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DOES PROVIDENCE PROVIDE FOR THE POPE?

In the wake of a papal assassination attempt (writing at a time when full recovery seems likely) that question is perhaps redundant. The previous pope, after full Vatican sanction, rapidly succumbed to a heart attack. A predecessor, Pope Paul VI, only narrowly escaped the knife of an assailant while on a world tour. It is hard to see how anyone can believe that the hand of the Lord hovers with any special care over the papal incumbent.

Of course, freethinkers deplore violent attacks on world leaders (and equally upon their followers). The bullet is never an argument and only creates sympathy for that which it opposes. Reagan's witless attacker gave him the support necessary to carry through Thatcher-like economic measures which may have dire consequences for America's poor. Bradlaugh was a republican at a time when European assassinations of leaders and monarchs were much discussed. He always claimed to be a "ballot" not a "bullet" republican; and secularists will always favour arguments and ideas not bullets and knives.

The most important question following the assault on the Pope is not why did providence not guard him, but why is the pope seen as a world leader? He rules no country: the tiny corner of Rome known as Vatican city is of no secular significance. He leads followers of a faith that has no substance historically or philosophically. The claim that his rule is descended directly from a treacherous disciple of Jesus, known as Peter, is ropey. The institution which he heads has somehow survived centuries of immersion in some of the world's worst chicanery and corruption. Yet, when the Pope is assassinated it is worldwide news and leaders throughout the world hastily contact their telegram writers.

It is said that the Pope has contributed to world peace and is an inspiration as a moral leader. These claims need examination. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Mr Runcie, has described the Pope as "a wonderful man who has done so much for peace in an age of violence". But what has he done? He has made admirable statements about human rights and the need for world peace. That is less a cause for great praise than a minimum requirement for any leader with claims to moral stature. He has travelled the world and (full recovery permitting) will presumably continue his super-tours. But does he spread peace and light wherever he trips to? He has been to Ireland: are prospects for peace there improving? He has been to South America: are military dictatorships in decline there? He has been to the Philippines: are human rights better safeguarded there? "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Crowd Injuries

Incidentally, it must be pointed out that wherever three or four thousand and more have gathered together to catch sight of the Pope there are likely to be injuries and deaths. Hospitals are always at the ready when a papal trip is imminent, to deal with the heart attacks and so on which regularly take place in the crowds. And there have been quite a few deaths directly due to lack of crowd control. No doubt the Pope deplores these, and of course they take place at other gigantic rallies such as football crowds, but they cannot be ignored as a feature of papal adulation from crowds, any more than an assassination can be ignored as a perpetual threat for world leaders.

The Pope is admired as a moral authority. Do his

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CENTENARY YEAR

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much criticised statements on birth control, the position of women, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and so on lead us to admire his perspicacious thinking on moral issues of the day or deplore his persistent adherence to the dogmas of yesterday? Does his refusal to allow the famous Catholic theologian Hans Küng to teach theology lead people to revere the wisdom with which he uses his authority?

We are told that the Pope is patently a good man and that the example of his "goodness" is an inspiration to us all. Now, there is no reason to believe that his love of children (very handy for the photographers) is not perfectly genuine and that a picture of a loving and sincere nature is not accurate. But who can with any confidence define a "good man"—philosophers have been trying since Plato and before. And is not the Christian idea of "saintliness" a chimera which disguises the actual, real, difficult, ambivalent drives of human beings? Is it not better to face and deal with the reality of contradictory human characteristics than to chase a fanciful and unrealisable ideal of saintliness?

We have no direct knowledge of the Pope, his "goodness" reaches the world via the television screen. The phenomenon of the Pope as a world leader is intimately bound up with the ubiquity of the TV. Logie Baird is more responsible for the modern Pope's image than God. Though a celibate, the Pope has developed a passionate love affair with the television camera (a two-way romance) which has been thoroughly consummated in his two-and-a-half years rule. The strength of the Pope as a figure in the modern world is enhanced by the tiny screen in the living room. Whereas politicians are seen close up, warts and all, having their ideas and slogans rigorously analysed, the Pope is seen from afar blessing the crowds. Where television diminishes the stature of politicians by constant exposure and catching them off-guard, it increases the stature of the Pope by shots of distant serenity and benign silence. When was the Pope last interviewed on TV? Politicians wilt under the interrogations of interviewers such as Robin Day and blear at the audience with oversized blood-stained eyes. But the papal treatment is not like this.

Symbols Not Ideas

Television is a better medium for propagating symbols than expounding ideas. Figures such as John Lennon, football superstars, and the Pope, who are representative and acquire symbolic status and instant TV recognisability are creatures of TV.

It is an oversimplification to join the doom-mongers who decry television as responsible for all the violence and ills of the world. (Christ was one of the earliest of doom-mongers and his expectations of an early end to the world were very wide

of the mark.) But in comparison with the printed word, TV has serious disadvantages. One programme merges into another so that differentiation and distinction become difficult. The newsreel of a real act of violence slithers into the adventure movie; and the distinction between fact and fantasy can easily be blurred. This is also a characteristic of religion, where fantasies are presumed to be based on fact, and is another reason why TV could have a dangerous effect upon people's ability to look critically at the phenomenon of religion.

Narcotic Effect

In comparison with the printed word, TV discourages pause, thought and analysis. The continuity has a numbing and narcotic effect. That is why it is an ideal vehicle for the "opium of the people" which is purveyed by the Pope. Early secularists were frequently self-educated and acquired extraordinary book-learning. Children of the telly age may pursue unorthodoxy in a similar way, but in the transition from a culture dominated by the printed word to one dominated by the screen this seems less likely.

Early secularists expounded and argued on public platforms in Hyde Park and elsewhere. Though not dead, this is a dying practice, fatally affected by TV. But who stands and argues with television?

Television, like religion, is a human phenomenon. And it is open to us to accept, reject, or use as we think fit. Judicious use of the off switch banishes the hypnotic power of TV. Similarly, it is open to us to judiciously turn off adulation of religious leaders such as the Pope. Seen from one perspective the small box in the corner of the living room is not very powerful, and one human being in the Vatican is not very significant; seen from another perspective institutions such as TV and the papacy could dominate and damage humankind if we are not careful.

Brecht wrote in his play *Galileo*: "Unhappy the land that needs heroes."

NEXT MONTH:

Jottings looks at the Salvation Army, after a spate of criticism.

Is Christianity Played Out? — an early Free-thinker article asks a still relevant question.

The world record for lying on a bed of nails was recently broken by a Baptist minister, Mr Ken Owen of South Wales. He ended his 102-hour record by having a paving stone broken on his chest with a sledgehammer.

The author considers infant euthanasia from the viewpoint of a relative of a deformed child. His personal experience has led him to look at religious and philosophical attitudes to death, and the Christian attitude to killing. He pleads for a new outlook.

The article is extracted from a much longer essay, which we do not have space to publish in full.

In order to treat this subject objectively I had thought of calling them A, B, C, D and E. C, D and E would be my three grandchildren, A and B their parents, but I find I cannot reach such heights of detachment and that I must call them by their true initials J, D, C, S and K.

I do not see them very often for I live in Europe and they in America. C is five years old and rather serious. She does not say very much, preferring to nod for "Yes" and shake her head for "No", but the whole time she is remembering and judging. I have an idea that, when she grows up, she will reject a great deal that most people accept. I feel very close to her and wish I could be beside her, when the time comes for her to make decisions. S, who is still only two, is very different. She accepts everything and everybody and flings herself laughing and chattering into the arms of those she knows. C and S both occasionally think of K, my youngest granddaughter, of course, but there is always so much happening that they do not often ask about her. C likes to be photographed holding her but K went away, when she was two months old, and they will, I think, soon accept her absence as permanent.

This morning I went to see K, who lives in a long white house above the Hudson. I met D there and together we went to her room. She is with ten other babies and she has her name on her cot. She has a sweet baby mouth and chin and large blue eyes and above it a high domed forehead, which would have been lovely too were it not for the sharp ridge that runs down it from her skull. She has, I am told, agenesia of the corpus callosum. That is to say, the central part of her brain has not developed and, therefore, the optic nerve too is defective. The whites of those beautiful eyes are tinged with blue and she is all but blind. "But look," said a kind nurse, "she blinks, when I wave my hand. I think she can focus a little too."

K did indeed blink but it seemed to me that she just felt the draught of the nurse's hand.

D clasped her hand, which was folded up like a bud and showed me the palm.

"That's the Simian line going straight across. You meet it in Mongols. But it is not a sure test, as she

isn't a Mongol. I showed it to an obstetrician and he just held up *his* hand to me. He had the Simian line too. All the other children here are Mongols. Look at their inner eyelids! Look at the way their ears are set—very low!"

The nurse leant over and touched a small tin box attached to the cot and a tiny tinkle came from it.

"She loves her little musical box," she said.

There was a pause while we watched for a sign that K was loving it but none came. The nurse closed it by saying: "She never cries. She's so good." (Later D told me that, when K was born, she did not cry, like other babies, but was unnaturally quiet.)

"Will she ever be able to walk?" I asked.

"Oh, why not? Of course!" she replied encouragingly.

"And talk?"

"Oh, I expect so. But you must ask the doctor." She was embarrassed and broke off to greet a little boy, who trotted into the room.

"Hello, Sammy! Back again?" and to us she said: "Sammy is the brightest of our little Mongols."

Children at Play

I asked to see the older children and she took us into a sunny courtyard, where ten or twelve of them were playing. The swings were soaring up and down and a big ball was rolling about. A tall, almost handsome, boy in a jersey with BEATLE printed on it, rushed up to us jabbing his left shoulder and shouting something. It sounded like "Resident! Resident!" "No, we're not residents here," D said, "we're just on a visit. Resident! Whi How!" the boy bawled on and we grasped that he was saying that he was the President of the United States. A girl of twenty with a broad blue band round her head, which was flopping from side to side, charged up to us. A swollen tongue stuck out of her mouth and she barked at us something we could not understand.

"Do they ever quarrel?" I asked the nurse.

"Oh, indeed they do!" she smiled at the innocence of my question. Then we went to the room of the totally unmanageable. These children cannot be given toys, because they destroy them. Some were incontinent and some had limbs that were frenetically askew. Television was on non-stop ("They love their television," said the nurse.) Many of them had dreary commonplace delusions like the Beatle boy, taken from TV or secondhand from the newspapers. One or two had some droll hallucinations, which two months ago, I would have found touching and even entertaining.

As we went back down the passage, we passed the open door of a small room and in it I saw a

charming looking woman with greying hair. Her husband was with her and they were talking to a young defective. ("He gets fits," explained the nurse, "that's why he has the black eye.") As his mother saw us, she turned to the boy with a gay and loving laugh. He looked unresponsively back and I knew that her animation was directed at us rather than at him. She was telling us that she was ready to do her part in lifting the great curtain of sadness that hung over us all.

Then we reached the hall. Two merry little girls dashed past us, with their parents behind. "I know whom you're come to see!" said the nurse bending down to them. "Yes, Lucy, Lucy!" they shouted and tore ahead. The nurse smiled at us, as though to say: "You see it's not all sadness. Children take it quite as a matter of course."

But I think it is all sadness, unnecessary sadness. The realities are concealed from us by a labyrinth of platitude in which truth and honesty have lost themselves. There is not a child in that large establishment, whose parents have not at one time thought what they dare not articulate: "I wish that my child would die!" Any many, perhaps most, are still thinking it and secretly praying for it.

Mme Vandeput and the Nine Catholics

I do not know how many defective children there are in the USA, but, when I returned home from visiting K, I referred to the book about the trial at Liège of Suzanne Vandeput, who killed her armless "Thalidomide baby". The nine gently disapproving Catholic authors of this book, doctors and priests, give statistics of the mental defectives in France. They are about 7½ per cent of the population. How many of these, I thought, can be as well cared for as our little K, surrounded from babyhood with toys and paintboxes, with practised smiles and laughter that is innocent or lovingly simulated?

The nine French Catholics are thinking of that too. Their book is learned, tender, imaginative. Not in one sentence do they denounce Suzanne; she was wrong, of course, they say, but they see her sin against a dark background of callousness, stupidity and smugness and they recognise that science has transformed the human scene and totally changed the nature of our problems:

"The new drugs," writes Father Roy, "can be as dangerous as they are salutary. The number of abnormal children is increasing; the doctors are opposing the process of natural selection by allowing beings to exist, which are in no way human."

They are aware that the support that Suzanne Vandeput received from press and public in Liège and beyond was not only sentimental and unreflecting but scholarly as well. Father Roy quotes, with bafflement and sadness rather than horror, the two

French writers, Barrère and Lalou, who present a humanist point of view:

"Our age has effected so many transformations on man that the moral problems raised can no longer be answered by the ancient formulae. It is almost a new reality that we must learn to accept and mankind will need many years to construct a new humanism founded on the new man. Euthanasia seems to be one of the keystones of this future edifice."

The nine writers are aware how unresponsive we have mostly become to the ecclesiastical anathemas of the past. With the advent of totalitarian and nuclear war, the old Christian taboos on killing have fallen into such confusion that one moral argument has now to support itself with ten practical ones. How, the nine writers ask, can we decide which malformation justifies infanticide, which does not? How can we know that a cure will not be discovered? Are not handicapped people often happy? Who would trust a doctor, if he were to become an agent, not of life, but of death? Doctors still swear the oath, which Hippocrates formulated 2,000 years ago, to observe and to protect the sacredness of life. How can they betray it?

I will interrupt these arguments here to say that the doctors are wrong about Hippocrates. His oath concerned the Greek habit of giving poison to those condemned to death. Doctors, he considered, must not allow themselves to be used as paid executioners. There is no evidence that Hippocrates opposed the ancient practice of infanticide. In his day in all the city states, except Thebes, deformed or sickly children were exposed. It was a custom, which Aristotle, an admirer and younger contemporary of Hippocrates, thought should be made a law. Plato too gave the same advice to lawgivers in his ideal republic.

Not till the time of St Augustine did suicide and euthanasia become the crimes which Christians today hold them to be and, even after Augustine, many devout men thought differently. In Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* a man in pain was permitted

"to dispatch himself out of that payneful lyffe as out of a prison or a racke of tormente or elles suffer himselfe willynglye to be rydde oute of it by another".

The author further examines the contradictions found in Christianity's attitude to killing, and speculates about an entire change of moral attitude inside or outside of the churches. The Christian attitude to war exemplifies this ambivalence towards death and killing.

But nothing can change till the leaders of the churches dare to say once more: "Those that take the sword shall perish by the sword." This would be a lightning flash, dazzling and destructive that would

shake the world. Many venerable establishments would crumble, but the dark unvisited places, which breed ugliness, would be illuminated. All the things that we do or fail to do in the antechambers of life or at its exit would be seen in their proper perspective — birth control, sterilisation, abortion, euthanasia. Our judgment, no longer clouded and crippled

by the great betrayal, would be free to act. If our lives were once more our own to dispose of, science might come to our aid so that many children, who are incapable of dealing with the world, would never cross its threshold. And love might decide that our little K's life, a frosted bud that could never open and bear fruit, should be allowed to drop.

Abolition of Blasphemy Law Proposed JIM HERRICK

The common law offence of blasphemy should be abolished. This is a proposal put forward by the Law Commission. It has been welcomed by "The Freethinker", the National Secular Society and the Committee Against Blasphemy Law. The Law Commission also recommends the creation of a new offence of "threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour in any recognised (not necessarily Christian) place of worship or cemetery". The Law Commission is inviting comment upon its arguments and proposals.

In a Working Paper "Offences against Religion and Public Worship", the Law Commission sets out the history of blasphemy law and weighs the arguments for and against retaining blasphemy law. The Working Paper is part of a continuous codifying of all criminal law.

Freethinkers have always campaigned for the abolition of blasphemy law; and the first editor of *The Freethinker*, G. W. Foote, was imprisoned for twelve months after a famous blasphemy trial in 1883. An early attempt came when Professor Kenny sponsored a "Religious Prosecutions Abolition Bill" in 1885. After 1889 this was dropped in favour of Bradlaugh's Bill to repeal and abolish all laws relating to blasphemy which failed to get sufficient support in Parliament.

The second trial of G. W. Foote for blasphemy before Lord Justice Coleridge was important in establishing that "if the decencies of controversy are observed, even the fundamentals of religion may be attacked without the writer being guilty of blasphemy". This was confirmed by the Court of Appeal in the case of *Bowman v Secular Society Ltd*, 1917 (a civil case relating to the status of a limited company, which nevertheless considered elements of religion and blasphemy because of the character of *Secular Society Ltd*): then it was stated that "to constitute blasphemy at common law there must be such an element of vilification, ridicule, or irreverence as would be likely to exasperate the feeling of others and so lead to a breach of the peace".

Freethinkers have, therefore, always been deeply concerned about blasphemy law. They have experienced its punitive force and they recognise the fun-

damental inequality of a law which protects one particular kind of belief. *The Freethinker* was arguing before the *Gay News* case, which in 1977 brought the existence of the crime of blasphemous libel into the public eye again, that the common law offence should be abolished and not left lying around for any moralist to use as a weapon of censorship.

The arguments about retention of blasphemy law are not really a contest between religious and non-religious people, but between those who favour free speech and those who don't. It is an argument about whether specific kinds of belief should be protected by law, or whether there should be freedom to debate, joke and write imaginatively about religious matters: a freedom which religious people might be as anxious to preserve and use as the non-religious. One of the ironies of the *Gay News* case was that the contentious poem was religious—in an unorthodox way—and the warrior, Mrs Whitehouse, was a heresy hunter not an atheist attacker. Can there be any reason why all views, religious and non-religious, should not be treated alike? Once society begins to prosecute particular views and writings, where does it stop?

The Nature of Religious Feelings

The Law Commission considered the view that religious feelings are of a special character and should be treated in a special way. They quote an article "Blasphemy, Offensiveness and Law" (by Jones in the *British Journal of Political Science*, 1980): "It is the special reverence felt for what is deemed sacred that makes people more susceptible to offence in relation to their religious beliefs than in relation to their political beliefs even though their political convictions may be no less strong. . ." However, they argue that the difference between religious beliefs and non-religious or political beliefs is only one of degree, and point out that some sections of the population hold strong views about the monarchy or the flag; they might have added liberty and Thomas Paine, and do refer, elsewhere, to the study and dissemination of ethical principles and "the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment" (as discussed in the case in which South Place Ethical Society gained charitable status).

The difficulty is that religious beliefs are in the

eye of the beholder. There is no measure of their "specialness" to others than those who hold them, and in a secular society such as ours they are part of the range of religious and non-religious beliefs that make up our culture. There is not necessarily any merit attached to the strength with which beliefs are held, since great devotion is likely to lead to fanaticism and intolerance which could be as damaging to society as acceptance of a wide range of views.

Another argument considered by the Law Commission is that the fabric of society in some way depends upon protection of its religious beliefs. A *Times* editorial at the time of the *Gay News* case is quoted: "It (blasphemy) amounts to an attack on the fundamental decencies and mutual respect on which society operates, and could damage the stability of the community." *The Times* responded to the Law Commission's recent proposals with a similar statement. In Britain today, with its multiplicity of views, what is important is respect for a variety of views, including tolerance of critical, polemical and imaginative (maybe discomfiting) examination of beliefs.

A weakness of the existing common law of blasphemy, which is examined by the Law Commission and has been much commented upon, is the restriction of its ambit to Christianity and probably Anglicanism. It has been argued that blasphemy law should be extended to cover all religious beliefs. This would create more difficulties than it would solve, even if it were desirable. Would the major world religions alone be covered, or would any sect or cult with religious pretensions be protected? As has been shown in recent controversy about the Unification Church, there is problem enough, and inequity enough, in deciding whether all religions should be given charitable status. But the idea of being careful not to offend the beliefs of the most bizarre of current religious groups is not only ridiculous, it could also muzzle necessary criticism, such as the exposure of the indoctrination techniques of the Moonies.

Race Relations' Analogy

The Law Commission examine the analogy with race relations law, where racial insult is illegal. Those defending blasphemy law have recently often made an analogy between insult to people's religious feelings and insult to people on grounds of their racial origins. But there are crucial differences, as the Law Commission point out. There is considerable evidence that disorder could break out from poor race relations in our society, but there is no evidence that intolerance of religious affiliation (at present) might create disorder. The Law Commission also point out that a person's skin colour and racial origin are in no sense a choice, whereas

religious beliefs are adhered to or modified by choice and conviction. Another essential difference where law to prevent incitement to racial hatred is concerned is that it deals with incitement to hatred of individuals or groups of people not with insult to the beliefs of people or groups of people.

Two other objections to blasphemy law are raised by the Law Commission. As the law stands at present there is no clear certainty whether a possible offender would be likely to be convicted or whether their intentions are relevant. It is a weakness in criminal law for a possible offender to have no means of knowing whether he or she is likely to commit an offence. There is also the problem, found in all attempts to curb free speech, that a ban may provoke an increased interest—as happened in the *Gay News* case, when Kirkup's poem was widely circulated after the trial: "a law which was seen to be discriminating in this sense might well stimulate activities designed to display its unacceptable character and the impossibility of securing its proper enforcement."

"Freethinker" Editor and the Post

A further argument against blasphemy law is that it is redundant since other laws cover potential offences. Laws dealing with breach of the peace and obscenity would cover many potential cases of blasphemy. (How many times must it be asked in *The Freethinker* — when will Parliament take a serious look at the Williams' Committee's report on obscenity and film censorship?) A rather unusual example of other laws covering offences relating to blasphemy is quoted by the Law Commission: after the *Gay News* case "a successful prosecution was brought against a secularist who sent a copy of the *Gay News* poem through the post". The "secularist" was in fact William McIlroy, a former editor of *The Freethinker* (see *The Freethinker*, October 1977). Such a petty prosecution was at the time described by W. McIlroy as a "monumental act of humbug and folly". It is a pity that the Law Commission do not condemn such ridiculous use of the law relating to Post Office mail.

The Law Commission are seeking comment from the public. They refer to the views, obtained as a preliminary to their study, from their letters to newspapers asking for public opinions. A majority of the 170 letters and submissions received "commented adversely and in detail upon the law, considering it to be archaic in modern conditions and an unnecessary check upon freedom of expression". They are obviously aware of what they described at a press conference as "orchestrated" response. Since Mary Whitehouse in letters to the press is already trying to fluff up opposition to the proposal to abolish blasphemy law, it is worth pointing out that reasoned arguments sent into the Commission

seem likely to be considered more seriously than letter campaigns by sheep following shepherdesses. It is also worth pointing out that blasphemy law is not relevant to radio or television and that the views of the National Viewers and Listeners Association would not therefore seem to be of particular relevance. Complaints of blasphemy in the everyday sense of "impious or profane talk" of which the Commission received a number, are not relevant to the offence of blasphemy, which must be "scurrilous" or "vilifying".

W. J. Ramsey (consistently misspelt by the Law Commission), the manager of *The Freethinker*, received six months for blasphemy at the same time that G. W. Foote was sentenced to twelve months in prison. When he was released, he wrote, in *The Freethinker* of 6 January 1884: "With the New Year I am back to work at the old shop, very glad to be in harness again." It is a lesson of the nineteenth century that blasphemy law was never an effective deterrent.

G. W. Foote, on trial before Lord North in 1883, in a lengthy address to the jury, which received an ovation in court, passionately defended free speech and opposed blasphemy law: he asked the jury "to allow us to go away from here free men and so make it impossible that there ever should again be

a prosecution for blasphemy; and have your names inscribed in history as the last jury that decided for ever that great and grand principle so high no temple could be lofty enough for its worship, so broad that the earth could not afford a foundation for it, which is as wide and high as the heavens,— that grand principle which should rule over all—the principle of the equal right and the equal liberty of every man. That is the principle I ask you to lay down by your verdict of Not Guilty, and thus close this discreditable chapter of prosecution once and for ever, and associate your names on the page of history with liberty, progress and everything dignified noble and dear to the consciences and hearts of men."

With the Law Commission report that "discreditable chapter", nearly 100 years later, may be almost at an end, Parliament should, in due course, take the simple step of abolishing blasphemy law once and for all.

A summary of the Law Commission's report "Offences Against Religion and Public Worship" is available from Mr C. W. Dymont, Law Commission, Conquest House, 37-38 John Street, London WC1N 2BQ, where comments should be sent by 30 November 1981. The full Working Paper is available at £5.70 from Government bookshops.

"Vital Need for NSS" Proclaimed at Dinner

Maureen Colquhoun said at the Annual Dinner of the National Secular Society that the Society was more vitally needed than ever before. She declared that British politics had failed and truly radical changes were needed, and the NSS could lead in looking at society in new ways.

The Annual Dinner was held on 21 March, and all speakers paid tribute to Barbara Wootton, who was unfortunately prevented from attending by ill health. Harold Blackham took the position of guest of honour. Barbara Smoker, in the chair, introduced Harold Blackham as a founding father of modern humanism. She referred to his work with Stanton Coit at the Ethical Church in Bayswater, to his position as Secretary of the Ethical Union which in due course became the British Humanist Association. His books *Humanism* and *Six Existentialist Thinkers* were well-known and he was now writing further books in retirement.

Harold Blackham spoke of Barbara Wootton's decisiveness and energy and recalled her contribution to a World Union of Freethinkers' Congress just after the war. In a wide-ranging speech, Harold Blackham said that he had heard a former *Freethinker* editor and President of the NSS, F. A. Ridley, say at an Annual Dinner that there were more brains gathered there than in the Vatican. Mr Blackham said it was necessary to judge intelligence

by the conclusions people came to and by that criteria the Vatican did seem somewhat lacking. The present Pope travelled the world beaming generously and spreading misery for the future, by his hard line on birth control.

Voltaire and Milton were quoted by Harold Blackham in emphasising the need for tolerance and freedom of speech. "What is tolerance?" asked Voltaire. "We are all steeped in weakness and error; let us forgive one another's follies, it is the first law of nature."

Maureen Colquhoun was introduced as a former MP for Northampton, who had taken great interest in matters of social justice, housing, the elderly, world peace, and the liberation of women and men. She referred to Barbara Wootton's "brilliant, courageous and incisive writing" and recalled her devastating impromptu speech in the House of Lords when the Sexual Offences Bill was debated in 1957.

Maureen Colquhoun referred to a shared interest between her and the NSS in Northampton, which had returned Bradlaugh as MP. She had encountered a woman working for her constituency whose grandmother had been Bradlaugh's minute secretary.

Maureen Colquhoun spoke of the bigots amongst activists in the Labour party, when she had stood

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ITALIAN ABORTION LAW

A move to curb legal abortions in Italy has failed. A referendum, on 18 May, put forward a proposal that the 1978 abortion law be changed so that only women whose physical health was endangered could obtain an abortion. This would have effectively made an abortion very difficult and was strongly supported by the clergy-dominated pro-Life group. A proposal to abolish restrictive aspects of the 1978 law, which had allowed doctors in hospitals to refuse to perform an abortion on the grounds of conscientious objection, was also defeated. Women have claimed the retention of the 1978 law as it stands as a great victory for Italian women.

The 79.6 per cent vote in favour of the existing law shows that even Catholics do not obey clerical calls in personal matters such as sexual freedoms. There was considerable fear that the shooting of the Pope, who had made a forthright statement on behalf of the Pro-Life campaign, might have swung sympathy towards the clerical call for greater restriction on abortion.

The Catholic Church spared no effort in the pre-referendum campaign. The Pope said: "The Church considers every legislation in favour of abortion as a grave offence against the fundamental rights of man and against the divine commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill'." He was criticised by pro-abortion parties who claimed his statements were "unheard of political interference" by a pope.

The publicity gimmicks of the Catholics included erection of banners in Naples on the Sunday before the referendum asking if the mother of Rudy Kroll, —a leading player in Naples's football team—had had an abortion, where would the Naples team be today? Naples was playing a crucial football match that day. Regardless of all intellectual honesty, the Catholics aimed to capitalise on the emotion of football supporters.

Mother Teresa was flown to Italy from Calcutta in the last stages of the Pro-Life campaign. She told a rally in Florence: "If mothers have fear for their babies, give them to me. God will take care of them." Does she think she is a goddess and can take care of all the unwanted babies in the world? Does she realise, despite her evident caring for those poverty-stricken in the streets of Calcutta, how irresponsible such statements are? Does she understand to what extent she was being used by a Catholic Church grown expert in recent years at using all the wiles of advertising?

The clerical party even went to the ridiculous lengths, after the attempt on the Pope's life, of trying to fling mud at the pro-abortion parties for that deplorable event. The Christian Democrat whip in the Italian parliament, half an hour after the Pope was shot, accused the Communist, Socialist, Repub-

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lican and Liberal parties of having "incited and brought about the climate of violence". The announcer on the state-owned radio network said that the pro-abortion parties had conducted "an ignominious campaign which, under the shield of free speech, had created a cultural and psychological climate of violence". These absurd accusations were quickly challenged. The socialist leader, Signor Bettino Craxi, said that it was "inexcusable that anyone could see a connection between the referendum and the attempt on the Pope's life".

One of the ironies of the pro-Life campaign was that clericals found themselves defending abortions when a woman's life is endangered, Italian bishops in campaigning for the referendum proposals to limit abortion were tacitly admitting the necessity of occasional abortions in extreme cases. Once this is admitted the whole absolutist argument — "no abortion ever"—is lost. The papal attitude is still that all abortion is wrong, but Catholic bishops are used to the mental gymnastics necessary simultaneously to hold two contradictory views.

The referendum as a way of bringing about changes in the law came in when the Catholic church in 1974 attempted to abolish the new divorce law. Fifty-nine per cent of Italians voted to retain the divorce law—and it was seen, then, as now, that the Italian people will no longer take directions on personal or political matters from the Catholic Church.

FRENCH SECULAR CEREMONY

The new French President, the socialist François Mitterand, started office with a strictly secular ceremony with no swearing in. By special request from M Mitterand a fast arrangement of the *Marseillaise* by Berlioz (an unbeliever) was played, as well as Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. He said of his election: "Hope was the only winner on May 10—may it become the best-shared asset of France."

MARRIAGE LAW

A Bill to allow any person to marry another to whom they are related by marriage but not by blood was rejected in the House of Lords on 15 May. The Marriage Enabling Bill was steered by Baroness Wootton and opposed by the bishops. Voting was 124 to 79.

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Barbara Wootton said that the Bill was prompted by the case of a man who was caused much unhappiness because he could not marry his step-daughter. She pointed out that the reform would bring happiness and relief to many couples.

The Bishop of Durham said that bishops would oppose the Bill because "it further eroded the concept of the family as an extended network of relationships". Speaking as a leader of the Catholic community, Lord Norfolk said that if the Bill were passed "The marriage unit would be weakened". Once again the churches put abstract, unjustified positions before common-sense, small-scale law reform.

MOUNTEBANKS

A leaflet—"Good News—Spring Edition, 1981, No 1!"—has been forwarded to *The Freethinker* by a reader. The paper advertises the work of the Rev Melvin Banks and his Crusading Team. The leaflet proclaims miraculous cures have taken place at Mr Banks's sessions: the paralysed have walked, the deaf heard and asthma has disappeared.

The leaflet is "distributed free" but much emphasis is placed on contributing towards £5,000 needed in the next month — "to reach multitudes of needy folk". "Give and it shall be given unto you" is a text printed on the leaflet — a text which Mr Banks has obviously taken to heart. Among the "exciting new books" by Melvin Banks are "heart-warming sermons"; also available are "marvellous cassettes" with titles like "Instant Miracle", "Mastery of Fear" and "The Blood of Jesus", for £2.75 each. In the first year of *The Freethinker* there were hilarious accounts of Moody and Sankey, evangelists from the USA. Some things do not change.

A correspondent, who attended one of Mr Banks's services, writes: "I attended one of his services and for a time was amused at the aplomb with which he performed the laying-on of hands at the close of the meeting. He carried this function out with such ease and confidence that he even poked his ear with his free hand on a couple of occasions. One old lady, cured of arthritis, walked up and down the side-aisle of the school hall where the service was held, but most of those treated seemed less than convinced of their cure.

"The seamy side of the business became apparent to all when a crippled young man struggled in vain to get out of his wheelchair. He was relegated to

one side whilst the healer continued to work his 'miracles' on others.

"A large part of the service was taken up in appeals for contributions of money from the congregation and a collection was taken. Numerous pamphlets and tapes were on sale and people were invited to sign a petition for Parliament condemning homosexuals, pornographers, those who oppose censorship and the like—but not charlatan faith-healers. Maybe Mr Banks's crew should be dubbed MounteBanks."

RATES CHALLENGE

An individual NSS supporter in Wales is refusing to pay a proportion of his rates because he opposes the use of public money to support church schools. R. W. Aldridge has withheld £2.43 from the Mid-Glamorgan County Council, which he has calculated is the figure from his annual rate which is allocated to voluntary aided schools. He is challenging the Council to sue for the money and is prepared to argue his case in the courts.

Centenary Appeal

Donations to the Centenary Appeal have generously begun to roll in. The appeal will remain open until the end of the year. All donations to the Freethinker Fund for this year will be added to the Centenary Appeal total.

Having reached our first centenary we hope to lay the foundations, by increased readership and financial stability, for the next 100 years.

Many thanks to the following: J. W. Bennett, 50p; H. J. Blackham, £20; Brighton & Hove Humanist Group, £25; Mr & Mrs Brown, £5; C. Brunel, £1; J. W. Buck, £2; J. Busby, £2; W. M. Duane, £20; E. C. Eagle, £10; P. Edmunds, £2; H. J. L. Evans, £2; P. A. Forrest, £4; T. Graham, £2.50; J. K. Hawkins, £10; F. Howard, £4; S. Hunt, £2; J. Joseph, £5; Margaret Knight, £10; C. H. Martin, \$2; G. Murras, £3; H. W. McCarthy, £3; P. G. McCormick, £1; E. McGue, \$5; J. W. Mooney, £5; M. P. Morf, £10; B. Morgan, £1.50; M. O. Morley, £7; B. Moss, £2; N. J. Moyses, £2; F. Munniksmä, £5; M. E. Nichol, £2; C. A. Pugh, £10; G. Reid, £1.75; E. Richard, £1; P. J. Riley, £5; E. Royle, £5; Dora Russell, £5; Earl Russell, £5; Renée Short, MP, £6; Barbara Smoker, £5; Mr & Mrs Stapleton, £2; In Memory of G. Stewart, £10; G. Thornton, £5; P. Willig, £10; A. E. Woodford, £2; Barbara Wootton, £10; D. Wright, £25; Anon, £25; Anon, £5.

Total for the period 13/4/81 to 19/5/81: £306.25 and \$7. Including previous Freethinker Fund, total for the year to date: £1,063.90 and \$39.

BOOKS

GÖDEL, ESCHER, BACH: AN ETERNAL GOLDEN BRAID by Douglas R. Hofstadter. Penguin £5.95

How is a modern materialist to think about the nature of human minds? This book seems to go a long way towards an answer, or at least towards posing the right questions. One of the best things about it is that it is not just another book about "the problem of mind". The form and content and style are so beautifully welded that it rejoices in the sense of *mind itself*, and in a special kind of mind which is all too little accessible to people. It communicates the liberal tradition of science as a form of free enquiry for its own sake. For that alone this is a book to be cherished.

Gödel, Escher, Bach is a map of a mind, thinking about Mind. It may give a faint hint of the flavour to say that that is both what it is, and what it is about. For the idea of *self-reference*, or *self-consciousness*, is the central theme of the work, a theme to which the book constantly refers (as Hofstadter himself is aware). To play on this theme he weaves together three threads in his "braid": Bach, who could include himself in his fugues, M. C. Escher, the graphic artist, who could draw pictures of a picture gallery including the picture itself, and K. Gödel, the mathematical logician. Gödel is certainly the most formidable for the uninitiated to deal with, but what he did (in 1931) was something very like an Escher drawing, only in mathematical symbols. He showed that if mathematics were treated as a "formal system", a game played with symbols, then it was possible to write down formulae which could never be proved true, nor proved false, within that system. These formulae would have an element of self-reference in them, the mathematical equivalent of saying "I am now telling a lie". In particular Gödel showed that there could be no formal way of showing that mathematics formed a *consistent* formal system.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with materialism? Well, since the 1940s anti-materialist philosophers have clutched on to Gödel's theorem as one of their straws. (Another straw, which I hope Douglas Hofstadter will deal with one day, is the Uncertainty Principle of quantum physics.) Their argument is that Gödel's result shows how minds can do something that no definite system, or machine, could ever do—namely appreciate their own consistency. Hence minds must have something more than mere matter.

Hofstadter demolishes this argument with an almost incredible patience, and this is one of the focal points of his book. But in the process he does something far more constructive than an anti-materialist demolition job. His procedure is that of developing the idea of the "level" of a system,

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or of a scientific description of some aspect of the world. This is a standard idea in the philosophy of science, but certainly not one that is as well understood as it should be. Partly this must be because most scientists work on their own particular level, and do not need to think about how the levels fit together. For instance, a strand of DNA, looked at in one way, is nothing but a collection of atoms. In another way, however, it is the logical jigsaw pattern of the amino acids that matters, and not the individual atoms. On another level, the details of the molecular coding do not matter at all, only the way that the information divides itself on reproduction. So an atomic physicist, molecular biologist and geneticist can see the same thing at different "levels". By considering examples like these, Hofstadter gets across the crucial idea that something can be "nothing but" atoms, and yet full of life and surprises, and suggests by analogy that the brain can be "nothing but" nerve-connections, yet at some other, very distantly removed level of description, embodies what we call "consciousness".

Having developed all these ideas with a happy wit and style, Hofstadter puts them together. What really interests him is the idea that "self-reference", whether in Gödel, Escher, Bach or anywhere else, can be thought of as a "tangling" or "looping" of these levels of description. There is a beautiful example of this in the case of DNA, since the process by which the DNA replicates itself must itself be determined by something in the DNA information. It is this "looping" or "tangling" to which most of the book is devoted, the driving point being the concept of human "self-consciousness". Without some kind of tangling, there is no way that a pattern of nerves, or pattern of patterns of patterns of nerves, can in some sense *represent* the whole pattern of the brain, without actually *using up* the whole brain. But something like this must happen whenever we use the word "I", and any remotely serious theory of psychology must hope one day to account for that sense of identity and existence in material terms. The great strength of Hofstadter's work is that it makes such a thing seem, at least in principle, a possibility. This is his constructive answer to what he calls, with admirable effrontery, the "soulist" use of the Gödel argument.

Whether this can also be done on a computer, as Artificial Intelligence enthusiasts believe, is another but closely related question. Personally I find it relatively easy to accept that a sufficiently complex system of computer patterns, and patterns of patterns of patterns, all tangling and referring to each

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other, could do something very like what the brain does—but only as long as one regards the brain as something that just sits in splendid sensory isolation! This is very much how AI theorists think of brains (and people in general), but it seems very remote from reality. Brains are enmeshed in sensation, communication and action, with other people and other things. There are descriptions of human activities called economics, politics, sociology, history, and so forth, in which this enmeshing is all-important—and so implicit in the Artificial Intelligence framework is the assumption that these descriptions are irrelevant to “thought”. Well, I find this very hard to believe.

All science depends on over-simplification: picking out certain features of the world for attention and ignoring others as irrelevant. But I am not at all sure that the AI over-simplification is valid, or even properly understood by its protagonists. Hofstadter is much more sensitive to this problem than most, but even he takes the line that the enmeshing of brains with experience is something that can be left until *after* computers have been taught to cope with language. The dubiousness of this view would be more readily apparent if the illustrations of Gödel, Escher, Bach, as of all books about logic and computers, were not so predominantly absorbed with jolly, safe, nice things. “We should not over-stress the role of language in moulding thoughts.” Hofstadter writes rather blithely, and for an example of the language-independence of thoughts points to the fact that “chair” in English and “chaise” in French are not too different in meaning. But what about words like “healthy”, “sin”, “class”, “rights”, “child”, “gay”, “free”, “God” — words whose current use speaks volumes about how people can think and how they can act, and around which great historical struggles have taken place? All *serious* words, in fact!

Hofstadter is keen on the sociology of *ants*, curiously enough, and uses it as an example of how a communal system can work in a way that none of the individual ants knows about. It gives a model for the brain, something “more than” the sum of the nerves. But the ant-heap of human society is not considered at all. Another reflection of this gap is that he turns to Zen Buddhism as a way of complementing the logical discussion. On one level it does, but on another level it only reinforces the implicit individualist framework. Thus *Gödel, Escher, Bach* is, at one level, a beautiful work about “mind”. It is also the most literate and penetrating book about certain very interesting aspects of mathematics

and science that I have ever seen. Yet at another level, it is a map of a particular kind of rather introspective 1970s Californian male postgraduate scientific culture. Which is fine—but not the whole story.

ANDREW HODGES

THE LIFE OF JOHN O'HARA by Frank MacShane.
Cape. £10.

You would never know it from this book, but John O'Hara was America's greatest novelist of manners, the equal of Jane Austen. The problem, with this and virtually everything written about O'Hara, is that too much attention to his character diverts attention away from the work, and the work cries out for assessment, for serious, detailed examination. The life, by this time, deserves to be ignored.

Frank MacShane, to be fair to him, does place O'Hara “among the six leading writers of his time”, ranking him, correctly, with Edith Wharton, Howells and other American masters of the genre. He credits him with having invented the oblique, elliptical short story for which the *New Yorker* magazine has been famous for fifty years. He is original in tracing a connection between O'Hara and D. H. Lawrence in the matter of sexual explicitness. He even traces the relationship between O'Hara's work and Alexander Pope's ideas, whether Roman Catholic or deistic—and O'Hara's admiration for the “*Essay on Man*” suggests anything but a religious outlook. But finally these contributions are all but buried under the weight of superficial hagiography typical of the popular, scabrous exposé that has no business calling itself “a critical biography”. It is not even properly annotated. It suffers from the very faults critics have been levelling at O'Hara since the appearance of his first novel fifty years ago.

I devote this much attention to MacShane's book not because it is worthy of respect, but because its publication is going to perpetuate the myth about O'Hara as a cheap, dirty-minded novelist who cared more for material wealth and celebrity than he did about his work. The photographs bear this out. There is a full profile of O'Hara at his desk, carefully reading over his work. This gives a real impression of the man. The only problem here is that it is on the inside opposite the title page. It should be on the dust jacket, but who is going to bother with it after seeing the actual jacket photo of O'Hara with his foot on the fender of his Rolls Royce, looking for all the world like a second-rate movie mogul or the millionaire author who writes his novels by dictaphone to an endless stream of lithesome secretaries. That was never O'Hara, no matter what you read.

MacShane is also guilty of the commonplace that O'Hara's characters are all selfish, petty monsters after status. In fact there is more genuine compas-

sion in two lines of O'Hara than there is in twenty-five better rated authors whose work, it is said, enhances our awareness of the human condition. Because he believed readability was a virtue, non-readers thought they could pass dismissive judgement on the basis of a ten-minute perusal of a short story or a three-hour whip through one of his novels. This is not the place to talk about O'Hara's technique, but take my word for it, no other American author repays repeated reading so well. Insights suddenly materialise on a fifth reading, and you are astounded by their power. As with a horror story, but for altogether different reasons, you cannot read O'Hara alone in a house. Or you do so at your peril.

And I would recommend O'Hara to the humanist precisely because of his ability to tell difficult truths about human beings without recourse to religious analogies that let the reader think there is a purpose and a meaning to life beyond the mortal coil. O'Hara never believed in religious or spiritual dimensions to literature. His writing was actual, specific, eminently true-to-life. In no other author I have ever read is there the same capacity to compel identification among his readers, most of whom will recognise their lives and experience in the fictitious events O'Hara created. My father, for one, was once so moved by memory of his own past through reading one of O'Hara's stories that he made a dozen photocopies of the story and sent them to all his relatives.

O'Hara time and again disavowed the sanctity of formal religion. Of his own loss of faith, he explained: "The priests ruined it for me". Accordingly his treatment of the clergy is highly blasphemous if we care to count up the number of men of the cloth who sin against themselves and their parishioners throughout his work. One such fanatical zealot preaches hellfire on Sunday, but succumbs to a prostitute and is so racked with guilt that he commits suicide. Another fell to seducing pre-adolescent boys. O'Hara is one of the most powerful advocates of healthy, natural instincts, and perhaps this is where the unlikely comparison with Lawrence has its point, for he also believed in asexual friendship for both men and women.

Perhaps the most valuable element in his work for humanists is the detailed way in which he distinguishes between people of different faiths. As Lionel Trilling once pointed out, O'Hara believed that religious and social differences between people were essential to what they are as people and how well or badly they communicated with one another, particularly in heterogeneous United States where no one could be said to be indigenously American. A third generation Catholic of Polish extraction, O'Hara would say, is altogether different from a second generation Italian Catholic, and the difference is manifest in the very way they address each other, where each chooses to live and what each

does for a living. O'Hara's abiding strength is his ability to reveal these differences as precisely as possible and to establish his characters' humanity nonetheless. I have already mentioned how closely his readers identified with his work and personified his characters behind the surface classification. They are human beings in their own right, and to recognise them as such it is important to pay scrupulous care to the way each speaks, dresses and behaves. True, they are always combative, but it is a mistake to view them as self-seeking or insecure or defeated. If O'Hara's characters are simply any of these things, then so are we all, and he did not believe that. In thirty-three books he always wrote about people primarily at their best, defeated, if anything, by their humanity. Social distinctions both define and restrict human beings, O'Hara said. We might all be better without them, but they are inevitable, and without them we neither exist, nor indeed, coexist, and so we all do the best we can in the event of the inevitable.

It would be wrong to condemn MacShane's book out of hand. Any author who chooses to write about O'Hara in the first place has to be applauded for taking him that seriously. But he is doing no service to his subject to then undervalue him through inadequate treatment.

JAMES MACDONALD

THEATRE

DON JUAN by Molière. The Cottesloe, The National Theatre.
GOOSE PIMPLES by Mike Leigh. Garrick Theatre.

Don Juan, as portrayed by Molière, was not only a libertine but also an atheist and blasphemer. His quest after any woman who was bedworthy and his contempt of "passion by contract" is defended in an argument for pure hedonism and unbridled pursuit of pleasure. His evident enjoyment of the chase is endearing, but his arrogant *grand seigneur* assumption of his right to exploit others is not. He possesses what was for Molière the cardinal sin—hypocrisy; but he uses it with such calculated skill that it looks like sheer effrontery rather than unctuous humbug—and at least he is honest about his sexual desires. Nigel Terry, in Peter Gill's assured and stylish production, portrays both the delight and the dastardliness of Don Juan.

The play contains a notorious blasphemy scene, which may have been responsible for the play's withdrawal after only fifteen performances in 1665. Don Juan meets a hermit on the edge of the wood begging for alms. He asks him how he spends his time and when the hermit replies "Praying", Don Juan needs only to survey the man's abject condition to provide a withering comment on the value

of prayer. The poor man is offered a gold coin if he will blaspheme—thus being forced to choose between the tangible solace of food and the intangible comfort of God. Despite the hermit's refusal to blaspheme, Don Juan gives him the money "for the sake of humanity".

Molière was certainly influenced by materialists such as Gassendi and knew the work of Epicurus and Lucretius. The existence of the influential Cabale des Dévots, a court party of bigots, meant that he sailed close to the winds in his attacks on religious hypocrisy. But comedy delights in ambivalence, and Don Juan's come-uppance and descent into hell seem, in part, deserved because of his utter selfish disregard for others. The moralists may have enjoyed seeing the flames that eventually censure him, but the suggestion that it is a fire that burns within him is quite anti-theological. And the servant's comic epilogue undermines any stern moral conclusion that sinners must repent; the devout were not happy that their position was expressed throughout the play by the rogueish servant, Sganerelle (given a vigorous comic performance by Ron Pember).

The play is full of interest and a happy reminder of Molière's skill in combining wit, elegance and ideas. John Fowles' new translation, the accuracy of which I cannot judge, is full of verbal delights. Well worth a visit.

In contrast, *Goose Pimples* by Mike Leigh demonstrates that comedy requires more than gross caricature and one potentially hilarious situation. In the deserts of London suburbia a rich Arabian is invited home by a silly young lady, who works at a night club, to impress her car salesman flat mate. The Arab imagines he is visiting a prostitute's room and cannot understand why a straightforward financial and sexual exchange does not take place.

Underneath there is a pointed play about "fulfilling one's client's demands", and being straightforward, and the character of those who applaud the virtues of the business ethic while being dishonest and heartless to themselves and each other. The trouble is that there is no perspective from which to evaluate this repulsive English trio, with their odious racialism and helpless immersion in the products of the commercial admiss world they smother their lives with, so that I merely became increasingly discomfited at spending two hours in their nauseous company. Mike Leigh has sharp antennae for details of social nuance, for a surface of leopardskin wall paper and a whiff of ambre eslaire floating in the breeze, but his improvisation technique does not seem, on this occasion, to have given shape to the underlying ideas or precision to the comic timing (some jokes seemed disastrously mis-placed).

At the time when Mrs Thatcher had just returned

from a saleswoman's trip to sell arms to Saudi Arabia (remember her church lecture—"morality is making money") Arabian concern was expressed at the portrayal of an Arab drinking and dealing with a supposed prostitute. A foreign office official was reported to have been dispatched to the theatre. But the Arabs need have had no fears, since the Arab is the only character to emerge at the end of the play with any sense of decency, in a performance by Antony Sher which gave a few moments of pathos and dignity to a play which ended up as appalling as the unpleasant lives it presumably wished to satirise.

JIM HERRICK

CINEMA

TESS (A) directed by Roman Polanski. At the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square, London, and selected local cinemas.

Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* tells of a country girl seduced by her employer, Alec d'Urberville. She is subsequently abandoned by her husband, Angel Clare. Angel pardons her "transgression" too late—Tess has become Alec's mistress once again to support her destitute family. Tess murders Alec, flees with Angel, is captured and hanged. The plot may sound novelettish (*Tess*, like many novels of its period, started life as a newspaper serial), but it is elevated by Hardy's dignity and passion and by his narrative skill. Beneath the surface of bucolic peace, atavistic forces move. There is a powerful sense of foreboding, of "it was to be".

Tess is also a radical work, that of a man much influenced by Huxley, Darwin and Mill. Hardy wrote, ". . . the novel was intended to be neither didactic nor aggressive. . ." yet the whole narrative protests against the strictness of Victorian morality, at its dual standard and against the conditions in which the poor worked and lived. The book aroused a storm on its publication, not least because Hardy had the temerity to subtitle it, "A Pure Woman", thereby vindicating the "harlot" Tess. The book, which Henry James called "vile", has a rich, rank sensuousness: "oozing fatness and warm ferments", "The brim-fulness of her nature breathed from her".

Roman Polanski is known for his menacing, cruel films: "Repulsion", "Rosemary's Baby", "Chinatown". Disappointingly, he approaches Hardy's classic with reverence but without perception or vision. The end product is nostalgically beautiful, with wide, carefully-composed shots, bleached and hazy. Philippe Sarde's score gushes and swells at every moment of quiet intensity. As Tess, the beautiful young German actress, Nastassia Kinski, lacks the range and self-confidence demanded by the role. She is stiff, obviously hamp-

ered by the strange language and dialect. A more physical, more sexual presence is surely needed to convey Tess's "bouncing, handsome womanliness" and to justify the large number of delicious and very telling animal images Hardy uses in describing her. Although Ms Kinski's performance does grow when she is with the excellent Peter Firth (Angel Clare) she appears almost unmarked by the "immeasurable social chasm" opened by her seduction. That act itself is handled in a way which is at once blatant and over-romantic, with a cut from the assault to a boat on a swanny lake, carrying Tess and her assailant. Hardy, with his sense of sweat and pain and calloused hands, his feelings for folklore, superstition and history, and his still resonant social comment, is deodorised by Polanski, and reduced to a string of safe, pleasurable filmic clichés.

In superficial details of costume and dialogue, the film is faithful to the book, but there are many uncalled-for deviations in motivation, characterisation and the creation of atmosphere. Alec's conversion to evangelising Christianity is not shown, nor is the painter of fire-and-brimstone graffiti whom Tess meets shortly after her seduction. A copy of *Das Kapital* is seen on Angel's desk, which makes his rejection of Tess seem to spring from a political motive, rather than from his inability to shed the influence of his upbringing. The material pressures which make Tess succumb to Alec the first time are underplayed.

Polanski alters the structure of the narrative, and the film is the poorer for it. Hardy's novel opens and closes with scenes where the presence of Christianity is felt. At the beginning a clergyman speaks to Tess's father. At the end, Angel and Tess's sister, like Giotto's "Two Apostles", watch the raising of the black flag above the prison where Tess had been held. These two scenes enclose, pincer-like, those where Tess makes her first and last appearances—the May "club-walking" with the white-gowned girls each holding a peeled willow-wand and a white nosegay, and Tess's capture at Stonehenge. Polanski has cut the "Two Apostles" scene, and made the May club-walking less ritualistic than in the book. The all-important friction between Pagan liberalism and Christian restraint is thus vitiated. How are the mighty fallen!

VERA LUSTIG

LETTERS

The film "Prostitute" (reviewed in the March *Freethinker*) is well worth the attention of readers. *Freethinkers* will need no reminding of the vicious sexism, overt and covert of Christianity. Like other patriarchal and punitive religions, Christianity has many forms, there are the extreme attitudes expressed by the Fathers of the Church, for example St Odo of Cluny, who called women "saccus stercorum" (a bag of

dung') and the more enlightened attitudes which allow women to be ordained or even to carry the Pope's chair on ceremonial occasions. Nevertheless, ideas and patterns of ideology drawn from Christianity still underlie much of our legal system, not necessarily in any rational or open way. The ways prostitutes are treated in the legal system and by the public generally are an example of this sexism, inherent in Christianity and in the State and its apparatus. Prostitutes are despised, labelled and politically powerless; only a very few have their situation moderated by being in a higher status-class situation with male friends sufficiently important to protect them.

In recent years "The Freethinker" has given space in its columns to several male-dominated liberation groups. Is it not time to publicise this issue which primarily concerns women? Are there not many analogies between the situation of prostitutes and that of the majority of women?

Further information about a programme for the reform of soliciting laws may be obtained from 39 Brockley Grove, Moseley, Birmingham, 13.

BRENDA ABLE

BLIND CENSORSHIP

They're at it again! Headline: "On the Blind Side"—"The adult cinemagoers of our capital are, predictably, to be protected from the bare bums of Penthouse King Bob Guccione's epic "Caligula". After a special screening, Cardiff City Council's licensing committee decided by three votes to two to refuse the film an X certificate. One of the three councillors to vote against (the film) was Mrs Joan Ward. Mrs Ward is blind. ("Welsh Nation", March 1981.)

But mind, they're not always bad. Cardiff allowed "Life of Brian" to be seen, when Swansea turned it down, after some poor councillors felt physically sick.

DAVID ROBYNS

NEW PRESSURE GROUP

The anti-abortion group "Life" is said to have reported no less than 15 doctors to the authorities in an attempt to get them prosecuted for ending the life of a severely handicapped child, after consulting the parents.

To promote the life of a child who has no prospect of autonomous existence, nor hope of normal fulfilment in entering into the business and pleasures of the world, especially when the parents have been consulted and have made a difficult, but unselfish and compassionate decision, is a short-sighted and inhumane policy.

Now that this matter has come to the fore, it seems time that a pressure group were formed which does not believe in prosecuting doctors in these tragic circumstances, and does not believe in all life is sacred, whatever its quality.

I should be interested to hear from anyone who would like to join me in forming such a group.

PEGGY LEJEUNE,

42 Church Road, Warlingham, Surrey.

MUDDLED ROMANTICS

St Peter Cadogan's gallant defence of Don Cupitt's "highly revisionist idea of God" (April) strikes me as more "unfortunate" than my review of Cupitt's book.

I am old-fashioned enough to believe that language only leads to meaningful communication if there is a mutual willingness to use words in a commonly accepted way. I really do not see how anybody can presume to call themselves a Christian—let alone to hold down a Cambridge college deanery—when they deny the existence of a personal entity designated God; consider the virgin birth, crucifixion, resur-

rection and divinity of Jesus to be "irrelevant"; and do not believe in another life after death.

Cupitt may well be, as Cadogan proclaims, "the arch-heretic of the eighties" who has written "one of the seminal works of our time". He may consider himself a Christian Buddhist—or, for all I know, a Confucian Sufi—but unless the Thirty Nine Articles and the creeds are now acknowledged by the Anglican Church to be totally vacuous, how can he conscientiously remain an ordained clergyman?

Does Peter Cadogan's reference to Moncure Conway suggest that there may soon be a new apostate at SPES? Come to think of it, two such incurably muddled romantics would rub along very well together in a state of joint doctrinal, philosophical and ethical confusion.

ANTONY GREY

HUMANIST TEACHERS

With reference to Alex Dawn's letter "Humanist Teachers" (The Freethinker, April), perhaps it is time to revive the Humanist Teachers' Association. As a qualified (though unemployed) teacher myself I would be happy to hear from anyone who would support my efforts to do this.

DAVID FORBES

28 Nemoure Road, Acton, London W3

COMBINATION SERVICE!

Thank you for sending me a copy of the April issue of The Freethinker and for drawing attention to the item concerning myself on page 56, "Clobbered by God".

May I point out two inaccuracies which I consider important, although of course I realise that you may not agree?

The service was not a "Communion" Service, but the "Commination" Service and, as I was careful to explain to everyone who interviewed me, I used the form in the 1928 Prayer Book, which asked for God's "judgment" on the offenders, not his curses, as in the 1662 book. You must have picked up the item from one of the few reports that got it wrong, but at least you were not the only one to make a mistake in the name of the service—in one local paper it appeared as a "Combination Service"!

ROBERT NESHAM

ESPERANTO

I should like to see a world-wide Humanist organisation using Esperanto. There are already Esperanto organisations for Catholics, Protestants, Quakers, Bahais and Buddhists, and it is time we saw the Humanist viewpoint put as well.

Would anyone interested please write to me in Esperanto also suggesting a suitable Esperanto word for "Humanist" which would not be confused with "humanitarian"?

PETER DANNING

44, Morley Road, Twickenham, London TW1 2HF.

(NSS Annual Dinner)

for re-election as an openly gay candidate, but the Northampton people were not in general like that, she said. She admired the courage of those who had left the Labour Party to seek freedom of speech outside the party, though she did not believe that the Social Democrats had any new answers.

In a Britain where politics have failed and a world where people are not fitted to live on planet earth,

the National Secular Society was more vitally necessary than ever. The total absurdity and hypocrisy of current politics necessitated a truly radical look at the world. The NSS should offer a working alternative to the current ideas that prevail. The possibility of progress was seen in the way the young are challenging bureaucracy, politics, and the established church. Liberated women (and liberated men) were offering new roles, the world is now a global village and old barriers were breaking down.

Emphasising the need to navigate new courses in society, Maureen Colquhoun proposed a toast, "with pleasure, honour and hope" to the National Secular Society.

Rita Craft, a social worker and NSS representative on the Independent Adoption Society, replied on behalf of the Society. She said the NSS was as necessary as ever, that fear, bigotry and intolerance, which never vanished, needed to be countered by freethought and tolerance.

OBITUARY

MR W. BROUGHTON

Walter Broughton, a dedicated humanist for many years, has died at his home in Friston, Sussex. He was aged 82.

Mr Broughton was a long-standing member of the Rationalist Press Association and active in local humanist affairs. He was a founder member of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group and a former chairman of Eastbourne Humanist Group.

There was a large gathering at the humanist committal ceremony at Eastbourne Crematorium.

JOHN O'HARE

We have received news of the death, at the beginning of the year, of the freethinker and poet, John O'Hare. A contributor from the London Secular Group writes:

"John O'Hare, Poet and Freethinker Lived' is the only epitaph he would have desired. There will be no stone, but we who knew his writings will remember him as John of the Dreaming Stanzas. Some of those stanzas appeared in the *The Freethinker*. The Socialist Leader knew him for his 'Loud Music Far Off'. BBC Third Programme listeners will remember him for his 'Conversations' series.

His passionate love of life was reflected in his devotion to literature, he was an authority on the works of Shaw, Shakespeare and Dickens, and maintained that these three literary giants were the greatest of all time.

He knew his London, its history in stone, verse and book and its pubs. London and Freethought has lost its poet and we have lost a comrade."

MR A. LAMBERT

Alfred Lambert, who died recently at the age of 79, was a socialist and keen supporter of the secularist movement for many years. There was a secular committal ceremony at Medway Crematorium, Maidstone.

THE FREETHINKER CENTENARY APPEAL

This year we are celebrating the centenary of The Freethinker. Since it was founded 100 years ago, The Freethinker has "fought the good fight" against irrational and intolerant attitudes and championed many important social reforms.

The Freethinker survived the imprisonment for "blasphemy" of its founder and first editor, boycott by distributive agencies, two world wars and financial crises. Its survival would be described in some circles as a miracle; its continuation is vital to all who value the principles it promotes.

Please respond generously to this special Centenary Appeal.

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THE FREETHINKER

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EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co Antrim. Tel: Whiteabbey 66752.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Antony Grey: How Moral is the Backlash?—a look at the morals of puritanism. Sunday, 5 July. 5.30 pm. Queen's Head, Queen's Road, Brighton. (Junction Road entrance opposite Brighton Station.)

Havering and District Humanist Society. EST: Erhard Seminars Training. Tuesday, 16 June. Barbara Evans: A Personal appreciation of Thomas Paine. Tuesday, 7 July. Both 8 pm. Harold Wood Social Centre (junction of Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road).

Lewisham Humanist Group. Jim Herrick: The Freethinker Centenary. Thursday, 25 June. 7.45 pm. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. SE6.

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.)

London Young Humanists. John White: Getting rid of RI and Prayers. Sunday, 21 June. 7.30 pm. BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, Kensington, London W8.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday morning meetings, 11 am. Peter Heales: Education in a Rational Society, 14 June. Harry Stopes-Roe: The Values of South Place, 21 June. Jim Fyrth: William Morris and Work, 28 June. John Blake: The Proverbial Wisdom of China and Arabia, 5 July. Anthony Quinton: Madness as a Philosophical problem, 12 July.

Sutton Humanist Group. Dick Robinson, Senior Probation Officer: Alternatives to Custody. Wednesday, 8 July. 7.30 pm. Friends House, 10 Cedar Road, Sutton.

Gay Humanist Group. Maureen Colquhoun, Thursday, 25 June. A film evening, Friday, 10 July. Both 7.30 pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Humanist Holidays. St. Leonards-on-sea. 1-8 August, 1981. Almost fully booked, apply immediately for full details from Mrs B. Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12. Phone: 01-673 6234.

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