorant who thinks he knows all. Let us search."

(Pinning Down Gods)

remembering, when faced with the deist, that there is more than one way to skin a cat.

1. HOSPERS, John. *An introduction to philosophical analysis*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956. p.357.

2. RUSSELL, Bertrand. *Why I am not a Christian*. George Allen & Unwin, 1957, repr. 1961.

3. BRUNNER, Emil. *Revelation and reason*. SCM Press, 1947. p.47, quoted in 4. p.137.

4. MARTIN, C. B. *Religious belief*. Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1959.

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Annual General Meeting: Thursday, 8 May, 8 pm. 8a Grand Parade, Castle reagh Road, Belfast. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co. Antrim. Tel: Whiteabbey 66752.

Berkshire Humanists. Annual General Meeting. Friday, 9 May, 8 pm. Friends Meeting House, Church Street, Reading.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. G. N. Deodhekar: Islam. Sunday, 1 June, 5.30 pm. Imperial Hotel, First Avenue, Hove.

Hasving and District Humanist Society. Discussion: Humanism in Practice. Tuesday, 20 May. Dorothy Frith: Forty Years of Pacifist Witness. Tuesday, 3 June. Both 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (Junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrel Heath Road.)

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Dr Harry Edleston: The Limits of Scientific Psychology. Tuesday, 13 May, 8 pm. Swarthmore, Leeds.

Lewisham Humanist Group. John Evitt: British Justice. Thursday 29 May, 7.45 pm. Lee Centre, 1 Aislebie Road, Lee, SE12.

Merseyside Humanist Group. Mrs Connolly: The Mentally Handicapped in Our Midst. Monday, 19 May, 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

Muswell Hill Humanist Group. Discussion: Heroes—a Reappraisal. Tuesday, 13 May, 8.30 pm. 30 Archibald Road, London N7.

Sutton Humanist Group. Kenneth Furness: The BHA Five Year Plan. Wednesday, 14 May, 7.30 pm. Friends Meeting House, Cedar Road, Sutton.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Annual General Meeting. Friday, 9 May, 7.30 pm. 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate. James Hemming: The Belief Vacuum. Friday, 30 May, 7.30 pm. 4 Gloucester Place, Swansea.

Worthing Humanist Group. Annual General Meeting. Friday, 18 May, 5.30 pm. Adult Education Centre, Union Place, Worthing.

Harrow Humanist Society. Barbara Smoker: The Shroud of Turin. Wednesday, 14 May, 8 pm Gayton Road Library (Nr Harrow-on-the-Hill station).

THE FREETHINKER

Editor: JIM HERRICK

News & Notes edited by Barry Duke

702 HOLLOWAY ROAD
LONDON N19 3NL
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