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JUDGE RULES SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY IS NOT RELIGIOUS

A double legal decision on 11 June means that the South Place Ethical Society has regained the charitable status which it has been denied for 14 years and has been confirmed in its ownership of Conway Hall. Mr Justice Dillon, giving judgement in the Chancery Division of the High Court after a hearing of seven days, ruled that South Place is not a religious organisation but is an educational organisation and an organisation for the benefit of the community, and that despite its fundamental change of character it should continue to own Conway Hall.

Nicolas Walter, editor of the *New Humanist*, who attended the whole of the hearing, describes and discusses the case: Ever since the South Place Ethical Society was refused registration as a religious charity in 1966 and 1967, it has argued that it always has been and still is a religious organisation. It is a matter of record that it began as such, but it is a matter of dispute whether it still is. The society was founded in 1793 as a congregation of Protestant Dissenters who adopted the unorthodox doctrines of universalism (that all mankind shall be saved) and unitarianism (that the deity is one person and that Jesus was not divine). For more than 30 years in the early nineteenth century it belonged to the Unitarian movement, and in 1824 it built a chapel at South Place in London which was committed by a trust deed of 1825 to "the public religious worship of one God, even the Father", and to "instruction in the Christian religion".

But under two great ministers, W. J. Fox and Moncreux Conway, it rapidly moved away from all forms of theism during the mid-nineteenth century towards a form of humanism. After nearly a century, it became the South Place Ethical Society in 1888, and for nearly a century it has been an important part of the humanist movement, especially

on account of its convenient hall. In 1926 it left South Place and in 1929 it opened Conway Hall at Red Lion Square in London, where it has remained ever since. The 1825 trust deed was amended in 1907 and again in 1930 to take account of doctrinal changes, and for half a century its objects have been "the study and dissemination of ethical principles and the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment". Conway Hall was registered as a place of public religious worship and for the solemnisation of marriages until 1977.

The activities of South Place are familiar to most British freethinkers. It holds public meetings several times a week, whether lectures, forums or discussions. It offers naming, wedding and funeral ceremonies. It has various social and cultural activities, especially chamber concerts on Sunday evenings during winter. It has been involved in public controversy arising from letting the hall to the National Front and to the Paedophile Information Exchange. It was threatened with extinction by the loss of charitable status with consequent tax and rating relief. It therefore began legal action to regain the privileges which it had enjoyed without question until the Charities Act of 1960 made its position impossible, and after 14 years it found itself in the Chancery Division, the case being known as *Barralet and others v H. M. Attorney General and others*, and the issue being whether it is a charity, and if so what kind, and whether it still owns Conway Hall.

The main argument of the society, emphasised by Peter Cadogan throughout the decade that he has been general secretary (with the enthusiastic or apathetic support of the majority of the membership), and expressed at great length by Owen Swingland, QC, leading counsel for the society,

(continued over)

was that it is as much a religious organisation as ever. Subsidiary arguments were that it is an educational organisation and an organisation for the benefit of the community. The evidence in court consisted almost entirely of affidavits supporting and opposing the society's case, though verbal evidence was also given by Cadogan. The affidavits supporting the society came from Cadogan, Harold Blackham (leading living British humanist, and an Appointed Lecturer of the society), Herbert McLachlan (leading Unitarian minister), and Jap van Praag (leading living Dutch humanist), and argued respectively that South Place is a religious organisation, that the ethical humanist movement developed from radical religion, that Unitarianism is now similar to the position of South Place, and that in Western Europe humanism has the same status as the traditional religions. The affidavits opposing the society came from Ernest Payne (leading deceased Baptist) and Christmas Humphreys (leading living British Buddhist), and argued respectively that South Place has abandoned all its original principles and is no longer religious and that Buddhism does recognise a supreme creative principle (i.e. is not atheist).

Cadogan's evidence in the witness box, explaining his affidavits, was the truth, but it would be easy to argue that it was not the whole truth or nothing but the truth. He played up the quasi-religious features of South Place and played down the non-religious and anti-religious features. He compared the Sunday morning lecture with a sermon and the refreshments after it with Holy Communion—"but real rather than symbolic". He said that the society was neither theistic nor atheistic but agnostic about God, and added that atheists had no place in the society and could not accept its objects (but did not add that most of the society's members and Appointed Lecturers throughout the present century have been atheists). He stated that the society is religious because it holds certain things sacred (truth, goodness, beauty) and practises worship in a natural rather than a supernatural sense. He said much more of the same, but was only gently cross-examined by John Mummery, for the Attorney General, acting as guardian of charities.

Educational Grounds

Mummery went on to argue that if South Place should be a charity, it should not be as a religious organisation but as an educational or generally beneficial organisation. John Knox, QC, for the Commissioners of Inland Revenue, argued that South Place should not be a charity at all, being neither genuinely religious, nor genuinely educational, nor generally beneficial. Most of the hearing was taken up with legal arguments based on cases going back at least as far as the society itself.

On the morning of 11 June Mr Justice Dillon

ruled that the society uses the word "religion" in an incorrect sense, because it has no faith in or worship of a god, and therefore that it cannot have the legal status of a religious organisation with the same privileges as the churches; but that its objects and activities do have the legal status of education and of general benefit to the community, and therefore that it should be a charity with the same privileges as other such organisations. And in the afternoon he ruled that the original society had in effect ceased to exist when it ceased to worship God or give Christian instruction more than a century ago, but that the current assets do belong to the present society, though it should amend its trust deed to take account of the recent development and of its new status.

Financial Consequences

The main tangible effect on the society is that it recovers the tax and rating relief it enjoyed until 1966, but it will still have to pay its legal costs, which will probably amount to between £20,000 and £30,000—not quite as bad as Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House*, when a whole estate was consumed in a Chancery case, but bad enough. A more intangible effect is that the arguments about religion which have split the society several ways at once may now subside, since it no longer needs to pretend that it pursues religion or practises worship.

The effect on the wider humanist movement which the society has belonged to for nearly a century is less clear. The other national organisations are propagandist rather than educational and are unlikely to benefit at all, but there are various humanist trusts which may hope to follow the same path as South Place, and some local humanist societies may try to do so. But at least the South Place Ethical Society and Conway Hall, which have been an important feature of London life for so many years will be so for many more.

Peter Cadogan was reported as saying that he was disappointed at the ruling that humanism could not be considered as religion. But he said "The decision effectively saves the society".

Barbara Smoker, a prominent humanist and member of SPES, commented: "It is the best possible decision. Ninety per cent of the South Place case as presented in court was directed towards obtaining charity status on religious grounds, and had the judge accepted this line of argument it would have put the society's clock back 100 years. Not only would SPES have had to keep up its pretence of religious worship, but the Secretary would have had complete sanction to continue his personal campaign against atheist members, and their number would have inevitably decreased, leaving the heritage of Conway Hall to the new religious faction. On the other hand had the society failed to regain charity

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Some Thoughts on Immortality and Atheism

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

Following articles by David Berman about belief in immortality ("The Freethinker", January and February), Geoffrey Webster offers some thoughts about immortality and atheism. He suggests that a created yet imperishable soul is an inadmissible concept and points out that some atheist groups (especially in the East) have accepted "immortalism".

As is evidenced by David Berman's article "The poverty of mortalism", the consensus of opinion regarding personal immortality is that one either disbelieves in it or accepts the Christian/Jewish/Islamic doctrine that the individual soul is absolutely non-existent prior to conception, yet is subsequently indestructible. Mr Berman also quotes Schopenhauer's doctrine that men tend to believe in God because God is the guarantor of their deathlessness. In the course of this article, I would like to establish two points: 1. That atheism is not necessarily opposed to a doctrine of personal immortality; 2. That a form of theism exists which categorically denies that the soul is utterly non-existent prior to conception.

In his essay "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature", Schopenhauer criticises, mercilessly and repeatedly, the familiar notion that the soul does not exist for a prior eternity, is created out of nothing, then continues to exist forever. He says that we can only conceive of ourselves as indestructible inasmuch as we think of ourselves as beginningless; on the other hand, a person who assumes he has an absolute beginning at conception must, logically, conclude he has an absolute end at death. Thus, we can introduce the idea of two different definitions of immortality, "conditional" and "intrinsic". Conditional immortality asserts that the soul is completely non-existent prior to conception. It is then either generated by the parents (Traducianism) or created by God (Creationism). In both cases — according to traditional Christian teaching—the soul does not have indestructibility as an intrinsic characteristic, but has this bestowed upon it by the grace of God. This means that something perishable can be converted into something imperishable by the will of God. Now, we can ask "What would God have to do to qualify as omnipotent?" Since omnipotence relates to power (potency)—since power relates to both actuality and potentiality—the conclusion is that God would only be required to accomplish what is possible in order to qualify as an omnipotent being. Inasmuch as the transformation of something mortal into something immortal is a logical impos-

sibility, God would not be required to accomplish such an evident impossibility.

Further—there is an overwhelming and unanswerable moral argument against the notion of a soul having an absolute origin yet having to thereafter spend eternity in hell because of the misdeeds of this single existence. Irrespective of whether Christians, Jews and Muslims accept Creationism or Traducianism (soul begun by God or by parents), they must admit that such a view of the soul means that the appearance of the soul in the world is the result of a virtually fortuitous event (ie parental coitus permitting the creation of a new soul). So—why should a hitherto entirely non-existent entity have to be eternally accountable for the deeds of one brief existence? This argument, incidentally, applies to both those who still accept the Adam and Eve story as literally true and those who manage to reconcile theism with the evolutionary theory—thereby claiming that an omnipotent deity would have to use such a long, laborious and sanguinary process as evolution to populate the planet with life.

Nature of Soul

Thus, the familiar idea that the soul is originated at conception but is subsequently endless is a logically inadmissible doctrine. Now, it is usually assumed that there is such an intimate connection between theism and belief in *conditional* immortality that no theistic alternative to such an absurd doctrine is available. This conveniently overlooks the central doctrine of Hindu theism concerning the soul—that it possesses *both* prior and posterior immortality. This doctrine is presented in the major Hindu scriptures, based upon two main lines of counter-argument to the Christian notion. These are: 1. That the notion that something indestructible can have a beginning (a moment of origin) is a contradiction in terms; 2. That the soul, to be absolutely dependent on God, must necessarily be co-eternal with him (souls are "amsa"—a minute portion of God's inexhaustible energy). Of course, this automatically leads to the doctrine of metempsychosis, a doctrine which seems to be anathema to orthodox Christians.

It should be remembered that many heretical sects in Christian history have accepted the idea of transmigration. In addition, the great Christian theologian, Origen, accepted that the soul existed in a spiritual realm prior to "falling" into matter. The Sufis—mystics of Islam—also have the doctrine that the soul was originally with God prior to the creation of the cosmos, but that it fell into matter through "Seventy Thousand Veils". At the moment, with so many books being published that give

accounts of how subjects under hypnosis remembered many events in their previous lives, it must be distinctly embarrassing to stand up in a pulpit and present the idea that the soul, a metaphysical entity, has an absolute origin at conception. Of course, atheists and theists will naturally differ on their judgement concerning recollection of previous lives, but this does not alter the fact that many Christians are now having to rethink their entire philosophical position on the nature of the soul.

So—a form of theism (namely, Hindu) does exist which categorically denies the Judeo-Christo-Islamic doctrine that the soul begins at conception, but is thereafter deathless. From a purely logical point of view, who can deny that the assertion that the soul is metaphysical (non-temporary) automatically leads to the idea of its pre-existence (prior eternity)?

Atheistic Hinduism

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that atheism is "not necessarily opposed to a doctrine of personal immortality". What do I mean? What evidence have I to support this odd statement? The answer can be provided by examining some of the principal "darshanas" (schools of thought) in classical Hindu philosophy. Schools such as the Vaisheshika, atheistic form of Sankhya, Mimamsa and the non-Hindu teachings of the Jains all accept the beginninglessness of the individual soul, whilst being uncompromisingly atheistic. Therefore, we should not conclude that atheism is inevitably synonymous with materialism (and, thereby, "mortalism"). On the contrary, these Indian systems are radically atheistic, yet believe in the prior eternity of the soul, the process of reincarnation, plus the attainability of a state of eternal bliss in which one will never again be reborn into the suffering of material existence. This being the case, Occidental atheists should not jump to the (no doubt convenient) conclusion that all atheists are predisposed, as atheists, to reject the notion of personal immortality. (In the West, we have the recent example of McTaggart, a pluralistic idealist, whose major work contains a celebrated "proof" of the unreality of matter, space and time, together with the claim that the individual soul has never *not* existed. McTaggart was an atheist!)

Mr Berman mentions theists who disbelieve in immortality, such as the Sadducees. There was also a sect of theists in India, worshippers of the God Shiva, who disbelieved in personal immortality, claiming that virtue is its own reward in this life. This sect ("Allekhiyas") was never numerous, and is probably now extinct.

To conclude—Western atheists experience relatively little difficulty in criticising the Christian notion of the soul as springing into existence out of prior non-existence, then continuing to exist throughout endless time. Unfortunately, they over-

look the fact that millions of Hindu theists also reject the notion of the soul's beginning, countering it with the doctrine of the prior eternity of the soul. We have also shown that forms of atheism exist which are totally opposed to "mortalism". Therefore, it is no longer a matter of simply distinguishing between atheists and theists, assuming that the first all reject immortality and the second all believe the soul is originated (ex nihil) at conception. We must transcend the parochialism of the Western atheistic tradition, recognising that there are atheists who believe in immortality (and, indeed, in reincarnation) and theists who would agree with atheists that the traditional Judeo-Christo-Islamic conception of the soul (created yet indestructible) is logically impermissible! This, of course, makes matters rather complicated. However this is no excuse for intellectual laziness or complacent oversimplification.

Note.—Inasmuch as Buddhism explains reincarnation without referring to a changeless soul, and says that "Nirvana" is a state of impersonal immortality, I have refrained from any reference to Buddhism in this article.

GURU TO NEASDEN

His Divine Holiness Sri Pramukh Swami, leader of 35 million Hindus in India, is to address a religious conference in Wembley in July. The leader is on a 40-day visit and claims 50,000 followers in England. The Swami's Hindu organisation is expected to spend more than £2-million on a new temple and educational buildings in north London.

Female followers will be kept at bay. His Holiness has adopted strict celibacy and may have no contact with women; he thinks they are on a lower level than himself. Women, who will be confined to the gallery, may take the chance for a steak and a glass of wine, for followers are strict vegetarians and do not drink or smoke.

His holiness will cover the 2½ miles between Neasden and Wembley on an elephant.

PAKISTAN

Continuing his process of "Islamisation", General Zia ul-Haq has turned his attention to the capital's university, some Government departments, and the legal system. Islamabad's university is to be transformed into an Islamic university for the study of Islamic history, arts and law. An Islamic taxation system is being prepared and Islamic economic proposals are being considered. The civil courts are to be made to conform with Islamic law and the appointment of Islamic judges is planned.

"The Guardian" has ended its regular Saturday religious column. It is intended to introduce another column with a different approach. This piece imagines a journalist on the track of a new column . . .

I was not worried when *The Sentinel* decided to scrap its religious column. I had edited "Comfort for the Credulous" during the entire ten years of its existence. Naturally Peter, the Features Editor, called on me to handle the replacement too. The only question was what form it should take.

"We want to discover what people really find worrying about the fundamentals," Peter said.

"Instead of dishing out what the dog-collars say people need, we're going to begin with a survey about what people themselves feel they need." Peter raised his voice to beat the roar of the open-plan office. "I know what I need . . ." He was almost shouting. "But it's too early in the day. Wait—"

I paused with my finger on the lift button. "Not only will you have to ask the right questions, you'll have to ask the right people. Those who can rise above their conditioning." Peter slouched away, hands in pockets. He threw over his shoulder: "That's if any of us can . . ."

A good starting point seemed to be the LSE, where I have contacts. I decided to find a junior lecturer and put the question to her or him without knowing his or her subject. The academic mind and training, regardless of subject, should do the trick.

Erica Forbes obliged instantly. I did not even need to take her to lunch. We found a corner in the LSE warren, and I took out my pad. She did not in the least mind being interviewed standing up.

"I have very strong objections to life as I am called upon to live it" said Erica. I seemed to have touched a spring. It is as well my shorthand is good.

The gravamen of Erica's complaint was simply that the universe kept her in ignorance of what she was supposed to be doing in it. "I am an intelligent person, and I have educated myself to the limit of my capacity. That should be enough." She looked at me defiantly. I hastened to express agreement.

"I am a thoroughly honest and sincere person. I mean well to everybody." Again she looked defiant.

"If that sounds smug I can't help it." I assured her it did not sound smug, and that nothing she said was any use to me unless it was what she really felt. Smugness was beside the point.

"Well if you want to know what I really feel, I feel bloody angry. I've been conned."

It was not some errant boyfriend who had conned Erica, but life itself. She had been convent bred,

in Ireland. The nuns were harsh, the food plainer than their faces.

"They ruled us by fear," said Erica. "In the courtyard was a white stone statue of the convent's patron, St. Philomena. They told us the white hand of St. Philomena would get us if we were bad. That stony white hand occupied my nightmares for a full seven years."

But it was not all like this. Sister Agnes, the deputy to the Mother Superior, was a good and holy woman.

"Sister Agnes made me see what this creed could produce. She was utterly kind, sympathetic and selfless. Nothing she did seemed to further her own interest. She caused me a lot of trouble."

"Trouble? How was that?"

"But for Sister Agnes I could have consigned the whole lot of them to oblivion as soon as I left the place. I can't forget her, because if everyone was like her the world would undoubtedly be a far better place to live in than it is."

Erica was bitter about the fact that the system which produced the good Sister Agnes was a superstitious rigmarole no intelligent person could swallow.

"Perhaps it's like the manure that feeds the rose" I flippantly suggested.

"But the rose is not intelligent. Nor is it self-conscious. Sister Agnes had utter certainty that when she prayed to the Virgin Mary her prayers were heard. She lived by that certainty, and it made her the most wonderful person I've known. It isn't fair."

I reported back to Peter that one area *The Sentinel's* new column should certainly explore was how a belief that was obviously ill-founded could be the basis for a life that was obviously suffused by a quality instantly recognisable as goodness.

"It's a start," he grunted.

CHURCH DECLINE

A report on the future of the United Reform Church predicts a traumatic decline during the next ten years. One third of the present membership of 150,000 are expected to die during the next decade and 300 churches will become redundant. "The most sensational collapse in the work of the churches in this century has been in the work among children and young people," says the report.

An index for *The Freethinker* for 1979 is available free on request with a foolscap s.a.e. from 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Bradlaugh Centenary Meeting

(continued from the June Freethinker)

Nicolas Walter gave an account of Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament

The energy of figures such as Bradlaugh was prodigious and their efforts in educating themselves from nothing was amazing. Bradlaugh taught himself French, Latin and Hebrew. The *National Reformer* which he edited as a popular paper now looks like an academic journal. He was intensely intellectual and enormously hard-working. While living with his two young daughters in St. John's Wood, he was an unpaid MP, living from hand to mouth and working almost 24 hours a day.

When he was first elected in 1880, he was the leader of the National Secular Society, a leader of the Republican movement, and a leader of the neo-Malthusians (campaigning for birth control). He was elected as a radical. He favoured woman's suffrage, Irish Home Rule, land reform, rights for India, a wealth tax, reform of the House of Lords, disestablishment, a complete educational system, and equal treatment of capital and labour.

Three myths about Bradlaugh have to be destroyed. First, that he was an aggressive man, when he was invariably polite. Second, that he insisted on affirming before Parliament, when he respectfully asked if he could and was prevented from doing so. Third, that he refused to take the oath, when he repeatedly asked if he could and even tried to administer it to himself.

When he was elected in 1880, Bradlaugh had no intention of making a fuss about affirming as an alternative to taking the oath of allegiance to the dynasty. There had been and were other atheist MPs in the Commons. He politely asked if he was entitled to affirm and the Speaker, Henry Brand, expressed doubts about the procedure for an atheist and a Select Committee was established to consider the matter. The Select Committee was split on party lines between Liberals and Conservatives and, on the casting vote of the chairman, decided he could not affirm.

Bradlaugh then decided to take the oath. He was interrupted while taking it, and doubt was cast on the legality of an atheist, who did not believe the oath, being bound by it. Another Select Committee was set up to establish whether Bradlaugh be allowed to take the oath. This was a move by the Conservatives to discredit the Liberals. Catholics and Anglicans were behind the objection, and during the protest about Bradlaugh there were petitions and personal attacks on Bradlaugh's daughters and Mrs Besant.

Counter meetings and petitions were organised on Bradlaugh's behalf. Bradlaugh wrote a pamphlet,

A Cardinal's Broken Oath, attacking Cardinal Manning for betraying his original vows as an Anglican.

On June 16, 1880, the Select Committee said that he could affirm, but at his own risk, since the consequences depended upon the reaction of the House. Bradlaugh, in a speech at the Bar, claimed to be the representative of the people who had elected him and presented the issue as conflict between people and Parliament. He was told to withdraw, he refused, and he was then arrested and locked up in the clock tower. The following day he was released and the battle began again.

Gladstone then put forward a motion to allow Bradlaugh to affirm. Many legal battles ensued in the following years, which Bradlaugh fought personally with great vigour—and at risk of bankruptcy. For a while he continued with Parliamentary work though not fully admitted to the House. In March 1881, he lost a legal battle, was unseated but re-elected, and returned to Parliament to try again to take the oath. Again he was refused permission, but persisted in trying. A compromise was agreed in which Liberals decided to create a Bill to let Bradlaugh in, while he relaxed his attempts. The Conservatives tried to destroy the Bill. And Bradlaugh made another attempt to enter the House; it was publicised well in advance, and a huge number of supporters were present at the gigantic fracas when he was physically ejected.

Bradlaugh showed amazing persistence during the years of his struggle. In 1882 he took a New Testament out of his pocket and attempted to administer the oath to himself. The House, in an action reminiscent of its treatment of Wilkes, declared Bradlaugh's seat vacant. He was again re-elected.

During 1882 the blasphemy prosecution against *The Freethinker* was brought partly as an attempt to deal with Bradlaugh, who had been initially connected with the journal (but had dissociated himself rapidly when the risks were apparent).

In 1883, an Affirmation Bill was introduced and rejected. Bradlaugh again attempted to take the oath, and a motion to exclude him was passed. He persisted in 1884, again attempting to administer the oath to himself.

In June 1885, the Liberal government fell, and in the election in November Bradlaugh was again re-elected. There was a Conservative government returned and a new Speaker appointed. In a crowning irony, Bradlaugh's struggles were now seen to

(continued on back page)

GOSPEL AND TORTURE AT CHILDREN'S EXHIBITION

The vast scruffy hall of Alexandra Palace was host in Easter week to the National Boys and Girls Exhibition. It was a strange mixture — both a trade fair and funfair, with roundabouts, train rides, a helter skelter, stalls displaying model racing cars, jokes, Lego, painting games, alongside stalls trying to persuade the adults as well as the kiddies to support Cancer Research and the League Against Cruel Sports.

Any freethinkers braving this melée would have been dismayed to behold two well-staffed and stocked stalls preaching the Good News of the Gospel. One of these was promoted by the Christadelphians who'd arranged a sophisticated Bible competition, and were giving away the Treasure Chest magazine . . . "The Bible is like a collection of wonderful Jewels. Each of its 66 Books is a gem! There is real History and true Adventure, superb Poetry, amazing Prophecy and up-to-the-minute NEWS!" The gentle girl who was pushing sticky "Good News" badges onto the jackets of rather bewildered infants was quite unabashed when I reminded her of the sex and violence in the Treasure Chest. It was all part of God's justice and punishment on sinful men, I was sweetly informed.

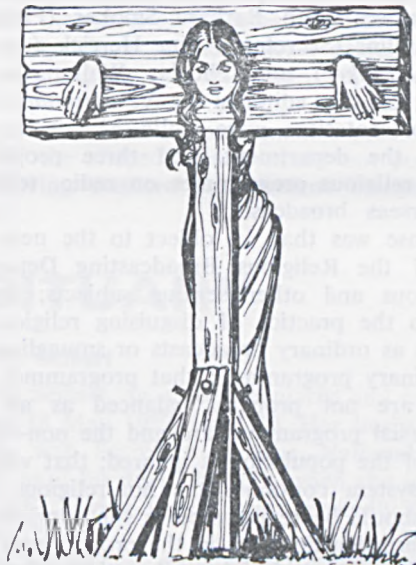
It's really horrifying how this wholesale indoctrination of the young is taken for granted. What would public reaction have been if there had been stalls manned by the Socialist Workers' Party, the Gay Activists' Alliance, or the National Secular Society? (NSS—take note and make a booking for 1981.)

No one seemed much worried either by the presence of ghoulishly dressed people on the stall advertising the London Dungeon. I know I'm slightly squeamish but I feel great unease at torture being made into amusement for youngsters. This Dungeon Museum, I should explain, is "the world's first fantasy British medieval horror exhibition"; and it has won a Tourist Board award, and its advertisements on the underground hoardings proclaim "It's torture" in three languages. My libertarian principles are considerably shaken by this sort of enterprise, and I cannot help wondering how others would react.

My mind continued to dwell on confused images of torture, when, having returned home I was leafing through various humf that I'd picked up at the Ally Pally. My eye fell on the lady illustrated below. At first glance I thought it was Jesus on the cross and I was looking at one of the Bible leaflets. But no, it was torture for fun, not for adoration. There were two of these ladies in the pillory with the caption "Spot the difference in the two pictures. Win a London Dungeon T-Shirt." Who can spot the dif-

ference between the models over the altar at the end of a church and the models in the torture museum?

C. FINDLAY



(Illustration from The London Dungeon)

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NSS TO BBC

On 28 May a deputation from the National Secular Society visited the Religious Broadcasting Department of the BBC to discuss mutual disagreements about religion on radio and television. The NSS representatives were Barbara Smoker (President), Terry Mullins (Secretary), Jim Herrick (editor of *The Freethinker*) and Nicolas Walter (a Vice-President and also editor of the *New Humanist*). The BBC representatives were Colin Morris, the new head of the department, and three people who produce religious programmes on radio, television, and overseas broadcasts.

Our case was that we object to the near monopoly of the Religious Broadcasting Department in religious and other serious subjects; that we object to the practice of disguising religious programmes as ordinary broadcasts or smuggling them into ordinary programmes; that programmes about religion are not properly balanced as all other controversial programmes are and the non-religious section of the population is ignored; that while the present system continues the non-religious organisations should be represented in the administration of such broadcasting and in the programmes themselves as a matter of right rather than of grace.

The discussion was inconclusive, in that we didn't get (or expect to get) any major or minor concession, and it was at times rather heated, but there was a free and frank exchange of views, and we came away feeling that they did at least have a better understanding of the way many non-religious people resent the way most religious programmes patronise or ignore their existence. What remains to be seen is whether there is any actual effect on future religious broadcasting.

CANTERBURY TO WALSINGHAM

Dr Runcie recently became the first Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation to go on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Virgin Mary at Walsingham. He received small, but vociferous, opposition from extreme Protestants and large, but placid, support from numerous religious tourists.

Walsingham is the English equivalent of Lourdes, with pilgrims travelling to pray for health and good fortune. Plaques inside the chapel door give thanks for restoration from sickness, and relief from financial troubles. The cult of the Virgin, normally more a Catholic than an Anglican phenomenon, is sustained at Walsingham by pilgrimages sponsored by both sects—and both with much pageantry, of the silver-candlesticks and scarlet-and-gold-ropes kind. It has become a pocket of High Anglican Mariolatry, but has not this century been propped up by the weight of an Archbishop's visit.

Walsingham's fame stems from a dream which

NEWS

came to the lady of the manor of Walsingham Parva in 1061, in which the Virgin Mary commanded her to build "a new Nazareth" and make an exact replica of the scene of the Annunciation. The shrine was largely destroyed at the Reformation, but in the 1930s it was rebuilt and the custom of pilgrimages was re-established.

The Protestant Truth Society and the Protestant Reformation Society both displayed banners as the Archbishop processed to the chapel. "The growth of this cult means the eclipse of the gospel," read one, and another warned "Howl ye shepherds and cry and wallow ye principal of the flock".

The Archbishop preached about unity in the faith and said that variety of custom did not matter. Secularists find the gospel so unclear that, as ever, the diversity of interpretation makes it impossible to believe there is any true version of Christianity.

The twentieth century increase in superstition, accompanying a decline of institutional religion, is seen in the increased respect given to shrines and shrouds. Or is it simply that growth of the leisure industry increases the popularity of religious tourism. Stately homes, railway museums and shrines are all grist to the tripper's mill. The Pilgrim's Route to Walsingham was signposted by the AA and some Anglican ministers were seen hitch-hiking.

MEMORIAL TO WASTE?

Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, the designer of Port Meirion, who died last year, was known to be an unbeliever. A memorial, designed by himself and recently completed by a local sculptor, was to be placed in the local church of St. Brothen, of which he was very fond and where members of his family were married and christened. However, a meeting of the parishioners has decided not to allow the memorial in the church because of Clough Williams-Ellis's atheist beliefs.

POPE TO FRANCE

The Pope, continuing his bid to enter the Guinness Book of Records as the most travelled man in the world, took a three-day trip to France recently. There was less unanimous acclaim than in earlier world tours; the French Catholic Church is divided between reformists and traditionalists, and France has a strong anti-clerical tradition. Instead of tirades against contraception and the morals of the modern world, Pope John Paul concentrated on messages of unity to a divided church, saying that

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dissidents on both sides were misinterpreting the Vatican Council of 1962-5.

The expected one-million turn-out at an open-air mass did not materialise. Some commentators suggested that President Giscard d'Estaing gave prominence to the visit because of an impending election. Certainly M. Chirac, the mayor of Paris and a rival of d'Estaing, and communist leader, M. Marchais, were keen to get in on the act and met the Pope as well.

A left-wing paper, *Liberation*, produced an issue in which printers ink was mixed with incense and readers were invited to "Smell here for an odour of sanctity".

The Pope gave greetings to followers of other religions, singling out Jews and Muslims as well as "people of good faith without religion". This was contradicted by an attack on secularism and materialism delivered when he returned to Italy. He spoke of the wounds to the spiritual life of the Italian nation from "secularism and materialism" and said they were having "fearful repercussions in the levels of family life and of public and private morality".

'EYES TO SEE'

A letter in *The Guardian* (2 June) described atheistic humanism as "the contemporary dogma of those who accept the omniscient pretensions of science and rationalism". In a reply published on 5 June, Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, asked, "How on earth can science and rationalism pretend to omniscience, when they are of their very essence, non-conclusive?"

She continued: "Atheistic humanists rely on the scientific method for coming to decisions—that is to say, it is on the relevant observable data that they base their predictions, and, in the field of morality, base their assessment of the probable consequences of alternative actions in particular situations.

"While religious ideas, based on revelation enshrined in sacred books and tradition, are slow to respond to any new facts or changed circumstances, scientific humanism is able to modify its tentative conclusions whenever new factors arise.

"Unlike alleged supernatural revelation, science is a cumulative human endeavour, continually striving to solve further problems raised by past discoveries. And unlike the 'leap to faith' (that is, wishful belief based on inadequate evidence) rationalism interprets the known data as far as they go, tentatively proposing hypotheses that best fit the known facts. It is thus revelation and faith, not science and ration-

alism, that have pretensions to omniscience.

"As an avowed atheist, I can only say that if indeed the cosmos were the deliberate creation of a conscious will, then, on the evidence before everyone with 'eyes to see', the supposed creator could not possibly be both competent and beneficent.

"Since the whole of life is based on the survival of the fittest, which is the amoral principle of the weakest going to the wall, and approved human morality is generally an attempt to undermine this principle of nature in some small degree, the attributes of the alleged creator could not possibly include loving concern for sentient beings on our planet."

OBITUARY

Ruby E. Seibert

Ruby E. Seibert, an ardent secularist and rationalist, died on 18 May 1980, aged 70. Her husband, John Siebert, was Secretary of the National Secular Society until his death in 1951, when she joined the NSS staff, having nursed him devotedly for many months.

Ruby Seibert was responsible for running the NSS office and bookshop. She helped to organise conferences and dinners and made many friends in the movement. In 1968 she joined the Rationalist Press Association staff, and she ran the bookshop, mail order service and booksales at conferences for the RPA.

In 1974, she left the RPA because of ill health. She died of cancer after a long illness, and faced the suffering of the last months courageously. At her request she was cremated with no ceremony, and her ashes were scattered on the same plot as those of her husband.

She was interested in many aspects of secularism, and she did much to help others, especially older people.

Freethinker Fund

We offer our thanks to the following readers for their kind donations:

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BOOKS

RUSSIAN THINKERS by Isaiah Berlin. Pelican, £1.95.

I must admit to being somewhat disappointed by this collected series of essays by Isaiah Berlin, not so much for what they contain but for the names brushed to one side, like Kropotkin and Plekhanov, as if somehow they do not fit into the category of "Russian Thinkers". Since this work is concerned with Russian intellectuals of the nineteenth century, I regard this as oversight on the part of Berlin, though perhaps the title is inaccurate in suggesting a comprehensive analysis, for it appears that the people included hold ideas not so far away from the viewpoint of Isaiah Berlin himself.

Much space is devoted to elaborating the opinions of Count Leo Tolstoy. I have never been quite sure whether Tolstoy was a mystic, a moralist, an anarchist, a Christian or a mixture of all four—and I am certainly none the wiser after reading the comments here. I gain the distinct impression that Tolstoy was, in addition to being an excellent novelist, also adept at putting down his contemporaries, but no good at contributing positive ideas of his own.

According to Berlin, Tolstoy was convinced that apart from material needs, man needed "spiritual" satisfaction. Only the innocent and pure of heart would find the eternal "truths", whereas those who were educated, and in particular intellectuals, would be damned. It is not difficult to understand why in his later years Tolstoy became a sort of mystic Christian. The basic ingredients were already there.

In the eyes of Tolstoy I would doubtless be damned, but I would dearly love to know what "spiritual" needs are and is there such a thing as "eternal truth"?

There is a strange link in nineteenth century Tsarist Russia between certain elements of the nobility and anarchist thought. The three best known in this category are Tolstoy, Bakunin and Kropotkin. It is unfortunate that space could not be found to devote a chapter to Kropotkin, since he is one of the few anarchist thinkers to formulate constructive notions rather than to pursue the relatively simple task of attacking and negating existing institutions. This relationship between anarchism and a landowning background can be explained as a rejection of the slow but steadily increasing industrialisation of Russia in favour of a return to the land with society organised on the basis of peasant communes.

It was in this tradition that Prince Mikhail Bakunin was brought up, although Berlin rightly points out that Bakunin did little in his writings to further these aims. Most of Bakunin's rambling works are

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polemical and somewhat infantile and his strength undoubtedly lay in being an active revolutionary on the barricades in various parts of Europe. His many years spent behind prison bars did little to further his admiration for the Tsarist state (he was tortured in the Peter and Paul fortress in Moscow) and his final years were spent in bitter controversy with Marx and his followers in the International Working Men's Association.

Bakunin's life may have been a history of turmoil and battle, yet, as Berlin points out, this above all else is what he really desired. In his famous *Confession* to Tsar Nicholas I, written while he was in prison, he said that what he most hated was a quiet life and most needed was fantastic adventures, perpetual movement, and battles in case he suffocated in otherwise peaceful conditions.

An interesting comparison can be made between Bakunin and his sometime companion Alexander Herzen. Bakunin can be said to have contributed very little in the realm of ideas, whereas the opposite could be said of Herzen, whom Berlin describes as an "original thinker, independent, honest and unexpectedly profound." On the other hand both could be said to have stressed the primacy of individual liberty and were prepared to speak out against every form of oppression whether it was domestic or abroad. Also in common with Bakunin, he had a deep affection for the Russian peasant commune life-style, although unlike Bakunin he was prepared to acknowledge the thoughts and ideas of those who were not in Slav territory.

One of those who influenced Herzen was the great German idealist, Hegel. Herzen was prepared to accept the Hegelian dialectical method of the interplay between opposing forces, but not its conclusion—the absolute state. Various schools of thought in nineteenth century Europe utilised Hegelian ideas to serve their own purposes. Religious thinkers used it as an indication of man striving to reach union with God; Mazzini, in Italy, as the inner spirit of people seeking to assert the principle of their common humanity; Marx as a class struggle governed by the forces of material production or dialectical materialism. (Berlin is surely mistaken in stating that Marx's explanation of the laws which govern historical development is one of the least successful attempts ever made. It is true that some of Marx's concepts have had to be modified in recent years, but as an explanation of mankind's material development it remains valid for the most part.)

Herzen was prepared to champion the individual

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against the oppressor, but also realised how the masses were prepared to accept authoritarian rule. In his work *The Other Shore* he states: "The masses are indifferent to individual freedom, liberty of speech; the masses love authority." A sober reflection perhaps not only for mid-nineteenth century Europe but for the 1980s worldwide.

Finally, it is appropriate that Herzen's colleague Vissarion Belinsky is considered in this work. Unlike Herzen and Bakunin he was no Slavophil, but like Herzen he spoke out against centralised authority, be it secular or religious, in favour of human liberty. In his short and tragic life he achieved much as an excellent propagandist and was responsible more than any other Russian for bringing mainstream Western ideas into Russia. Naturally the Tsarist police constantly hounded him and may have been responsible for his early death since he spent several years abroad in exile.

Secularists should take note of a letter written by Belinsky a year before his death in 1847, quoted by Isaiah Berlin, in which Belinsky speaking of Russia, sees progress not in terms of mysticism or piety, but in the achievements of education. It is rather sad that the same can still be said today with almost the same degree of validity.

KEN WRIGHT

TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF GEOLOGY IN AMERICA. Proceedings of the New Hampshire Bicentennial Conference on the History of Geology. Edited by Cecil J. Schneer. University of New Hampshire, \$20.00.

Geology loomed large in the bitter fight between the entrenched Goliath of clerical obscurantism and the David of scientific truth in the nineteenth century. To the outside observer the battle may have given the impression that the odds were all in favour of Goliath, however, it was David who won, though echoes of the clash can still be heard from time to time.

Although the time span of this volume takes in the period of the clash between geology and biblical literalism, you will find only tantalising hints of it in the various essays which go to make up this work, with one exception. This is an essay on "Agassiz' Later, Private Thoughts on Evolution: His Marginalia in Haeckel's *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868)", by Stephen Jay Gould. Louis Agassiz was one of the most distinguished American geologists and a naturalist of international repute. He was also a deeply religious man, and was a leader of the opposition to Darwinian evolutionary ideas.

Gould, who appears to dislike Haeckel almost as much as Agassiz did, though appearing to be less familiar with his works, presents a summary of the marginalia which Agassiz pencilled into the margins of his first edition of Haeckel's *Natural History of Creation*, which he had discovered on "the open stacks of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology library." These notes were written in German, and give an insight into how at least one eminent opponent of evolution thought privately. What seems to have aroused Agassiz to fury was his discovery that Haeckel had taken over one of his own pet notions (that geological sequences and embryological stages run in parallel) "without credit and in an opposing context". "Das ist mein Resultat!", he seems to bellow, and, "This method is not the author's, but was first used in my *Poissons fossiles*." Poor Agassiz, he really did not like evolution, preferring instead catastrophism.

Perhaps one six page essay is not worth \$20, but if you have a specialised interest in the development of scientific ideas you will find this volume of value, and, incidentally, modestly priced when set against some others of a similar nature.

ROBERT MORRELL

THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY. A POSITIVE ANSWER TO THE CURRENT DEBATE by Michael Green, David Holloway, David Watson. Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, £1.25.

If the Church of England report on homosexuality turned out to be a damp squib, this book is more akin to a penny banger. Briefly irritating and not at all illuminating.

It is more or less what one would expect from evangelical Christians these days. No longer do they call for excessive punishments for homosexuals but for understanding and compassion instead. Indeed David Holloway says that the way the Christian community responded to the homosexual in the past was "often cruel, unaccepting, unloving and homophobic. Of this repentance was needed." Rather like saying the Nazis owe the Jews an apology!

But acceptance of gays by Christians of this ilk needs to be looked at with some suspicion. When most people accept something, they do just that: *accept it*. But not this lot. These people insist that gays can and should be cured or at least that they should stop indulging in nasty habits like falling in love and having sex with other gays.

The cure (or "change") is quite successful, they claim. There is a forty per cent success rate in some secular treatment of this condition among those who *want to change*. A much higher success rate is apparently available to Christians "who open themselves to the healing and renewing power of the holy spirit." No details of these cures are

given which is understandable since such "cures" have been widely discredited.

But we are informed that, apart from the requirement that the person concerned must want to be changed, there must be "friendship and prayer" backing so as to provide support in the avoidance of homosexual encounters and stimuli and their replacement by non-homosexual relationships. Rather like locking an alcoholic out of the bar and claiming he has stopped drinking! Alcoholics, incidentally are always mentioned in the same breath as gays by evangelicals and in this book homosexual activity is lumped in with fornication, adultery, bestiality and child battering as well. As I said, pretty much what one would expect.

The greater part of this book need not concern humanists except insofar as it confirms what we knew already—the bible is no substitute for reason. The proposition that the bible condemns homosexual acts and that practising homosexuals should not be ordained is a problem for gay Christians to deal with. However, when people try to mislead the public as the authors do, humanists should be concerned. This book is full of fallacies, half truths, and at least one downright lie. Lord Halsbury is quoted as saying during a House of Lords debate that *Gay News* had featured articles entitled: How do you pick up someone you fancy? How do you solicit in a train? How to procure models—that is, prostitutes; Techniques of seducing boys; So you want to know how to do it—illustrated with drawings. These articles do not exist. But Lord Halsbury was protected by Parliamentary privilege and because the libel laws concerning privilege are so ill-defined, *Gay News* cannot take action over this repeat of the lie. The publishers claim it is "fair comment". Well it is fair comment to say that this shows little concern for honesty and neither does the book.

When the authors do try to be honest they manage to say some pretty interesting things: "There is a limit . . . to how long the Church can remain publicly confused yet credible."—Holloway. "The modern commonsense acceptance of homosexual acts on the one hand; the dead hand of tradition and Church teaching on the other."—Green (describing the tension caused by the debate on homosexuality). "If there is a problem of homosexuality, it begins with the problem of the Church's homophobia."—Watson. Well, they said it!

Towards the end of the book we are treated to a transcript of an interview with a young man who had become convinced that God wanted "full control of my total sexuality". So now he abstains from homosexual practices and having been "filled with the spirit" he lost all fear of being known as gay. So much so that only his initials appear throughout. Perhaps he's modest. This person believes that some gays are possessed, and so does one of the authors.

David Watson, I am reliably informed, has been involved in exorcisms of the evil spirits in gays, some of whom have suffered severely as a result. Perhaps the book should carry a government health warning.

Just what causes some people to be gay will be the subject of much argument for a long time yet, since relatively little research has been done in this area. But our evangelical trinity are in no doubt as to why gays exist. Along with differences of language, colour and race, homosexuality is all due to "the fall". If Eve hadn't fallen for that smooth talking snake we would all be the same colour, speak the same language and be happily married. I suspect that means white, English and deadly dull!

BRIAN PARRY

CINEMA

THE TIN DRUM (X) The Odeon Haymarket, London till late July, then selected locals.
ANGI VERA (A) The Gate Cinema, Notting Hill Gate, London.

In the area of film, the Germans are no slouches, never have been. Small wonder, for theirs is the tradition of Büchner and Wedekind, of Expressionism and of Brecht's Epic "Thaeter". Volker Schlöndorff is the eldest of their excellent postwar generation of directors. In filming Günter Grass's picaresque novel, *The Tin Drum*, he worked in close collaboration with the author. Many episodes have, of necessity, been omitted or whittled down and the film is tauter and shallower than its original, but it remains commendably true both to Grass's highly individual style and atmosphere and to the feel of Germany. It's a Germany of small-town bustle, of potato fields and almost-quaint Gothic rooftops wreathed in smoke and of placid women in vast, accommodating skirts.

Grass's unstoppable little drummer is Oskar, putative son of a Danzig grocer. In 1927, at his third birthday party, thoroughly put off by the sight of his elders, faces flushed and glistening from their intake of *schnapps*, goose and cream cakes, playing at extramarital footsie under the table, Oskar hurls himself down the cellar steps. This halts his growth, but sexually he develops apace. He also discovers an ability to shatter glass with his highpitched scream, so whoever crosses him, be it teacher, doctor or his own dear mama, is landed with splintered spectacles, glazier's bills or the occupants of specimen jars, beached in yellow puddles of Formalin. Oskar, marvellously played, with a wide blue stare of indignation, by 12 year-old David Bennent, disrupts a Brownshirt rally with his drumming; causes havoc in church; joins a troupe of midgets and tours the front lines with them and eventually learns to put to good use his "third drumstick" (an incident slightly cut by the British censor). *The Tin Drum* is a hymn to the viscous joys of food and forni-

ation, a film which fairly reeks of smoke, sweat and unmade beds.

But there's more to it. During Oskar's childhood another stubborn little fellow, gifted, too, at breaking glass by remote control, was in the ascendant. *The Tin Drum* shows a guzzling, card-playing *petit bourgeoisie* supporting Hitler by default and by a kind of lazy opportunism. The way to a people's heart is through its stomach. Oskar is supplied with drums by Sigismund Markus (Charles Aznavour), a newly-baptised toyshop owner. Markus adores Oskar's mother Agnes, but he entertains the child during her Thursday visits to cousin Jan (whose blue eyes resemble Oskar's). After Agnes's premature death Markus stands alone reciting the *kaddish* over her grave, while two men hover darkly. Shortly afterwards he is found slumped dead over the accounts in his vandalised shop.

The film opens in misty, innocent dawn colours, with "wipes" linking the scenes, a cinematic effect which evokes the turning of pages in a photograph album. Oskar recounts the story of his origins in a rasping voice-over, reminiscent of a Brechtian narrator. Gradually, as the Brownshirts and Oskar make their presence felt, the full palette of old gold, rust and plum is used, and the saga begins to tell itself. This is a film to cherish and remember, for the grandmother's ruminative peasant face as she conceives Agnes by a refugee Pole harboured under her skirts; for Oskar's emergence from the pink grotto of his mother's womb; for the splendid Angela Winkler as Agnes; the ominous drum-roll that heralds her death and for Oskar's sweetheart/stepmother, post-coitally sullen, straddling a make-shift bidet.

Pal Gabor's *Angi Vera* based on a novel by Veszi Andre is also set at a specific and very crucial date in history. It is Hungary in 1948, at the hopeful beginning of Rakosi's Stalinist régime. Veronika Papp, an actress of defiant, fragile beauty, plays the 18-year-old war orphan Vera Angi (the Hungarians reverse names), working as an assistant nurse. Her outspoken exposure of her hospital's negligence and corruption earn her a place on a three-month residential course in Party ideology at what looks like a prison camp. Vera and her fellow-students struggle with the jargon, like lithe bodies in stiff, drab uniforms. At "criticism and self-criticism" sessions the top brass systematically crush the students with negative assessments of their performance. Vera makes two women friends, the earthy Maria, joyous leader of the chorus of shower-room and dormitory confidences yet dedicated slogger for the Party, and the embittered Anna, an older woman, perhaps a mother-figure, whose lover was executed, and who is happier informing on her comrades than enjoying their friendship. Vera falls in love with her teacher Andre, who returns her love. Prompted in part by her exploited need to belong and her misplaced belief in "integrity", in

part by the influence of Anna and of the "self-criticism" sessions, Vera publicly confesses to the liaison, thereby destroying her lover and gaining for herself official plaudits but no happiness. She is left hankering after Maria's robust, uncomplicated way of life.

If that synopsis makes the film sound wooden, then I've done it a grave injustice. It's a fluent, perceptive and very beautiful work, and a fascinating insight into its period. In short, it's a masterpiece. Although it's set so precisely in '48, *Angi Vera* can serve as a generalised study of fresh idealism turning sour and divisive, of bright eyes growing jaded and shifty. A warm amber glow floods in through the windows, but outside it's grey and slushy under a merciless white sky. A frugal students' dance with rationed beer made me hopelessly nostalgic for the films of Czech director Milos Forman before he fled to America and made *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The observant camera strolls and weaves among the guests, loving them. Tactfully, gently, it nudges us into noticing a brisk but furtive trade in bottles of beer; a dancer's too-long trouser leg; eyes daring to meet across the crowded room and, sitting motionless on the platform under a Party banner, the accordionist, lost in some private sorrow.

VERA LUSTIG

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The Association of Christian Teachers are to open a new study centre in Nottinghamshire. The ACT gave £50,000 towards the project, but £42,000 was provided by the Manpower Services Commission.

LETTERS

DEFINING GOD

I sympathise with Mr Reid (May 1980) and all atheists in that we are arguing against a god that not only does not exist, but even worse has never been accurately defined. Certainly the confusion, vagueness and elusiveness of those who devote so many of their earthly hours to the god, whose existence they are entirely confident of, have never made it easy for us atheists.

Nevertheless it is thoroughly absurd to say that arguments against god deriving from its meaninglessness as a concept are as strong as arguments derived from the impossibility of the meaning of the concept being realised.

Even if, much against my better judgment (after all it would be mystifying the language in a way religion delights in), you twist the meaning of the word "meaningless" to "incapable of disproof", I don't believe you have actually produced a valid argument against deism. True, you might well produce an argument for agnosticism, but that is all. And I dare say, if the case can't be argued, the cynical would find that Pascal's Wager has something to recommend it.

But to go back to where Mr Reid started, I am sure the Christian who believes in an all-powerful, loving creating and redeeming god would be astonished to find these concepts termed meaningless (technically or otherwise). Beyond proof, they might agree, but meaningless, no. And in truth I would be astonished if Mr Reid and many others would think those ideas meaningless.

The trouble is that theists are (especially nowadays) vague and unclear—probably deliberately so in many cases. In fact to argue against them we must pin them down to a clearer concept than the mysterious, the imminent, etc. In doing so we must not misrepresent the beliefs that theists hold, but we must crystalise them.

When we have done this (and Christians do accept certain concepts as appertaining to god, such as "omnipotent", "good", etc.) the barrier is not that there are no disproofs—Bradlaugh cited some in his "A Plea for Atheism". The trouble is that Christians bury their heads in the sand and refuse to accept anything as evidence against the existence of god. They don't accept evidence from the circumstances of this earth that would tend to make a reasonable man disbelieve in a beneficent god. Nor will they accept logical disproof.

To such dim theists, I would say, if you refuse to accept any basis for knowledge and any universally applicable means of acquiring it, you don't miraculously become all knowing, you just become totally ignorant — at best an agnostic, at worst completely dumb.

GEOFFREY H. L. BERG

NO BIGOTRY WANTED

The letter in the May issue from a correspondent with the unlikely name of Roger Santerre revived memories of disputes I had, both as Secretary of the National Secular Society and Editor of "The Freethinker", with people who regard the Roman Catholic Church as the sole repository of reactionary political, social and religious ideas.

Such encounters usually took the form of telephone calls from disagreeable, hatred-oozing individuals — frequently using different names and invariably with Merseyside or Scottish accents — demanding that the NSS and this journal indulge in the kind of anti-Catholic propaganda that would be more fitting to the Orange Order or the Ku Klux Klan. Even the mildest questioning of such demands would provoke a torrent

of abuse and accusations that the freethought movement had been taken over by the Jesuits or by Catholic Action.

When dealing with the Catholic Church's relationship with pre-war Nazi and Fascist regimes, Mr Santerre goes over ground that is familiar to most freethinkers. But like others whose real aim is conducting a "hate Catholics" crusade, he ignores several important factors. First, is it really surprising that the dictator of a Fascist country where the population is chiefly Catholic is himself a Catholic? Secondly, many of Hitler's backers among German industrialists, militarists and religious leaders were not Catholics. German Protestants, with rare exceptions, were as anti-Jewish as their fellow-Christian countrymen. Thirdly, despite the friendly attitude of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to dictators like Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and Salazar, thousands of Catholics fought against the Nazis either as members of the armed forces or operating in the underground movement.

Mr Santerre's proposal to set up a secret anti-Catholic society is old hat. Odd-balls were trotting out similar nonsense in London 20 years ago. The chief propagator of the idea at that time was also declaring himself in favour of the systematic extermination of Catholics. Secret societies and cloak-and-dagger activities are the products of warped minds, not a programme for the freethought movement.

Incidentally, the subsequent careers of some of the most vitriolic anti-Catholics I tussled with indicate a certain instability in their psyche, to say the least. One of them converted to Catholicism, another returned to the Church and yet another to the faith of his Judaic fathers. A prolific and highly successful anti-Catholic writer later became a propagandist for the Rev Ian Paisley and, to my personal knowledge, a warm admirer of John Tyndall, former chairman of the National Front. Roman Catholic bishops and priests are not the only people with strange political bed-fellows.

Hatred, prejudice, injustice and discrimination are some of the weapons which Christians have used against one another over the centuries. Freethinkers have endeavoured to educate, persuade and shame them into being better than their creed. But there are still many fanatics and sectarians around; we should be careful that they do not use the freethought movement and its publications as an outlet for their pernicious religious bigotry.

WILLIAM McILROY

CORRECTIONS

What a pity secularists who read "The Freethinker" (June) seem to be every bit as intolerant, abusive in disagreement and unknowledgeable as other groups.

As I am the object of the target practice may I correct certain statements.

(1) Most of Jasper Ridley's books, I assure W. H. Pemberton, including the Tudor period ones, are on my shelves: I most certainly did not state he wrote only on the 19th century, or criticise him for it. What he has never covered is the late 18th century and French Revolution; and the French Revolution preliminaries in his book on Napoleon III and Eugénie are based, as his references make clear and as he agrees, only on the memoirs of the sister of Josephine Beauharnais. The authorities I quote—Albert Soboul (Professor of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne), George Rudé (also author on the Revolution and lecturing professor at Montreal and Adelaide Universities)—among other books on the period line my shelves also, and are quoted by me in my own books.

To argue that a lot written on Robespierre is patently wrong (as shown by the above authorities) is not to say everything he did is admirable. The same applies to Stalin. The best historians are non-partisan

and show balance. Other correspondents on Stalin please note.

(2) I am sorry Terry Mullins also persists in his view that nothing of any benefit to anyone whatsoever took place in Soviet Russia under the Stalin régime (if it was so exactly like the Nazi régime, why did the Russian people fight for their country, Stalin included, during the War and why did Churchill and Roosevelt ally themselves with him?).

Perhaps Mr Mullins will explain why Maxim Shostakovich is unable to leave Russia when the West is in fact full of dissidents (including S. Volkov) who have left without conspicuous difficulty. Why did Shostakovich himself always elect to go back there? He could have stayed in the West quite easily.

It is a pity secularists are playing the Thatcher game in politics and I hope they enjoy the nuclear war against Russia they are propagating.

(3) I assure Margaret McIlroy I was only trying to correct the wholly laudatory picture of Wesley given in her review, and I do remember my own book on Wilkes. His Bill of 1776 advocated universal suffrage. She is being, if I may say so, grossly unfair in quoting only on Wilkes in late life when like many of the old he settled down into something like conformity. "Wilkes and Liberty" was not an idle slogan in the major active part of his life. The 1776 Bill showed it was still not forgotten; no one of that time (or for long afterwards, including in the 1832 Reform Bill) had ever dared to suggest that everyone should have the right to vote for a representative in Parliament, irrespective of property qualifications. (Everyone except women, of course: even Wilkes did not go that far!)

No one has surely suggested that the reformists of the Age of Reason, political or theological, carried the day in their own time. They were a strong, much-read band nevertheless and we owe much to them.

Finally, may I with some amusement assure W. H. Pemberton that my personal friendship with Jasper Ridley dates from the time he gave an excellent review (with the same balance of criticism I give to his books) of my "Thomas Paine: His Life, Work and Times" (1973)—one of the history books Mr Pemberton tells me I should not write! In fact, Mr Ridley has written me that he agrees on the matter of his book's overwhelming length and minute detail; he had suggested a shorter book to his publishers but they insisted on the weighty kind of volume now popular with academics.

AUDREY WILLIAMSON

BRIAN AND JESUS

After reading April "Jottings", I should like to give an "inspired" guess as to why it is sub-titled an occasional column. As William McIlroy is obviously devoid of any beliefs, he feels he is quite safe to demolish what others hold dear in faith. Fortunately his success does not match his bigoted fanaticism, for which Christianity cannot hold the candle to him. For all his caustic witticisms he succeeds merely in causing a nuisance.

The wise men in "The Life of Brian" followed a star that was definitely "on the blink". Justin Martyr, Origen and Tertullian, when reading Matthew 2:1 thought of magi as astrologers. How many of these astrologers from eastern parts "brought gold and frankincense and myrrh" to the child Jesus is not disclosed; there is no factual basis for the traditional notion that there were three. They were wittingly or unwittingly led by what appeared to them as a moving "star". They alerted Herod to the fact that the "King of the Jews" had been born. Herod in turn sought to have Jesus killed. The plot fortunately failed. Jesus Christ went on to become the central figure of Christianity. It is worth noting that Flavius Josephus,

although an unbeliever, in his "Antiquities of the Jews" testifies to the existence of Jesus Christ as "if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works".

It is not irrational or unreasonable to demand that his disciples "become as little children". Answering a question "Who really is the greatest in the Kingdom of the heavens?" Jesus Christ called over a young child into their gathering and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you turn around and become as young children, you will by no means enter into the Kingdom of the heavens. Therefore whoever will humble himself like this young child is the one that is the greatest in the Kingdom of the heavens."

After Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, and before ascension to his father in heaven, he was able to say to his disciples, with the full legality of fulfilling the Mosaic law: "All authority has been given me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of people of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the things I have commanded you. And look! I am with you all the days until the conclusion of the system of things."

The only new era or age to be ushered in will be this one, and divine umbrage will be a deal more marked than the collapse of Brighton clock tower.

MICHAEL LEEDHAM

(South Place Ethical Society)

status, it could not have run Conway Hall at a profit. So charity status on educational grounds was just what I had been hoping for, though with little optimism when that aspect of the case was sacrificed so largely to the religious claims."

Immediately after the judgement the following statement was issued by the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association:

"All humanists naturally welcome the decision of the Chancery Division of the High Court on 11 June 1980 that the South Place Ethical Society regains the charitable status it was denied in the 1960s, because this means that it can continue the valuable contribution it has been making to London life for nearly two centuries. Most humanists will particularly welcome the decision that the society is not a religious organisation in the legal sense, but it is an organisation for the advancement of education and the general benefit of the community, because most humanists do not regard themselves to be religious and do not wish to be regarded as religious by others. But humanists still consider that the charity law should be changed, so that religion is not taken as a special case, and so that religious and humanist organisations are treated on the same level and have the same privileges."

The judgement of Lord Dillon was fully reported in "The Times" of 19 June 1980.

(Bradlaugh)

have been unnecessary when the new Speaker said that the decisions of the last Parliament were irrelevant and ruled that Bradlaugh could take an oath and should not be interrupted. On 13 January 1886, he took the oath unopposed, shook hands with the Speaker and entered Parliament.

Bradlaugh's work as an MP was remarkable. He fought for the cause of Ireland, of India, and of the natives of New Zealand. He argued for changes in the Game and Land Laws, for changes in prisons, and for the rights of soldiers. He championed many who were not his constituents.

The effect of the struggle was seen in the acceleration of the secularisation of the country. There was a huge growth of atheism and radicalism in the 1880s, and increasingly of socialism—both Annie Besant and Edward Aveling moved from the secularist to the socialist camp.

The Affirmation Act passed in 1888 gave all MPs the right to affirm. In a final irony, Bradlaugh, exhausted by the struggle, did not live long enough to affirm in a new Parliament. In the 1890s about 40 MPs affirmed, and a not much larger number do so today. Through Bradlaugh's struggle the moral status of atheists was changed. However, powerful religious pressure remains in politics to this day, which is the best reason for not forgetting Bradlaugh's courageous struggle.

Christopher Price spoke of his own Parliamentary experience. He said he came to the meeting to learn more about Bradlaugh and pointed out that MPs were conscious of Parliamentary traditions— younger MPs tended to walk about thinking they were Gladstone or Disraeli.

It is possible for individual MPs to influence events and even the law. He gave examples of his personal experience. As chairman of a sub-committee of a Select Committee, he had had the chance to decide whether such proceedings were privileged. Successful attempts to preserve justice

and freedom were often counteracted: "the moment you've won, the whole weight of the establishment turns round to blunt the victory". As an example, he quoted the Confait case, in which publicity brought about an appeal which was successful; it was followed by an inquiry indicating the appeal decision was probably wrong.

Christopher Price recounted details of the ABC trial concerning official secrets and the farcical incidents relating to the naming of "Colonel B".

Through Parliament and the courts individual freedom could be preserved and extended, but only by constant vigilance. Bradlaugh was a fine example of an MP who had been eternally vigilant.

EVENTS

Havering and District Humanist Society. Discussion: Why are we humanists? Tuesday, 15 July. Slide Show. Tuesday, 5 August. Ring Romford 27858 for venue.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Questions session: Richard Balfe, Euro MP. Thursday, 24 July, 8.30 pm. Lee Centre, 1 Aislip Road, Lee, SE12.

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.)

Merseyside Humanist Group. Raymond Freeman; To Do Evil: Crime or Disease? Monday, 21 July. Paul Ebsworth; Sexism: Are we brainwashed by sexual conditioning? Monday, 18 August. 7.45 pm. 46 Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday Morning Meetings, 11 am. 13 July, Harold Blackham; Self-Management, 20 July, Peter Cadogan; Coleridge, the Conservative Anarchist and his idea of the National Church. Tuesday Discussion will continue informally during the summer, details on request.

Tyneside Humanist Society. Discussion; Imposed rationality. Wednesday, 9 July, 7.30 pm. Friends' Meeting House, 1 Archbold Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne 2.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Summer social events—contact Georgina Coupland, Bishopston (828) 3631.

THE FREETHINKER

Editor: JIM HERRICK

News & Notes edited by Barry Duke

702 HOLLOWAY ROAD
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