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CALL FOR MORE RELIGIOUS TEACHERS WHILE RE IS DYING ON ITS FEET

Members of the national Religious Education Council have called on the Government to act to prevent the decline of religious education. They have presented a memorandum to the Minister of State for Education, Baroness Young, which sets out a six-point plan to stop religious education disappearing, by default, from our schools. The Religious Education Council represents 40 organisations from most Christian denominations as well as a representative from the Jewish faith and from the British Humanist Association.

The six-point plan calls for a reminder to local education authorities not to neglect the statutory provisions for RE, contains a statement on the educational importance and justification of RE, and reminds local authorities of their right to establish a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. The memorandum also asks for support at the highest level for efforts to improve RE staffing, training and re-training, and emphasises the importance of in-service training for RE teachers. There is also a recommendation that 7.5 per cent of school time be given to RE, which would amount to roughly two or three lessons a week — far more than is usually given at present.

The background to the memorandum and exchange with the Minister of State for Education is the palpable decline of RE taking place in schools. As less pupils are taking RE to A level, so less students are training to be RE specialists and there is now a shortage of RE teachers. Rhodes Boyson is quoted as saying that five hundred new teachers of RE need to be recruited annually through the 1980s to fulfill the obligations of the 1944 Education Act. A survey of school inspectors has shown that 18 per cent of secondary schools now provide no RE at all. RE after thirteen in a secondary school is said to be a rarity. (Teachers are known very reluctantly to take bits and pieces of RE just for the con-

venience of the time-table planner.)

At the same time a new report indicates that children are showing a declining interest in religion. A survey by Dr Leslie Francis, published by the Farmington Institute for Religious Studies, shows that 60 per cent of sixteen-year-olds found religion and the Bible boring and only ten per cent liked school lessons about religion.

So RE is dying on its feet. It is possible to argue that as a result children are not even learning *about* religion and that there is no place in the curriculum for them to learn to think about behaviour and the moral consequences of actions. Some humanists think that RE is important for this reason, and argue that, since there is not the slightest chance of a change in the 1944 Education Act in the foreseeable future, it is better to persuade educationalists to teach RE in an open, unbiased way than to campaign for its abolition.

Unpopularity of RE

We, on the other hand would argue that the decline of the RE profession and the unpopularity of RE as a subject in schools is an ideal time to redistribute this subject into other parts of the curriculum. Religion as a phenomenon can be taught in history, literature, art and so on, while discussion of people's beliefs of social behaviour can come into social studies, or education in thinking.

The British Humanist Association takes the former of these two views and this is its justification for membership of the REC. James Hemming, President of the BHA, and one of the representatives of the REC to Baroness Young, explained his position. He claims it is very useful for the humanist position to be represented in the religious education field and said: "One of the effects has been that the Agreed Syllabuses are now beginning to include naturalistic life-stances in their revised

forms. The loosening of dogma has also opened the way for teachers of RE to give much of their time to issues of personal relationships and social responsibility. Teachers are taking advantage of this opportunity. Trying to teach dogma produces hostility among the young anyway. Here it should be noted that, in many schools, the only place where the pupils receive personal and social education is in the RE periods which are now sometimes renamed as 'Religious Studies' or, even, 'Orientation'."

He also said: "We joined the delegation to the Minister in order that our view should be put. We are not opposed—quite the contrary—to time being spent on moral/social/religious education provided that the time is used properly, and provided that social/moral values should be included 'across the curriculum' and not exclusively hived off into the RE period, leaving academics to teach a curriculum devoid of any teaching on social responsibility."

Nicolas Walter, editor of the *New Humanist*, in a letter published in the *Church Times* and *Catholic Herald*, has dissented from this humanist participation in REC demands for more RE. He writes: "It should be made clear that the great majority of humanists in the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association, or in local humanist groups, or in no organisation at all, want not any kind of revival of the present system of religious education but its replacement by a completely different system of genuine education about religion, philosophy and morality."

Open-minded Education

Although there is certainly some open-minded education about religion taking place, freethinkers cannot support any call for a strengthening of RE. Like all professions RE teachers are a vested interest reluctant to see their role vanish. (Latin teachers have faced the same problem.) They will never support removing teaching about religion to other parts of the curriculum. But if they are a declining race, surely this is an ideal time to consider moving their topic into other areas.

The teaching of morality and responsibility (in so far as it can be taught not caught) should be part of the school life and curriculum. But freethinkers have always held that RE is the last place where moral education should be taught; it is the mistaken idea that morality and religion are inextricably interwoven that has been enormously damaging.

Have changes in RE come as a result of pressure from humanists? Or have changes not come from liberal Christians (such as Don Cupitt, who seems uncertain whether he believes in God), who create a climate of opinion in which RE has to be more open-minded, and from children who refuse to listen to the old-fashioned Religious Instruction. (An RE teacher writing in the *Catholic Herald* describes a lesson in which the majority of the class refused

to listen at all.) There have been swings in the religious pendulum from latitudinarianism to intense evangelism before and no doubt will be again. If the vested interest of the RE profession is there it will reflect the current religious climate.

At present RE may include discussion of non-religious beliefs (for example *Religious Education in Hampshire Schools*) but a change in climate of opinion would be reflected in a strengthened RE profession. Religion should be taught as part of the study of all beliefs and not beliefs as a part of religion. It is to be hoped that the Government will not strengthen RE but strengthen education about ideas, thinking and behaviour, so that RE is unnecessary.

Humanist involvement in the Religious Education's Council criticised in Jottings page 183.

WORLDWIDE

ITALY

Links between the Catholic Church and crime have emerged in Italy. Three instances of connections between wayward priests and the Mafia have been reported. The Sicilian Michele Sindona, now in jail in America for fraud, was once a financial adviser to the Vatican. A monk from Palermo, Don Giacinto, was gunned down in public. It was revealed that he had run a string of girls, and a pistol and £3,000 were found in his desk. Father Coppola, known as "the Shotgun Priest" in Palermo, has been released from a Milan prison after being held on suspicion of being involved in several kidnappings.

AUSTRALIA

A morals campaigner, Rona Joyner in Queensland, has denounced democracy: "The majority should not be allowed to rule if their decisions are anti-Christian." Mrs Rona Joyner runs two organisations—STOP (Society to Outlaw Pornography) and CARE (Committee Against Regressive Education). She is attempting to abolish sex education in schools and has said: "The teaching of human reproduction really only takes an hour; teachers extend this to cover the whole 12 years of schooling, in courses they call 'human relationships'. It's all just a disguise for the propagation of humanistic anti-Christian notions of promiscuity."

I am myself a dissenter from all known religions, and I hope that every kind of religious belief will die out. I do not believe that, on the balance, religious belief has been a force for good. Although I am prepared to admit that in certain times and places it has had some good effects, I regard it as belonging to the infancy of human reason, and to a stage of development which we are now outgrowing.

"Sceptical Essays" by Bertrand Russell.

The Philistines in Britain

JAMES MACDONALD

A new play, "The Romans in Britain", caused an unroar after its first night at the National Theatre. James MacDonald who—unlike some of the protesters—has seen the play, comments upon the rumpus and its implications for censorship and British drama.

Buckingham Palace could not have timed it better. No sooner had the Queen delivered a major address in Rome on the cultural debt the nation owed Italy because of Shakespeare's Roman plays than Howard Brenton was proclaiming the tradition alive, well and thriving at the National Theatre.

There is no evidence that Shakespeare caused much of a stir with his evocations of Roman history; no sign as yet that *The Romans in Britain* will produce anything like the public outcry that attended Peter Brook's production of *U.S.* at the Aldwych twelve years ago. But already Mr Brenton has set the fur flying in Fleet Street and elsewhere; and so, a dozen years after the Lord Chamberlain ceased to pronounce on the suitability of plays, there are still writers who can, through the audacity of their work, create a scandal on the boards. It is a healthy sign.

Of course the critics to a man were all quick to point out that they objected to the play on artistic rather than moral grounds. Milton Shulman denied that in his *Evening Standard* review he had called for the play to be banned. James Fenton of the *Sunday Times* tried to cover his moral outrage by attacking the play's credibility: he had not been here at the time of the Roman invasion, of course, but he had, he assured us, been interrogated in Northern Ireland, and it was nothing whatever like Mr Brenton's play. Benedict Nightingale, of the *New Statesman*, also sought to question the play's authenticity: the offending homosexual rape was not convincingly staged, he suggested.

Whatever the reviewers said (or claimed later to have said) about the play, Mrs Whitehouse sought to bring an action against it solely on the verdict of the reviews; Mr Shulman had indeed called for the play to be removed, and Mr Fenton advised Sir Peter Hall to sack himself. Sir Horace Cutler, chairman of the Greater London Council, seriously considered withdrawing the annual grant to the National because the play was such a travesty. He and his wife covered their eyes during the rape scene, and left the theatre at the interval.

There followed a vigorous correspondence in *The Times* and elsewhere between those who, like Mrs Whitehouse, had not seen the play but who felt themselves qualified to write on it, and those who criticised the critics for their prejudice. In a lengthy article in the *Guardian* Edward Bond delivered a

broadsheet at the capitalist establishment over their reaction without once mentioning the play by name, let alone what he thought about it. In calling on James Fenton to resign, he questioned the critic's qualifications to pass judgement on the theatre and denounced his review as "a yowl straight out of Yahoo-Land". On balance, Mr Bond is right.

No reader of *The Freethinker* will be surprised at anything Mrs Whitehouse has to say. If she has missed the point entirely by suggesting that a member of the audience might take it into his head to commit assault, well, Puritans have never liked the theatre. Sir Horace, likewise, cannot be counted among the National's most avid spectators, and that is his fault rather than the theatre's if he does not even sample the work of this country's most adventurous new dramatists that his own council supports. The onus must be on the professional theatre goers who, by their verdicts, confer on these plays the status of subversive. Other dramatic disasters—if that is what this is—have sunk without trace for want of adequate coverage. There was no need, if the play is truly unworthy, to follow their dismissive reviews with righteous editorials; no need whatever for Milton Shulman to accuse theatre audiences of bear-baiting when his strenuous condemnation had brought them out in force. Witness the case of *Caligula*, which has excited none of the fury of the Brenton play and is yet more gratuitously violent. It is to Howard Brenton's credit that he can raise the ire among those who are paid to pass judgement. On the National's biggest stage, among audiences who are the most select (economically) in the country, he certainly cannot be aiming for anything less.

Artistic Merit

Apart from Howard Brenton himself, ex-directory and therefore unavailable for comment, the one who has come out of this in the most dignified way has been Sir Peter Hall, Artistic Director of the National. He was in New York for the opening of *Amadeus* when Sir Horace announced his intention. In a telegram, Sir Peter upheld the artistic merit of *The Romans in Britain* and added that it was but one of a whole spectrum of plays representing a full range of drama which a National theatre ought by its brief to reflect. There are those who would argue that a theatre whose policy is so eclectic tends to be bland rather than inclusive, but both seem valid as points of view.

Sir Thomas Hetherington, Director of Public Prosecutions, has now seen the play and decided not to bring an action against it according to the Obscene Publications Acts. The National doubtless will have their annual grant from the GLC renewed come January. And David Webb, actor and organiser of

the National Campaign for Reform of the Obscene Publication Acts, has tried to bring an action against Mrs Whitehouse for wasting police time. Sir Harold Hobson, in a letter to *The Times*, generously called it "a deeply serious play" with nothing as shocking in it as the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*. And meanwhile audiences flock to the National Theatre, their sensibilities visibly intact when they leave two and three quarter hours later.

Small beer, it may seem, for a play whose intention is to subvert the national consciousness by questioning the way we live now. Howard Brenton, if one of the most strident of British dramatists currently

writing, is also among the most prolific. There is nothing inconsistent with his work as a whole in *The Romans in Britain*. Indeed there is greater resonance here than in his previous plays, an expanded frame of reference as well. What is most important, he brings to his satire the force of an epic that has the power to attack Britain's presence in Northern Ireland as no other medium has been allowed to do and no other recent play has managed. The reviewers have no business asking the play to be banned, but the travesty is that they prefer to cite the mild palliative offered by the latest Alan Ayckbourn as evidence of British dramatic growth.

The Psalms of Thoth

R. J. CONDON

Comparison between the texts of different religions causes the sceptic to question their uniqueness or religious truth. Here R. J. Condon compares Hebrew psalms with the religious literature of ancient Egypt.

Similarities in style and content between the Hebrew Psalms and the religious literature of ancient Egypt have sometimes been noted by scholars. Occasionally the correspondences are close enough to suggest a direct borrowing by one from the other. Psalm 104 is usually cited; the parallel passages are found in a hymn to the sun from the reign of Amenhotep IV (Akhnaton). This king founded the cult of Aton the sun as the only god, and has been thought by some writers, notably Freud, to have inspired the Hebrew monotheism.

Psalm 104

20. Thou makest darkness, and it is night. . .
21. The young lions roar after their prey. . .
22. The sun ariseth. . .
23. Man goeth forth unto his work, and to his labour until the evening.
24. O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.

Hymn to the Sun

When thou settest in the western horizon, the land is in darkness like death. . .
 Every lion comes forth from his den. . .
 At daybreak, when thou arisest. . .
 Men awake, and stand upon their feet. . . All the world, they do their labour.
 How manifold are thy works! Thou hast made the earth according to thy desire.

Only five of the psalm's verses can be so matched. More striking, and less known, is the apparent con-

nection between Psalm 22 and two chapters from the Book of the Dead, 17 and 78. More than half the psalm's verses may be paralleled with material from one or other of these chapters, some of the likenesses being very marked indeed. Both Psalm 22 and chapter 78 begin with an appeal to an absent god:

Psalm 22

1. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
6. But I am a worm, and no man. . .
10. I was cast upon thee from the womb. . .
11. Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.
12. Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have compassed me around.
16. . . . the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.
- 17-18 . . . they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them. . .
19. . . . O my strength, haste thee to help me.
20. Deliver . . . my darling from the power of the dog.
21. Save me from the lion's mouth. . .
23. Ye that fear the Lord, praise him. . .
24. For he hath not . . . hid his face . . .
25. . . . I will pay my vows before them that fear him.
26. . . . they shall praise the Lord that seek him: your heart shall live for ever.
29. . . . none can keep alive his own soul.
30. A seed shall serve him. . .

Book of the Dead

Hail, Great God, come now to Tattu.

I am one of those worms. . .

The faults of Ani, against the lords of eternity, since he came forth from his mother's womb. Let not him that would do me harm draw nigh unto me, or injure me.

The bull which striketh terror shall not drive me back.

Deliver thou the scribe . . . from the Watchers who bear slaughtering knives, and who have cruel fingers, and who slay those who are in the following of Osiris.

Let not anyone come to see the divine one naked.

May I be strong on earth before Ra.

Deliver thou the scribe . . . from the god whose face is like unto that of a greyhound.

The double Lion-god . . . saith: "Get thee back. . ."

Hail, Lord, thou most mighty and terrible soul!

I shall see Osiris.

The company of the gods hold him in fear.

The words are spoken for him that loveth his lord.

He hath stablished my heart.

The night . . . of the slaughter of souls.

I had germinated, and had flourished.

The psalm's reference to the "power of the dog" makes no sense as Hebrew, but the Egyptian parallel goes on to explain it. The dog-faced is he "who watcheth at the Bight of the Lake of Fire, and who devoureth the bodies of the dead and swalloweth hearts". This is Am-mit, shown in representations of the Last Judgement crouched ready to devour the souls weighed in the balance and found wanting. As watch-dog at the mouth of Hell, he is evidently the prototype of the Greek Cerberus.

Most of the Psalms are ascribed to David. The Book of the Dead, with its many psalm-like passages, was thought by the Egyptians to have been written by Thoth, the scribe of the gods. At first sight the names have nothing in common, but when we learn that David is the English form of the Hebrew Dod, a connection readily suggests itself. Dod would appear to be Thoth with hardened consonants, a change which could easily happen in passing from one language to another.

Thoth was the word, mouth, tongue and pen of the gods. Tut, derived from Thoth, is Egyptian for speech, utterance and language. This becomes the Hebrew duth, translated "language" in Nehemiah 13: 24. Psalm 100 is called A Psalm of Thudh, translated "praise". Praise is of course a type of utterance, and Thudh is cognate with duth and Thoth.

Thoth was lord of Sessenu or Purgatory. Sessenu and Thoth appear together in the headings of Psalms 60 and 80: To the Chief Musician upon Shushan-eduth. The texts of both psalms suggest the cries of souls in Purgatory.

Other psalms are called Maschil. The Hebraist Gesenius renders this "didactic" or instructive. But the subject matter of some of them is anything but instructive. Psalm 88, in particular, is a cry from the depths: "I am counted with them that go down into the pit . . . I am shut up, and I cannot come forth". Maschil is the Egyptian Meska, another name

for Purgatory. Meschen, in Hebrew, is a state of wretchedness.

Many psalms are ascribed to Asaph, "collector" in Hebrew. Sephr, a related word, is Master or Mistress of Writings, a keeper of records. This connects with Sefekh, a wife or female double of Thoth, who was Mistress of Writings in Egypt. Thoth kept the records of the gods.

For a final indication of Egyptian influence on the Psalms, here is no. 109, verse 31: "For he (the Lord) shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those that condemn his soul". This again is meaningless as Hebrew. But in Egyptian judgement scenes it is Horus, Lord by name, who stands at the right of the balance in which the deceased's heart is weighed, to intercede for him who has to pass the 42 judges of the dead and finally face the great god Osiris.

PSALMS FOR THE EIGHTIES

Thatcher is my shepherd

I shall not want

She leadeth me beside still factories

She depriveth me of oil

She guideth me to the path of unemployment for the Party's sake

I fear no evil for thou art against me

She anointeth my wages with price increases

So that my expenses runneth over my income

Surely Poverty and Hard Living shall follow me and

I shall dwell in a mortgaged house for ever.

Five thousand years ago Moses said "Park your Camel, pick up your shovel and mount your ass and I will lead you to the Promised Land."

Five thousand years later Roosevelt said "Lay down your shevel, sit on your ass and smoke your Camel, this is the Promised Land."

Today Thatcher will take your shovel, sell your Camel, kick your ass and tell you there is no Promised Land.

I am glad I am British, I am glad I am free,

But I wish I were a dog and Thatcher a tree.

W. MILLER

NSS ON CND MARCH

Members of the National Secular Society took part in the largest march and rally concerning disarmament in London for many years. The rally on 26 October was organised by CND and gained 10,000 supporters and considerable publicity.

A silent march has been held by the association of lay employees in the Vatican in support of demands for better wages and working conditions.

The "Family" Synod

BARBARA SMOKER

The four-yearly Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops took place in Rome from 26 September to 25 October; the special theme for the 1980 Synod being family morality. What were its conclusions? Are they likely to have any far-reaching effects on the lives of the faithful throughout the world and on the problems of the world at large? The President of the National Secular Society sums up the synod for Fræthinker readers.

During October, Rome was full of top people—the visit of the British queen being rather less important than the month-long international synod of RC bishops, taking place at the same time.

Like Olympic athletes, Catholic bishops assemble every fourth year to determine the winners in various fields of contention. But even the winners in any particular confrontation win no more than the right to advise the curia, and thence the Pope—who, of course, may well refuse the advice offered. However, much of the day-to-day endeavour during the course of the synod was publicised across the continents, and thus must have some influence on the outlook and conduct of the Catholic laity throughout the world, whatever the curia and the Pope may or may not accept. Moreover, it has now, incredibly, become something of a two-way process: for instance, the hierarchical representatives of England, Cardinal Basil Hume and Archbishop Derek Worlock, took with them a comparatively enlightened, progressive approach to social issues that derived partly from the report ("The Easter People") of the Liverpool lay congress six months earlier, though suitably watered down. Even so, there was insufficient water with it for the taste of the majority of bishops (particularly the Italians), and the British contingent found itself in a small minority of progressives (comparatively speaking).

The main theme of this 1980 synod was "the family"—as though a top-level decision had been made to open Pandora's box. Does the choice of theme denote exemplary Christian courage? Or naivety? More likely, it was just unavoidable. The increasing tendency of the Catholic laity to make their own decisions has forced the hierarchy in many countries to face the facts of life, and the debate on sexual, family, and social issues could be kept out of the central arena no longer, especially as the globe-trotting pontiff has been carrying his reactionary message beyond the safe docility of Poland and southern Ireland to such rebellious areas as the USA and western Germany, with future plans that include a crusade to Britain in 1982. The widespread debate within the Church on such issues as contraception, divorce, and even abortion and mar-

ried priests had reached such a ferment that the lid of Pandora's box could no longer restrain them.

As the bubbles burst in the synod, the bishops faced the difficult task of preserving the united front of a monolithic church, at the end of the day. How far they were successful in this remains to be seen. But it looks as though the awkward progressives were put safely in their place all right. There were all sorts of bishops in Rome—but they all found that they had to do as Rome does.

In the USA, Britain, Holland and several other European countries, the social authority of the Church has been eroded since 1968 when Pope Paul VI, in the disastrous encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirmed the ban on artificial birth control. Millions of Catholic women were already on the Pill (assuming that it was about to be permitted) and most of them remained on it in spite of the Pope. Anxious to restore ecclesiastical authority, and possibly also genuinely concerned for the welfare of their flocks, the bishops of those countries made speeches in the opening days of the synod that cried out for help in this crisis, but they went largely unheeded by the reactionary majority in the synod; and, as the month drew towards its close, the progressives had to hold their tongues.

Although one of them, the Canadian Cardinal G. Emmet Carter, who had expressed dissatisfaction with the synod's purely consultative status and lack of legislative powers, was finally elected to the 15-man council which, backed by a permanent secretariat, represents the synod until its next session, in 1983, he cannot expect to achieve much.

One of the influential diehards that he will be up against is the Italian Cardinal Pericle Felici, a leading member of the Church's central administration, who came out strongly during the synod against new approaches to sexual issues.

Compulsory Heroism

On the face of it, Felici has the Pope on his side—though the Catholic press in this country are at pains to explain that the Pope differs fundamentally from Felici in motivation, if not in actual conclusions. Whereas Felici is juridically authoritarian, the Pope, they say, is a compassionate idealist, who sees marriage as a heroic vocation. The more progressive bishops, however, would like him to realise that heroism cannot be made compulsory. And several of them had survey findings in their briefcases to prove it.

Even the *Catholic Herald* admitted that the Pope's speech in which he admonished men not to commit

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AN OCCASIONAL COLUMN

JOTTINGS

WILLIAM McILROY

was, in the words of the *Church Times*, "even Dr James Hemming, president of the British Humanist Association". He was there to uphold the broader aspects of moral education and comparative religion, a BHA spokesman explained with customary expansiveness.

My first encounter with the Religious Education Council took place in 1976 when Harry Stopes-Roe, then chairman of the BHA Education Committee, sought to persuade me that much was to be gained by humanist participation in the Council's work. I agreed that there was much to be gained, but not by humanists, parents or pupils, and put forward some reasons why the movement should not become involved with the REC.

First, humanists in such an alliance would be overwhelmingly voted down on any matter of real importance. Their presence would be exploited by religious elements, anxious to give the organisation an appearance of breadth and agreement about the advantages of religious education.

Secondly, humanist participation in a Council dedicated to "the work of improving RE in schools and colleges" would be resented by rank-and-file humanists, particularly teachers, and misunderstood by the general public.

Thirdly, our personnel and resources would be more effectively used in a campaign against RE, instead of tinkering with it, and against denominational schools.

Dr Stopes-Roe soon realised that I was unlikely ever to share his enthusiasm about the benefits to be gained through working with the Religious Education Council, but hoped that I would not "rock the boat" by publishing nasty comments. Secularist objections to the scheme were pooh-poohed, and the BHA, with the trusting simplicity of Mrs Jemima Puddle-Duck, went into the Religious Education Council.

Rumour now has it that the education mandarins at 13 Prince of Wales Terrace are dismayed at the hard line taken by the Religious Education Council in its memorandum. They apparently believed that their outnumbered, outwitted representatives could exercise a profound influence on a body of Christians, Jews and Muslims whose *raison d'être* is the promotion of their respective religious faiths. Even the memorandum was evidently written by Howard H. W. Marratt, a gentleman of the cloth grown long in the tooth as a defender of Christian privilege in the education system.

The REC memorandum was submitted "on behalf of its 40 National Member Organisations". Religious members of the Council who really believe that their British Humanist Association colleagues fully represent the views of more than a handful of humanists — either inside or outside of the BHA — are, like school religion itself, well and truly up the creek.

Almost 25 per cent of comprehensive schools are breaking the law by not providing religious education; 22 per cent of first school teachers and 33 per cent of middle school teachers receive no religious education training; religious education in secondary schools after third year is a comparative rarity. These joyful tidings are contained in a memorandum that was recently submitted by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales to Lady Young, Minister of State for Education.

The Council's report has not been seriously questioned. It confirms what has long been suspected by supporters, and hoped by opponents of the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act. One religious weekly declared editorially that the REC "has provided sober and cogent evidence that the 1944 Act is in shreds". It went on to say that the statutory provision of religious education in that legislation is now almost as often ignored as fulfilled.

Of course we cannot expect the churches and their pressure groups to sit back and let captive classroom audiences slip away from them. The conservative Roman Catholic bishops, leaders of the most religiously indoctrinated Christian and criminally active section of the population, have thrown their weight behind the campaign for more school religion. The "liberal" Religious Education Council has called on the Government to remind local education authorities of their statutory obligation on the question of school religion over the full age range of pupils. School governors should be reminded of their powers, whilst head teachers and inspectors should be made aware of their importance in securing "adequate provision" for RE. (There is no recommendation that parents and teachers should be reminded of their legal rights in the matter.)

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales was formed in 1973. Acting on the precept that it is better to hang together than to hang separately, it brought under its aegis a mixed bunch of Christians, Jews and Muslims who were concerned about the future of religious education. Other groups became involved in this ecumenical mishmash, and no doubt it was the composition of the Council that inspired a *Catholic Herald* headline: "Catholics, Jews and Humanists Tell Government to Stop the Rot".

No, don't rub your eyes in disbelief—the British Humanist Association is a member of the Religious Education Council, and among those on the delegation that submitted the memorandum to Lady Young

ATHEIST FOR PM?

Michael Foot, who was described by Brian Sedgemoor at the National Secular Annual Dinner as "a beacon of rationalism", has become leader of the Labour Party. Barbara Smoker, President of the NSS, sent a letter of congratulations to Michael Foot. The Warwickshire Humanist Society also sent their congratulations and said "local humanists of all political parties (and none) will, we know, join with us in wishing you well in your new and exacting job".

There may have been previous Prime Ministers with little or no religion, but there has never been one to acknowledge his atheism. Perhaps the closest to this position was Sir Winston Churchill, described by his biographer, Martin Gilbert, as a "rationalist". Churchill said: "All religion is a delicious narcotic, but it saps our strength and checks our growth."

DESEGREGATION FOR LONDON?

Segregation by religion has been opposed by the London Labour Party. The proposal comes in a booklet called *A Socialist Policy for the GLC* in which part of the section on education says that "no child should be segregated by virtue of his or her sex, religion, ethnic or socio-economic status". The logical consequence could be the eventual abolition of voluntary aided denominational schools.

The booklet sets out the policy which is accepted by all Labour-adopted candidates for the policies for next year's Greater London Council elections. There is a chance that the proposal may be adopted by the Inner London Education Authority, which is controlled by a Labour majority. The Westminster Diocesan Schools Committee, which has hitherto supported the ILEA, are considering joining the demand for return of education to the different London boroughs as a result of the manifesto. There has been considerable controversy about the ILEA's educational effectiveness and some political pressure (especially from Conservatives) to break up the ILEA.

Press comment has interpreted the Labour manifesto as meaning that pupils from Roman Catholic and Protestant Schools must be educated together. But Jo Mostyn, chairman of the group that drafted the section on education, said "I don't think anyone would regard the abolition of denominational schools as a practical proposition." She said that opportunities for segregated Catholic school children "should be as good as those in other schools".

The idea of religious schools for Muslims and Sikh children is now gaining force. The Church of England, following its takeover of Twyford school in Ealing, is planning to purchase two schools, one in Solihull and one in Taunton. Never has there been

NEWS

a more important time to open a public debate on the place in our society of schools segregated by religion and supported by the state. The 1944 Education Act was a compromise with church interests which should not be seen as standing for all time. Representatives of church schools sometimes claim that they wish to offer a service to the whole community and not to indoctrinate. Their claim would be more likely to be believed if they abandoned the right to select pupils by giving preference to those of particular religious beliefs. Another way in which changes could be made is to consider, at a time of vast government costs, whether the churches should pay a higher percentage of the capital costs of their schools.

Clerics are prone to talk about "ecumenism". When will they begin to abandon sectarianism at the grass roots educational level?

CHANGE FOR ABORTION LAW?

Alteration in legislation may be required to prevent a reduction in the number of abortions as a result of an Appeal Court ruling that nurses should not help with non-surgical abortions. About 7,000 of the 142,000 abortions at present carried out annually are performed by induction after pumping a chemical fluid, prostaglandin, into the womb. The process takes 18 to 36 hours and the legal arguments have related to the extent to which nurses should perform part of the operation. The case was brought by the Royal College of Nursing to establish their exact legal position, rather than as part of a campaign against abortion.

The British Medical Association said that the ruling would have a serious effect on the availability of abortions. The Department of Health and Social Security have been given leave to appeal to the House of Lords. Although Lord Denning said in his judgment that he could understand that many nurses disliked having anything to do with abortions, this was not relevant to the decision. A loophole in the 1967 Abortion Act allowed the High Court Judge to rule that an abortion was not legal unless a doctor administered the prostaglandin throughout the treatment.

Catholic nurses have acclaimed the decision as "a very welcome move". The *Catholic Herald* pointed out that the judgment merely identified an anomaly in the law and was not a "pro-life" victory: "it only needs one zealous pro-abortion MP to be successful in the forthcoming private members' ballot

AND NOTES

for the relevant amendment to be wafted through the House and on to the statute book." Freethinkers will hope that this prediction is accurate, but abortion has now become so controversial an issue and such a rallying cry for Catholic pressure groups, that it might take more than "wafting" to accomplish even a minor amendment.

BOOKS FOR BURNING?

Customs and Excise Officers have raided a consignment of books travelling from America to a London bookshop. The books included works by Jean Genet, William Burroughs and Lawrence Durrell — all writers with a high reputation in literary circles. Titles seized included *The Black Book* by Lawrence Durrell, *The Thief's Journal* by Jean Genet, *The Ginger Man* by J. P. Donleavy and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*.

The bookshop for whom the books were destined, Words and Music in Charing Cross Road, has been told that the confiscation could be challenged in the courts, but the companies involved have decided not to contest. As a result the books will be destroyed. It is shocking to confiscate books available in many public libraries, and book burning by the Customs is legalised theft and barbaric vandalism.

LORDS FOR EVER?

The House of Lords, according to the Church of England, which is well-represented in the upper chamber, "performs a valuable constitutional function". This view was set out in a letter to Warwickshire Humanist Group member, Roy Saich, who, following the threat at the latest Labour Party Conference to abolish the House of Lords, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, asking what his, and the Church of England's views were.

A reply was received from Michael Kinchin-Smith, lay assistant to the Archbishop, who wrote: "The Church of England's view is that the House of Lords performs a valuable constitutional function, particularly as a revising chamber. A strong case can, however, be made for its composition to be reformed. If this comes about, I think the Church will press that the bishops should continue to have a place in the second chamber. There are many occasions when it is important that the view of the churches should be expressed in Parliament. As you know, bishops in the House of Lords do not retain

their seats for life, but have to vacate them on retirement".

FRATERNITY FOR HUMANISTS

The guest speaker at the Brighton and Hove Annual Dinner on 15 November was Tom Evans, well-known as an expert on Shaw and a lecturer on literature and ideas. Mr Evans referred to the words Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Liberty, he said, is as important as ever. He instanced the utterances of certain Chief Constables, who have betrayed the trust placed in them by the public, and the problem of Northern Ireland, which successive governments have done little to solve. The danger of a governess-like society was seen from the unholy trinity of "Mrs Whitehouse, Mrs Woodhouse and Mrs Thatchhouse".

Turning to Equality, Tom Evans complained of the perpetuation of an absurd pyramid of honours culminating in the royal family, and said he looked forward (figuratively, anyway) to Paine's hope for "the strangling of the last king in the entrails of the last priest". The gap between rich and poor had not been narrowed, even by Labour governments, and he commended the ideas of equality propounded by R. H. Tawney, the centenary of whose birth is about to be commemorated.

He substituted Humanism for Fraternity and described the humanist movement as a "broad church". We live in an age when not only do old religions cling to authority but new ones spring up like mushrooms. In conclusion, he affirmed his belief in the power of reason, intelligence, wit and sympathy as forces for humanity.

CRITICISM FOR POPE

The Pope's visit to Germany has shown that his rapturously received tourist trips are becoming less popular. Catholic bishops had stirred controversy in Germany, whose population is almost half Catholic, by a pastoral letter criticising the economic policy of Chancellor Schmidt's Government just before a general election. Further controversy preceded the Pope's arrival with the publication of a six-point challenge to the Pope's theology and teaching on such issues as birth control or disarmament from prominent German Christians including Hans Kung, the theologian whose right to teach has been withdrawn by the Church.

An opinion poll before the visit showed that most Germans "could not care less" about the visit. There has been criticism in the press of the £4 million expenditure on the Pope's visit.

National Secular Society membership only £1. Details from 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

BOOKS

SETTING THE WORLD ON FIRE by Angus Wilson.
Secker and Warburg, £6.50

Just behind Westminster Abbey, as everyone knows, is Tothill House, the only great house in London to remain, with its marvellous gardens and park, in private hands. It was built by Pratt, master of order and regularity, but the Great Hall was the first work of the baroque architect and playwright, Vanbrugh. It's the Mossons who own it all now, of course—a family with an immense fortune based on the West India trade and then on banking, who inherited through the female line at the end of the eighteenth century. . .

It's a necessary, and mysteriously persuasive, invention of Angus Wilson's: for the novel that spreads its own remarkable house and gardens on that basis is deeply concerned with invention itself—that is, with the imagination and its works. There are two boys, Mossons, whose father was killed in the war, and whose mother, her life helplessly a matter of the heart, is accepted at Tothill House only with elegant reservations. The older boy, Piers, has a gift that will make him in time one of the great theatrical directors of his day: the younger, Tom, is a mathematician, attracted to logic and intellectual tidiness, who will become a lawyer of outstanding promise. Taken into the world of the great house, they recognise the difference of their natures in terms drawn from the house itself: Piers is Van, Tom is Pratt. The house is a fusion of them both, seen at its best in the Library, on which both architects had worked, and in which "order cradled aberration, and baroque imposed regularity". The first half of the novel, the whole of which covers the years between 1948 and 1969, is concerned with Piers' ambition to produce in the Great Hall an opera by Lully: *Phaethon*. Well, it must be *Phaethon*; for scenes from that story are painted on the ceiling of the Great Hall itself. And Piers has just produced, successfully, for his school (Westminster, round the corner), Shakespeare's *Richard II*—Shakespeare's *Phaethon*, indeed, which makes exactly that reference to Richard: "glist'ring Phaethon". In the theatre, says his uncle's rich noisy Italian mistress, Piers would "set the world on fire". That, of course, is what *Phaethon* almost did: and Piers has an idea for introducing conflict into the opera—there will be the conventional picture of *Phaethon*, as the creature damned for his ambition, and under that quite another view of him, as the hero, "the innovating artist who dares". All these ideas, drawing on the same imagery of fire, which might represent superb excitement or appalling destruction, exist alongside the enormous political unease of our time: the Earth being indeed close to consumption by fire: and the words that

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might be used of an artist taking imaginative risks being possibly the words of a terrorist claiming the right to destroy and to embrace chaos. Our century has laid bare the essential human dilemma: that the thrilling aspects of our nature, responsible for human glory, seem also to be the starting point for what's fanatical and murderous in us.

I've made it sound stiff with symbolism, when the fact is that it's most beautifully flexible with symbolism. This is never anything but a novel. Tom's gift for order is based on such a dread of the reverse that he can't walk across Waterloo Bridge without a terrible apprehension of the space below him and the possibility of a fall. But he doesn't cease to be an interesting human being called Tom Mosson. The general vertigo and the particular vertigo are perfectly married. (Actually, it strikes me that what Angus Wilson does so well is to bring out that sense in which all of us have general existences, and are the creatures of general as well as particular ideas and experiences.) The novel is very precisely concerned with the fear that shapelessness may take over, and at the climax the rawest melodrama interrupts the most controlled drama. But all these generalities, which are mine and not Angus Wilson's, spring out of a perfectly gripping story: a large part of which is drama simply of a domestic kind. It's related, as everything is, to the general theme. But it's a matter of explosions of quarrelling among the Mossons themselves. I don't know anyone who writes better about those moments when every kind of domestic floor collapses beneath us: emotions that have been gathering force in secret under the surfaces of lives suddenly—and often at serene moments—demand to be expressed. There's a scene in *Setting the World on Fire* when Piers contrives that his great-grandfather should speak freely, and the old man does so, in a fashion that causes his family enormous embarrassment. And that makes Piers scornful. "A tomb had opened and the skeleton had spoken its mind. And all they could hear were senile ramblings. And they were red in the face as though a parrot cage had been uncovered and the parrot had said 'Fuck!'"

Oh, excellent Angus Wilson! What he does, I believe, is to give us access, within the shapeliness of his novel, to a great tangle of modern nervousnesses, some of them potentially terminal tics: and to a much neglected area of experience, the interpenetration of the private with the public life. If Angus Wilson has made an art out of his feeling for human irritabilities, it has to be said that he makes an art also of the constant human struggle to be

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decent and kindly. And the way to those ends might well be the way of understanding: as a novelist provides it, in flashes of perception (leapings of serviceable fire) related to this character or that. When, in *Setting the World on Fire*, Piers says: "Oh, people! All their bloody little ways!", Tom replies: "It's private emotion that makes the whole thing so insecure, or so it seems to me." And in the general context of the novel, it's an exchange a reader could feed on, for months.

In the end you can only say that a novel is alive, if it nourishes the reader's own attempt to understand what's happening, or it's dead. Angus Wilson's new novel is marvellously alive.

EDWARD BLISHEN

HUMANIST ETHICS—Dialogue on Basics, Edited by Morris B. Storer. Prometheus Books, New York, Paper \$9.95, Cloth \$17.95.

Why debate humanist ethics? The twenty professors represented here (mostly American) give various reasons. We are ethical animals, and need to be able to say of others and of ourselves that what we are up to is or is not morally good. We need a vision about society. There are new and expanding areas of choice where moral guidance is lacking. We need to be taught *how* to think and choose (but not *what* to think and choose). We are wanting in moral wisdom, and require a science of the good life. There is pressing need to develop and enrich the conceptual content of the humanistic framework. Without a system of ethics the whole idea of humanism is uninformative and redundant. Such a system is also needed to demonstrate how mistaken are the unrealistic expectations aroused by the present concentration on human rights to the neglect of human duties. It will help us discover what excellences in persons are required to bring about a world where people can enjoy life together and bring their powers to fullest realisation, and to learn what excellences in persons would be made possible by such a world.

Is there any hope of consensus on the content of humanist ethics? It seems unlikely, though the professors do not fully address themselves to this question. They are not concerned to present any system of detailed rules, still less a practical guide to decision-taking. Instead the emphasis is on theory. Here, as one might expect, there is widespread disagreement. Nor do the disagreements produce much illumination. Are ethical principles absolute or subjective? Somewhere in between says Professor

Kurtz, plumping for what he calls objectivist relativism. Can ought follow from is (the naturalistic fallacy)? Yes, says Professor Storer. The naturalistic fallacy is a "bugaboo". Ought is a kind of owing, and moral debt is every bit as factual as market debt. It is required of me and everyone else as the cost of a good community in which all have an equal stake. What is the moral debt of a person who lives in a bad community, in which he has no stake? Professor Storer does not tell us.

None of the professors deal with the fundamental problem of ethics, namely *the scope of ethical concern*. For whom should I have consideration? I must decide at each moment what to do. I wish to be good, and therefore to decide as I ought. I wish to guide my children to do the same. For this I need advice. We cannot puzzle everything out for ourselves. If we try, we make avoidable mistakes. They are avoidable because they have been made before. Men and women learn by errors, but it is less painful if they are the errors of other people.

So I wish to be able to consult a manual of ethical principles. Being a humanist, I wish the principles to constitute humanist ethics. There is no such manual; but perhaps the professors thought they were clearing the ground for the preparation of one. If so they have failed. They have not even addressed the first question. We cannot construct a system of humanist ethics without deciding the scope of our concern. The fundamental position is not given but chosen. Here are some of the questions involved in identifying it:—

Does our concern extend to the whole human race equally, or do we prefer (a) ourselves, (b) ourselves and our nearest and dearest, (c) ourselves and our fellow-countrymen, (d) ourselves and others of our class?

Does our concern extend to the human race of the distant future? Or do we dismiss them saying "What has posterity ever done for me?" At what point do we treat people as joining the human race? At conception, at birth, or somewhere in between — and if so where?

Do we accept that people should be free to reproduce at will, even though the planet becomes overcrowded and our own race becomes more and more outnumbered?

Do we adopt "species chauvinism" or agree that other species also have the right to flourish? If the latter, do we accord all species equal consideration? If not, which do we favour and why?

These are difficult questions, but the professors do not examine them. Where they are mentioned at all it is incidentally, with positions being implied but not justified. On animals, for instance, we are given the following. Talk of animal rights is nonsense (Hocult). Not to assign rights to animals is "an

unfortunate anthropocentrism to which humanists are too easily prone" (Hannay). "A climate which is not congenial to disease-carrying germs is 'good' for human beings; it is clearly not 'good' for the germs . . . Value consists of whatever is valuable to human beings" (Tarkunde). "Humanist morality is, or should be, the 'institution' of concern for the suffering of all beings that suffer, which of course includes other than human beings" (Hannay once more). "We have here a genuine puzzle since a moral case can be made both for treating 'animals' as 'animals' and for treating some 'animals' at least as moral agents" (Radest).

A paradox of this book is that while no identifiable (and therefore teachable) doctrine emerges, the professors are unanimous in insisting that humanist ethics must be taught. This is what they say. Having deprived mankind of religious morality, humanists' duty is to offer a substitute morality of their own. Some individuals lead the lives of crippled moral dwarfs: we must develop moral growth in them. There is need to root within the psychological makeup of each individual a set of moral dispositions and virtues. It is vital that a set of *prima facie* ethical principles be psychologically grounded in human motivation — in feeling as well as thought — by programmes of moral education. It is a dangerous policy to trust social relations and conduct to the intelligence of individuals operating on their own resources and judgments. In so critical an art guidance is vital. Moral failure is very largely a failure of knowledge, a result of our inadequacy as moral knowers.

Professor James R. Simpson rightly adds that the rock-bottom concern of morality is to foster a philosophy in which people assist others because they *want* to, not because they are forced to. Professor Kirkendall describes how he did this in a school situation involving pupils from many cultures. He did not want to divide them into cultural groups. He wanted "an umbrella covering them all as human beings". The answer was to make the pupils genuine and effective partners in setting the ethical climate of their school. Excellent moves, comments Professor Bahm. He adds: "How they can be extended to big government, big business, rampant nationalism, and traditional religions has not been made clear".

It is one of many things not made clear in this interesting, yet superficial and disappointing collection.

Footnote—The editor expresses the hope that this book, which runs to over 300 pages, will generate a consensus on humanist ethics. Yet it lacks an essential tool for its use as a sourcebook, an index. This omission virtually amounts to a confession of essential frivolity.

FRANCIS BENNION

THE APARTHEID WAR MACHINE. Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 8. International Defence and Aid Fund, 104 Newgate Street, London EC1. 50p

This pamphlet describes and analyses the armed forces of South Africa, which is now among the world's most militarised states. The Fact Paper shows how the South African Defence Force is being trained into a formidable war machine and is "repressing the political aspirations of the people and attacking neighbouring states".

ATTACKS ON GAY PEOPLE. A Report of the Commission on Discrimination of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality by Julian Meldrum. £1.20 from BM-CHE, London WC1V 6XX

A devastating, lucid and detailed analysis of attacks on homosexuals. It gives the lie to those who claim that now the law has been changed all is well and gay people would be better to keep quiet and not "flaunt themselves and their cause in public".

THEATRE

THE CRUCIBLE by Arthur Miller. Cottesloe, National Theatre

Arthur Miller's historical reconstruction of the Salem witchhunt of 1692 is generally taken to be a political allegory of the McCarthy period in America when he himself was called before Congress to "name names". One need look no further than Chapman Pincher's recent promise to divulge the names of some sixty Communist MPs on the Labour left to justify the timeliness of the National's revival. But the play explores many of Miller's themes, and Bill Bryden's production brings them out admirably.

It is tempting as humanists to focus attention on the strong anti-Puritan line in the play. The citizens of Salem are seized by a spiritual fanaticism so fierce they are ready to pounce on the most unwitting of victims on the thinnest of pretexts. There is religious hypocrisy in the minister's unconscious efforts to drive lust from his body by seeing the objects of his covert desires burnt as witches. There is the flagrant miscarriage of justice in the confusion of church and state and judges wreak havoc in God's name. There is even an onslaught on free speech as a woman is found guilty of witchcraft because she is taken up with reading. It was indeed a black period, but not for the satanic reasons set forth by the characters.

The company evoke the troubled atmosphere with all the verve and ferocity of the events themselves, taking hold within minutes of the opening scene. As the Reverend Samuel Parris, Dave Hill personifies the fear behind superstition that renders him help-

less and sweeps through the community unchecked. Caroline Embling brings out all the venom of Puritan womanhood in her portrayal of a tossed-aside slattern. The pivotal performance of James Grant as Reverend Hale shows precisely how feckless leaders can be with the bit between their teeth. "I am not a judge," he insists, all the time knowing his testimony is vital to the murder of innocents.

At the centre of the play, the Proctors represent Mr Miller's protagonists. John Proctor is not blameless in the turmoil. Events compel him to adopt a position of strength where before he was weak, largely indifferent to matters of broad social concern. He betrays his wife initially and lives to regret it, an unheroic man in a hero's role. His wife wills him on through the embodiment of straightforward devotion. Mark McManus and Dinah Stabb are tremendously human in these parts, and their humanity makes all the difference in our grasping of Miller's true humanist meaning in this play. Here as elsewhere he has raised the essential question of where personal conscience begins and social commitment takes over.

The Crucible might be seen to have a religious denouement for those who believe that the saving of personal souls is paramount. Proctor indeed meets his fate with a clear conscience. But that is not everything. In this play, as in none other he has written, Arthur Miller shows that while we are responsible for ourselves alone, we are responsible toward the whole of humanity.

JAMES MacDONALD

LETTERS

EDUCATION AND THEORY

T. F. Evans ('Freethinker', October) reviews my book "Tamarisk Tree 2" which gives some account of my work in Beacon Hill School, alongside James Hemming's book in which he stresses the importance of educating the right hemisphere of the brain. Your reviewer indicates that I am "not so directly concerned with theory as is James Hemming", and adds that I was dealing only with a limited number of fee paying children. The second observation appears to me irrelevant, for if any method or experiment has any merit, it is not necessary to limit it. It could equally well be applied free of charge to a larger number.

As to theory, in point of fact I dislike theories of education. It seems that nowadays we must always find some scientific reason or discovery to dictate any course of action.

Given an individual child we do not know which side of his or her brain is likely to develop most: any theory might lead us to mis-educate him or her.

Clearly it is advisable that both sides of the brain receive opportunity for development. The job of the educator, in my view, is to watch children as individuals, without plans or theories for their future destiny, and then to help them towards the goals to which their own interests and attitudes lead them, provided that these are not anti-social to excess.

DORA RUSSELL

CELIBACY DEFENDED

May I be allowed to answer my critics in two recent issues? To start with, I find it amusing that one gentleman immediately identifies a public advocacy of celibacy as "religious irrationalism"—so far as I am aware, no existing religious philosophy is unconditionally opposed to reproductive coitus, added to which the said critic is probably unaware of the fact that avowed atheists such as Schopenhauer, Hardy and Baudelaire have all condemned procreation. More specifically, Schopenhauer says that a person determined by reason rather than lust would have "so much pity for the coming generation as to wish to spare it the burden of existence. . . ." Hardy says that birth is "an ordeal of degrading compulsion. . . ." Baudelaire describes pregnancy as the "disease of a spider", and refers to reproduction as a "vice" of love.

It may also be worth mentioning that a book just published in America by a lady doctor ("The New Celibacy") suggests that many folk are spontaneously attracted to either short-term or permanent celibacy. This book is the result of interviews with people in all walks of life and is not (so far as I am aware) based on a "religious" justification of chastity.

If "lovers" can be satisfied—as suggested—by social and intellectual intercourse, can there not be occasions when the stale, predictable old "genital sneeze" (orgasm) is superfluous? On the other hand—how is the bedwrestling of this couple related to the welfare of the rest of humanity? Their self-indulgence temporarily "lifts" them above the pain and heartache of global human existence—subsequently, they may wax lyrical about the experience, as if the epilepsy of the loins enables one to throw off all the vulnerability of human life and feel (briefly) godlike. Yet one is tempted to quote Schopenhauer: ". . . we see in the midst of tumult the glances of two lovers meet longingly! yet why so secretly, nervously and furtively? Because these lovers are the traitors who secretly strive to perpetuate the whole toil and trouble that would otherwise rapidly come to an end."

Of course, it may be objected that a figure like Schopenhauer is hardly representative of "mainstream" atheistic thought—also, that the availability of contraceptive facilities means one can refrain from procreation without the need for celibacy. If a man or woman using contraception to avoid offspring are capable of asking themselves "Why not go the whole hog and give up sex altogether?" they have made the transition from "socially acceptable drinking" to a teetotal state (if I may be permitted such an analogy).

Existing religious creeds do not criticise reproductive orgasm. Indeed Christians talk of the sanctity of marriage and priesthood, forgetting that Christ was a celibate and many Church Fathers condemned family life as an encumbrance.

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

(The 'Family' Synod)

adultery with their own wives "made him seem the ultimate Polish joke"; but they contrived to interpret it as meaning that a wife remains a person, not a possession or a mere sex object. If this was indeed what the Pope meant, we would all agree with him—but it is not what he said. In fact, this interpretation would entail the implication that lovers (who traditionally "commit adultery") do not treat one another as persons, and even the Pope can hardly believe that. So "the ultimate Polish joke"

it remains.

As secularists, we rejoice at this sort of papal fallibility, and, more seriously, look hopefully for episcopal rifts that will splinter the magisterium of this most resilient of religions. That, however, is a pipedream. The synod was too wily to reveal in full the 43 final propositions that it sent to the Pope. Like other totalitarian regimes, the Catholic Church can contain dissident views in high places, provided the dissidence is kept behind closed doors and the dissidents agree to toe the party line in public.

The *Catholic Herald's* columnist, Desmond O'Grady, made this clear in his concluding synodal report:

The synod did issue a rather bland eight-page final message which encouraged families to pursue Christian ideals and protested against governments and international organisations allegedly constricting families to use contraception, sterilisation, abortion and euthanasia to solve social and economic problems.

The bishops reaffirmed *Humanae Vitae*, but what was not clear was whether, and in what terms, they recommended fuller study of the whole sexuality issue in the 43 final propositions they sent to the Pope.

And the final paragraph of this particular Catholic report does not hide the writer's feeling of dejection that, as usual, the conservatives played it their way:

By their nature, synods tend to be unsatisfactory. But, because of the expectations roused in the opening phases, this was more unsatisfactory than most. A month was not sufficient to tackle the issues which will remain a challenge both for the Pope and for the participants, who, on return home, have to somehow give a comprehensible account of what they achieved this October in Rome.

What achievement, however, would be worthwhile, short of a complete re-write of *Humanae Vitae*? And it looks as though that could be achieved only over the dead bodies of many a living bishop — including the Bishop of Rome, John Paul II, who looks likely to live to a ripe old age.

OBITUARY

MR. ALEX DAVIS

Mr Alex Davis, President of the Leicester Secular Society, died earlier in the year at the age of 73. He had been President of the Leicester Secular Society for almost a decade and guided the affairs of the society with great care and attention.

The new President of the society, Peter Miller, has commented: "My personal friendship with Alex Davis goes back to my first contact with the Leicester Secular Society, which was in 1961. I well

recall Mr Davis at this time, then and to the end as a typical forthright secularist, always ready to talk, discuss, debate and argue on subjects from a wide viewpoint. I remember discussing with him matters political, ethical, religious, historical, philosophical and social. He was a man of great breadth and learning, and his pleasures were essentially of the contemplative and studious type."

"He was for me a typical secularist, devoted to the process of debate, rational argument, and discussion. He was always ready to listen to the other person's point of view. His virtues are not fashionable in these intolerant days. Perhaps that makes the work of the Leicester Secular Society, to which Mr Davis made such a significant contribution, all the more important."

OTTO WOLFGANG

Otto Wolfgang, who worked throughout his life for freethought and published articles in *The Freethinker* and elsewhere, died recently, aged 82. He was born in Vienna of a Jewish family, but turned his back on religion of any kind long before the holocaust. Brutally separated from his 15-year-old son, he managed to emigrate to England and so escape the years of Nazi persecution.

He experienced the evil of aggressive intolerance in a personal way from racial ideology. In innumerable writings he exposed the dangers of intolerance, especially that derived from all religious denominations. Right up to his death he stood against all persecution and supported humanism and tolerance.

Freethinker Fund

We thank the following for their kind donations to the Freethinker Fund: A. Bayford, £1; J. H. Budd, £2; L. Burnett, £1; Mr & Mrs Clowes, £5; A. Foster, £2; B. M. Goodale, £2; S. Halley, £3; D. Harper, £6.50; F. C. Jennings, £2; A. Joiner, £1; B. Martin, £1; C. G. Newton, £3; J. V. Ruffell, £1; B. Whiting, £1; V. Wilson, £2.

Total for the period 22/10/80 to 20/11/80: £33.50.

Despite an increase in postal charges next January, we have decided to hold the cost of a postal subscription to *The Freethinker* at £3 for a year and £1.75 for six months. This decision is partly because we hope to increase the number of subscribers during the centenary year. Also our policy is to encourage postal subscriptions, which is administratively more convenient and reliable than distribution via newsagents. In view of the decision not to increase charges, we should like to emphasise that donations to the Freethinker Fund are vital to the Freethinker's existence at a time of continual rise in costs.

Reagan, Religion and the Moral Majority

BARRY DUKE

"The real meaning of the First Amendment is that State may not invade Church, but Church may pervasively influence State." That pronouncement by Ronald Reagan in the run-up to the American Presidential election sent a chill up many a freethinker's spine in the USA, for it suggested that a Reagan victory could pose a threat to the separation of Church and State as mandated in the First Amendment to the Constitution and interpreted by the Supreme Court of America.

Whether or not this threat will materialise remains to be seen; but one thing remains clear: the vast number of evangelical Christians who threw their collective weight behind the Reagan campaign have stated, in no uncertain terms, that having supported Reagan they will now expect him to deliver the many promises he made concerning legislation demanded by the likes of Moral Majority and Christian Voice.

Fr Charles Fiore, for example, has warned that the National Pro-Life Political Action Committee would be monitoring Reagan's performance carefully. (Earlier this year NPLPAC organised Right to Lifers for Reagan, but disbanded it after Reagan nominated George Bush as his vice-presidential running mate. They considered Bush to be insufficiently anti-abortion. However, just before the election NPLPAC reiterated its support for Reagan because of his consistent stand against abortion.)

The abortion issue is one of the less bizarre in the recent campaign. One of the many shrill evangelists who supported Reagan stated that the time had come for Christians "to come out of the closet" and demand a government representative of American Christian values as laid out in a variety of leaflets published at a cost of millions, and spelled out in messages to millions of people via radio and television.

One leaflet asked: "Is humanism molesting your child?" and urged parents to "examine your child's library for immoral anti-family and anti-American content." Another stated "Your Five Duties as a Christian Citizen are as Follows: Pray, Register, Become Informed, Help Elect Godly People, and Vote."

The loose coalition of conservatives, Catholic pro-family groups, evangelical Christians and others opposing abortion, homosexuality, gun control, school prayer bans, bussing for school integration, sex education programmes and the Equal Rights Amendments revealed, as never before, what a frighteningly ugly underbelly American society has. The hatred and intolerance and simplistic politics of evangelical leaders like Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell even scared Christian observers this side of the Atlantic.

Writing in the *Church Times* recently of her experience with an American "born-again" Christian, Margaret Duggan, an Anglican, commented:

"It was my first experience of a head-on collision with this brand of American Evangelicalism, and it was painfully like it used to be meeting an aggressively Irish Roman Catholic in pre-Vatican Council days. There was the same sharp division of the world into good Christians and bad; the same aggression; the same monopoly of God as the immediate answerer of prayers to overcome the minor difficulties of life like imminent parking tickets or lost purses. There was the same disregard for good manners, or sensitivity to other people's feelings and beliefs; the same arrogance of certitude. . .

"It seems to me that dogmatism and compassion don't very often go together. A rigid pattern of belief and morals always tends to exclude others; to create a 'them and us', to draw an intolerant distinction between those who claim to be godly and those condemned as the ungodly. It has happened often enough in Christian history, as it has happened in most of the great religions of the world. It is thus that every religious war has begun."

CHRISTIAN VERSUS YOGA

A series of yoga classes in a church hall in Kenilworth has sparked off a controversy which could end with the classes being banned in this small Warwickshire town by the St John's Parochial Church Council. The council is worried about the Hindu origin of yoga, and feels that the underlying philosophy of yoga is "inappropriate" for a church hall.

According to the Rev Desmond Gritten of St John's Church, the church council wanted more information about the sort of yoga lessons that were being taught by qualified instructor Barbara Sidebottom, a local resident. In a letter to the Kenilworth Weekly News, Mr. Gritten answered critics who wanted the lessons continued by saying: "I wonder how much criticism there would be of a Conservative club if it queried a booking for, say, whist drives by an Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society? ('Nothing to do with Communism, you understand, just elderly people enjoying a game of cards.') Or are religious differences less important than political ones?"

In denying that he was a bigot, as was suggested by one correspondent, Mr Gritten said: "If I were I would not be spending hours I can ill afford worrying about a right decision, but yes I am concerned for even one inexperienced Christian whose faith may be harmed."

DOCTORS AND OVER POPULATION

The Doctors and Overpopulation Group, now nearly ten years old, held a highly successful one-day symposium in the last week of September, under the title "Family Planning and Freedom". The seven lecturers covered a wide range of topics. Jack Parsons, author of *Population Versus Liberty*, spoke about population pressures and freedom. A speaker from Sri Lanka, representing the International Planned Parenthood Federation, reported on the position in developing countries. Though most of the audience was in favour of the "woman's right to choose" an abortion, the opposite viewpoint was given an airing when Dr C. B. Goodhart spoke on the rights and wrongs of abortion. J. Glover, an Oxford philosopher with a fluency reminiscent of A. J. P. Taylor, spoke on the "Moral Implications of Abortion" and on balance came down on the side of "the woman's right to choose".

From the secularist point of view, the highlight of the symposium was Madeleine Simms's speech on "The Political Fight for Freedom to Control Fertility". In her brief but brilliant survey of the last 100 years, she pointed to the various landmarks; from the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, the Catholic Women's League protests in 1922 against birth control education in maternity and child welfare centres, the defeat in 1926 of Birth Control Enabling Bills moved by Ernest Thurtle, Labour MP for Shore-ditch, and by Lord Buckmaster, a Liberal peer, to the ban in 1980 in Catholic hospitals in the USA against sterilisation of women for contraceptive purposes and, of course, the high-powered campaign of Pope John Paul II.

She also dealt at length with the long struggle from 1936 when the Abortion Law Reform Association was formed to give women a chance to secure a safe and legal abortion. She referred to the notorious pair, Susan Kentish and Michael Litchfield of *Babies for Burning* fame and the determined campaign of SPUC to undermine the gains of the reformed Abortion Law and warned that "continuous vigilance is required, because the forces of anti-

feminism are still lurking in the shadows waiting to pounce".

Doctors and Overpopulation Group, 143 Cranley Gardens, London N10.

EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Dr Harry Morgan: Humanism a Personal View. 8 January 1981. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co Antrim. Tel: Whiteabbey 66752.

Berkshire Humanists. Algar Reed: Human Rights. Friday, 9 January, 1981, 8 p.m. Town Hall, Wokingham, Berks.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. John White: The Position of Religion in Schools Today. Sunday, 4 January, 1981, 5.30 pm. Queen's Head, Queen's Road, Brighton. (Junction Road entrance opposite Brighton Station.)

Hasving and District Humanist Society. Dick Condon: Our Pagan Christmas. Tuesday, 16 December, 8 pm. Councillors Johnston and O'Flynn: How Government Policies Affect Us. Tuesday, 6 January, 1981. Both 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

Leicester Secular Society. Albert Meltzer: An Anarchist on Terrorism. Sunday, 14 December, 6.30 pm. Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester.

London Secular Group (Outdoor meetings). Thursday, 12.30 pm at Tower Hill; Sunday, 2—5 pm at Marble Arch. ('The Freethinker' and other literature on sale.)

South Place Ethical Society. Sunday Morning Meetings, 11 am. 14 December, Lord Fenner Brockway: The Levellers and Diggers—Pioneers of Humanism. 21 December, Cosmo Desmond: Amnesty International. 4 January, Harry Stopes-Roe and Peter Cadogan: Directions and Descriptions. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Sutton Humanist Group. Mrs Linda Best: Amnesty's Work. Wednesday, 10 December, 8 pm. Friends' Meeting House, 10 Cedar Road, Sutton.

Gay Humanist Group. Barry Jackson and Julian Meldrum: Attacks on Gay People—a tape-slide kit presentation. Friday, 9 January, 1981, 7.30 pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1.

"One of the chief enemies of disarmament is a sense of resignation."—The Brandt Report.

THE FREETHINKER

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