

# The Freethinker

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## LEGISLATION NO GUARANTEE AGAINST ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts has made strong representations to the Government not to extend the Obscene Publications Acts to public service radio and television. It not only opposes such an extension, but argues that the Acts should no longer apply to publications where consenting adults are concerned.

In a letter to all members of the Cabinet, David Webb, NCROPA's honorary director, describes British censorship laws as a disgrace, especially when virtually all other countries of the western world have long since dispensed with censorship as we know it.

NCROPA asserts that public service broadcasting is already more than adequately controlled by various broadcasting Acts. These are supplemented by the broadcasting authorities' own "voluntary" guidelines.

"To inflict further censorship restrictions on the programme makers and subject them additionally to the inhibiting confines of the Obscene Publications Acts, the lamentable results of which, in other media, are all too familiar to anyone who cherishes freedom of choice and individual liberty, would be an act, not only of recklessness, but of crass stupidity. It would also be an act of gross hypocrisy for the present Government so to legislate, formed, as it is, by members of a political party which ever proclaims 'the freedom of the individual' as the cornerstone of its whole philosophy."

Calling for the repeal of what it describes as "repressive, puritanical and out-moded Obscene Publications Acts", NCROPA refers to the recommendations of the 1979 Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship (the Williams Committee) which have still not been acted upon.

"In promoting such demands, we are not asking for that which is outrageous, or even unreasonable," NCROPA declares.

"It is vital to the arts and entertainment in general that they are allowed a free hand, if they are to expand, and flourish and progress. News, current affairs, documentaries and other factual programmes must also be free from state interference so that they can inform and enlighten honestly, impartially and fully. It will be intolerable for TV and radio producers and directors constantly to have to subject their programmes to the absurd 'deprave and corrupt' test of the 1959 Act — absurd because 'depravity' and 'corruption' are both highly subjective terms and legally unquantifiable. The even more absurd 'grossly offensive to a reasonable person' test, as promulgated in Gerald Howarth's (or was it the Home Office's?) recent and unlamented private member's Bill, will certainly not do either, since practically everything shown on television is 'grossly offensive' to someone, somewhere, and every someone, somewhere, thinks of him or herself as a 'reasonable person'. The mind-boggling consequences of carrying so lunatic a definition to its logical conclusion would mean that no programme would theoretically be transmissible."

Although television violence is rightly a matter of major concern, NCROPA argues that "it is essential to keep a proper perspective.

"Violence always has and, regrettably, always will be a part of society. Violent crime may have increased in recent years. On the other hand methods of detection, greater inclination to report crime, or even simply population increases, may all have something to do with this. There is also a widely-held view that crime is certainly no more rife now than it ever was, and possibly considerably less so. . .

"Broadcasting, both television and radio, reflects society, warts and all, and that must be right.

(continued on back page)

# The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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## SUNDAY RACING

Lord Macaulay said of the Puritans that they prohibited bear baiting not because of the animal's suffering but the spectators' pleasure. The same dictum could be applied to contemporary religious opponents of Lord Wyatt's Sunday Sports Bill which has had its Second Reading in the House of Lords and should reach the Commons before the end of the year.

Lord Wyatt's Bill has the backing of the Jockey Club whose deputy Senior Steward, Sir Cecil Blacker, told a press conference at Sandown Park last month that "while Ireland, France and Italy enjoy Sunday racing, Britain has been denied that right by the anomalies of an archaic and outmoded law."

The Lord's Day Observance Society has announced that it will spend whatever is necessary to defeat the Bill. It has already written to all members of the House of Lords. However, the LDOS, once the arrogant cock of the Sabbatarian walk but now regarded as an embarrassing oddity by the mainstream churches, has been upstaged by a slick Johnny-come-lately known as the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. This group spearheaded the operation which defeated the Shops Bill last year, and is now leading the field against Lord Wyatt's Bill.

The Sabbatarian bandwagon, presently travelling on the ecumenical highway, has been boarded by Roman Catholic leaders who must surely be regarded as unwelcome passengers by the fundamentalist Protestant LDOS. Nicholas Coote, assistant general secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, said the Church opposed the Bill in principle. It was in the interests of society to have a special day of the week free from commercialism. But RC Church "principles" are rather flexible on this question; licensed Catholic clubs, often conveniently situated in the church grounds, do a roaring trade in drink, cigarettes, raffle tickets, etc, after Sunday Mass.

The shallowness and hypocrisy of the Sabbatarian campaigners is revealed yet again in their denunciations of Sunday racing. Michael Schuler, spokesman for the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, said his organisation had "no objection to horses running round a field." That remark in the context of a debate on horse racing is as muddled as the case for legally compelling people to observe the Christian non-Sabbath as commanded by a figment of Dr Schuler's imagination. Sabbatarian propaganda is peppered with dire warnings of threats to "the

# NEWS A

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# 'S AND NOTES

family" and "the traditional Sunday", whatever that may be. Crocodile tears by the fontful are shed over stable staff who would have to prepare horses for Sunday races. But there are few Christian expressions of support when these workers try to extract a few more pounds a week from greedy trainers.

Christian objections to Sunday racing are rooted in an arrogant determination to make all and sundry toe the line of Sabbath observance. The human, and it is to be hoped, humanist objection is based on opposition to the brutal exploitation of sensitive animals for the benefit of wealthy owners and gambling syndicates.

Sabbatarian campaigners ignore the moral question of horse racing on Sunday or any day of the week. They probably do not know that over three hundred horses were killed during one National Hunt season. Add to that carnage the number of horses killed and injured in other races or during training and there is a far stronger case against racing than piddling causes like "our Lord and His Day" and "keeping Sunday special".

## THE SHOW GOES ON

The Rev Jim Bakker and his lady wife Tammy, America's television moguls of Praise The Lord ministry fame, are coming under ever closer scrutiny by the authorities. Congress itself is now taking an interest in the financial empire built up by the pious pair who are increasingly looking like discarded models from a small-town waxworks.

The Bakkers, probably more than any of their ilk, exploited the financial privileges accorded churches and religious organisations. Their multi-million dollar PTL network is exempt from taxes; so is the fundamentalist Disneyland known as Heritage USA, a conglomerate of studios, hotels and gift shops selling everything from a confection described as "Heavenly Fudge" to T-shirts inscribed "I'm Nuts About Jesus."

The Rev Jerry Falwell, the Bakkers' brother in Christ who took charge of their crisis-ridden ministry earlier this year, now refuses to return it. Even worse, the Moral Majority serpent has turned over to the Federal authorities documents which reveal that during one 16-month period Jim and Tammy "earned" over two million dollars in salaries and bonuses. In addition, the PTL ministry through its health insurance scheme, paid for an operation to

have Tammy's breasts rearranged and for Jim to have a face-lift.

The Bakkers are now complaining that they are in financial straits. But even in these troublesome times — and despite Jim's sexual gymnastics with a church secretary — they are sternly upholding the rule of "no sex outside marriage." So when Snuggles, their pet dog who lives in an air-conditioned kennel, became enamoured of a neighbour's poodle, Jim and Tammy arranged a canine "wedding". Snuggles wore a tuxedo and the "bride" was arrayed in a white dress and veil. The ceremony was followed by a reception attended by thirty (human) guests.

While the Bakkers struggle along on their last million dollars, Jessica Hahn, the born-again *femme fatale* who "revealed all", in a manner of speaking, to the Rev Jim, has struck it rich. She has been signed up by *Playboy* magazine to tell her story. The fee, plus the "hush money" paid to her by the PTL ministry, gives Sister Jessica good reason to Praise The Lord.

## NO QUARTER FROM JULIE

How the pious and conventional must choke on their Corn Flakes when reading Julie Burchill's *Mail on Sunday* column! Unlike so many of her profession she does not ooze respect for White House Rambos or career celibates like the Pope and his priests "whose ideal woman is a mother who is also a virgin."

A few months ago Mary Whitehouse, whose eyes must be screen-shaped by now, was denouncing BBC 1's *EastEnders* as a threat to family life, traditional moral values, blah, blah, blah.

Julie Burchill sees it differently. "The truth is that the idea of being born in original sin has mixed up and maimed more people than a million soap operas ever could.

"Not only are half the tarts in London convent-educated, but a large number of the drunks, dossers and assorted human flotsam lying around the streets speak with an Irish accent."

In the same article she recalled the scene when a woman was dragged screaming from a London courtroom after her son had been jailed for a vicious murder. In fact four of her sons were convicted murderers. "Where did we go wrong," she cried. "We are strict Catholics."

"Exactly," comments Julie Burchill, and quotes Auberon Waugh: "Traditionally, Catholics were taught that murder, prostitution, etc, were mortal sins. But so was missing Mass.

"Masturbation was as much a sin as rape and you might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

"But, in any case, if you made a good Confession both were forgiven instantly."

## NEWS FROM DORIS

Spiritualist superstar Doris Stokes, who died earlier this year, was a fake, according to author Ian Wilson. He has just published *The After Death Experience* (Sidgwick & Jackson), accusing Britain's best known medium of rigging "discoveries" of people's problems by psychic power when she appeared in theatres and halls all over the country.

Terry Stokes, her adopted son, is extremely angry about Wilson's allegations. He says his mother is in regular touch with him from beyond. She speaks to him through his left ear. "It is redder, because it is psychic," he explained.

Although she has met many departed relatives, Doris is nevertheless very happy in her new surroundings. Mr Stokes said: "She is absolutely delighted with the Other Side, although she hasn't had time to see much of it yet."

Doris Stokes makes the Great Adventure sound like moving to a retirement bungalow at Bexhill.

## XMAS SHOPPING LIST

Barbara Smoker, who has just compiled and published *Blackham's Best*, a selection of excerpts from H. J. Blackham (see News and Notes, *The Free-thinker*, September), is offering copies of it for sale at £1.50 each plus 20p postage (two or more copies post free), or, for a minimum of six copies, at £1 post free to humanist groups. Her address is: 6 Stanstead Grove, London, SE6 4UD.

She tells us that for the 1987 winter solstice she is also repeating the publication of some of her old Heretic Cards in a cheap photoprint notelet-style format at 10p each, together with some new designs with topical anti-religious cartoons, and will use customers' own cartoons if required. The cards have a choice of two inside wordings: either SEASON'S GREETINGS or, for general notelet use, WITH ALL GOOD WISHES. She will send a selection of ten cards (minus envelopes which cost an extra 2p each, but are the standard C6 size) for £1 post free, with a 25 per cent discount to groups for larger quantities.

Orders for *Blackham's Best* or for Heretic Cards or both may also include orders for Barbara Smoker's books *Humanism* (£1.50), *Good God!* (95p), or *Atheism on a Soap-Box* (50p), or for R. J. Condon's *Our Pagan Christmas* (75p).

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Thirty-three followers of a female guru, Park Soon Jan, who claimed she was directed by God, have committed suicide in the South Korean town of Yongion. Another sixty are missing from the headquarters known as Heaven. Many of the victims were teenagers.

## "... and Mrs Gillick's Statistics" ALASTAIR SERVICE

Mrs Victoria Gillick has never been the most dependable statistician in the world, and her recent efforts to twist the number of teenage pregnancies during the period of her case to show that she was right is an outstanding example of her work in the demographic field. There can, of course, be no doubt in anybody's mind that her mistake was unintentional, for Mrs Gillick is famous for her sincerity and quest for higher truth. Her much publicised contention last month was that the number of conceptions to under-16 girls between December 1984 and October 1985 was improved by the Appeal Court ruling in her favour that was in force during those months. In fact, there is no justification for her claim. She made the error, as many other people have, of misinterpreting accurate figures so that they give inaccurate impressions.

The trouble was that Mrs Gillick used the actual number of girls in the 13-15 age group, rather than the rates per thousand — which is the only figure that shows a useful trend. She overlooked that, although there was a reduction in these conceptions, there were actually 30,000 fewer girls in that age group than before, and the conception rate was in reality unchanged.

Nevertheless, you could take a safe bet that there are many people having conversations about this matter all over the country, since Mrs Gillick's claim, who really believe that she was right. The *Catholic Herald* on 11 September, jumped in with a news analysis that seemed to show that during the ten months when the Appeal Court's decision still ruled, lots of naughty girls simply stopped having sex. And I can imagine at this moment that writers for the bulletins of many idealistic if reactionary organisations will be composing their articles on the same assumption. Mark you, the *Catholic Herald* writers are not among the blindfolded. Their analysis goes on to point out the situation in our society in which children have rights of various kinds which are abused, of which the question of child sexual abuse is but one, however extreme. The Catholic newspaper points out the danger to children if, in such difficult situations, they were to become unwilling, or even unable, to go to a doctor without their parents' knowledge — as might be the case if Mrs Gillick had had her way.

As a society, we have not yet had time to digest fully the impact of revelations about child sexual abuse and the dangers of AIDS. Many assumptions and prejudices are inevitably going to be swept away by these recently emerging factors. There is no case any longer for any school that does not have a high standard programme of education in personal



relationships, sexuality and responsibility. But how long will that fact take to get through to all the groups of governors and teachers who must make the decisions to introduce sex education? There are substantial problems facing them, not least dealing with the feelings of cultural minorities among their pupils and parents. But these difficulties must not be allowed to hold up progress for long. For if AIDS makes the

much-feared jump from a minority within society over into the general public (which it could easily do, despite our health education efforts) we owe it to our young people to equip them to avoid infection for themselves and play their part in helping others to avoid it.

*Alastair Service is General Secretary of the Family Planning Association.*

## That Unholy Holy Evening

ERIC WESTMAN

Sated with persecuting AIDS victims and homosexuals, Christian fundamentalists have been contemplating an extension of their malevolent activities. They have been seeking new targets for their Bible-inspired venom. And judging by exhortations penned to newspapers, as well as pamphlets issued by such kill-joy mobs as the Evangelical Alliance and the Association of Christian Teachers, they have found one: Halloween.

Yep, good old "Trick or treat" — it's evil. But, we all know, "Halloween" means "Holy Evening": in Catholic countries it is the time when people visit cemeteries. Not for any Satanic high jinks, but to lay flowers on the graves of the dear departed. It is also the eve of All Saints' Day (1 November), dedicated in one fell swoop to all the saints that ever were — or weren't. And the day after that is All Souls' Day (don't say it quickly or it sounds rude): that's when Catholics indulge in prayers for the faithful dead. By Christian standards it should be a mighty holy time — three days of non-stop holiness — so why should the evangelical Johnnies find Holy Evening unholy? Is it because it is sometimes called "Nutcrack Night" and these Christian nuts seem pretty cracked?

Nope, the prizewinning answer is: because it was originally pagan.

Ye gods (all three-in-one of them)! If Christians are going to boot out everything of pagan origin in their pilfered religion, they might as well subscribe to life membership of the National Secular Society, because they won't have any religion left.

The whole idea of God, for instance — the pagans had that long before there were any Christians. So — out God: he is evil. Trinity? Sorry boys, the pagans had that too. Saviour? And that. Virgin birth? Lots of 'em. Baptism, Communion, Easter, Christmas, Harvest Festival? Yep, all pagan — all evil. Prayers, hymns, holy water — the pagans had the lot, centuries before Jesus was even a twinkle in the Holy Ghost's eye.

But back to Halloween. What is it, nowadays? Mostly a beano for young people, in which they

dress up as such biblical figments as "witches" or "demons", or other imaginary characters. After all, the clergy regularly dress up in funny clothes and the Christian killjoys don't find anything evil in that. The revellers could even dress up as parsons or bishops, except that it might frighten the children. What else goes to make up Halloween? A couple of bashful schoolgirls also disguised as "witches" (or as Mrs Thatcher — it's hard to tell the difference in the dusk) knocking on your door and giggling "Trick or treat". Whereupon one hands over a silver (sorry, cupro-nickel, these days) coin and hopes it was a 10p and not a 50. After all, with the decline of "Penny for the guy" the kids have got to have some sort of scrounging spree. Well, the parsons do, pretty frequently.

So that was Halloween: a fancy dress party for the young folk, and knocking on the neighbours' doors for the even younger. And, with any luck, a Frankenstein film on TV for us fogeys. That was evil? Funny, most of the partygoers and dressers-up will declare themselves to be, at least nominally, Christians. They don't see anything evil in what they are getting up to. Could it be that the problem lies with the evangelicals? After all, seeing something that does not exist comes under the heading of "suffering from delusions". People suffering from delusions are often sent to a special kind of hospital.

As a side activity to their surly assaults on Halloween, fundamentalists have indulged in a further jamboree of hate by picketing Spiritualist churches. But one Spiritualist managed to give the fundamentalists a good kick up the fundament. In a letter to *Psychic News*, she pointed out that in all her career as a psychiatric nurse, she had had only two Spiritualist patients. But in the same period, she had nursed more than a dozen fundamentalist Christians.

We get your point, Sister. Have a nice Halloween.

Roman Catholic bishops in the United States have introduced a "non-sexist" version of the New Testament. It will be used in church services by the country's 50 million Roman Catholics.

# School Worship: a Christian's Case for Abolition

JOHN YOUNG

Objections to the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act are not motivated solely by anti-religious sentiment. Secularists assert that legally enforced religious instruction and acts of worship are anti-educational and hypocritical. In this article, first published in the Church Times, the Rev John Young, Chaplain and Senior Lecturer at the College of Ripon and York St John, argues the case against compulsory worship in the nation's schools.

In preparation for his autumn Education Bill, the Secretary of State has issued a consultation document on worship in schools. He wants to loosen up the requirements in the 1944 Education Act, for daily collective acts of worship in all "State" schools.

Predictably, some Christian watchdogs — led on this occasion by Mr Conal Gregory, Conservative MP for York — have raised the alarm. It is, they say, the thin end of the wedge. Presumably the thick end of that wedge would be the abolition of school worship altogether. If so, this would be one of the few positive elements in an otherwise over-hasty educational package.

Most protestors lead us to suppose that the line-up on this issue is straightforward. In the blue corner we find most Christians, together with other men and women of good will. In the red corner a "coterie of teachers" (mainly vocal atheists and agnostics), together with their like-minded supporters. In fact, this is not the case: many thoughtful Christians are opposed to compulsory school worship and appalled at the prospect of putting the clock back.

In this context "putting the clock back" is a polite way of speaking about obeying the law. For the 1944 Education Act (theoretically still in force) requires that each school day shall begin with all members, apart from conscientious objectors, gathered together for worship. It is well known that many schools, perhaps *most* secondary schools, break this law daily, which is why the Secretary of State has decided to grasp the nettle, in the hope that he might bring the law into line with current practice.

Now that the issue is out in the open, there are only three possibilities. We can become more flexible, as Kenneth Baker suggests; we can insist that the present law is enforced; or we can ditch the requirement for school worship altogether. What we can no longer do is to pretend that this particular law isn't on the statute-books.

True, schools have been able to hide under the size factor. In 1944 most schools were small enough to make a whole-school gathering easy, and probably

desirable. But to gather all members of today's average comprehensive school is unwieldy, time-consuming and often simply impossible. As a result, many schools *can't* obey the law. Sighs (of relief) all round, for in truth they don't *want* to obey that particular law; and size produces a convenient excuse.

But we shouldn't be looking for convenient ways round out-dated laws. We want good laws which take account of relevant criteria. And the best possible law would not enshrine "flexibility" (the thin edge of the wedge, according to Mr Gregory and his cross-party supporters) but the *abandonment* of school worship altogether. Let's apply the *thick* end of the wedge; and let's do it now.

I do not deny that it can be helpful in fostering a sense of "belonging" if the whole school (or large sections of it) gathers together from time to time. Nor do I deny that many sensitive teachers and creative children work hard at producing meaningful assemblies. But I do assert that in Britain today it is encouraging hypocrisy, and giving a false view of what we mean by that great word "worship", to use the same word to describe what happens in churches on Sundays and what happens in most school assemblies during the week. *For true worship cannot be compulsory.*

By the time most children get to secondary school, they are pretty muddled about religion. But they are clear about one thing; they are not convinced Christians. To require them to pretend that they are for fifteen minutes each day is anti-educational and anti-Christian.

It is sometimes argued that experience of worship is an essential part of religious understanding without which young people cannot make meaningful choices concerning religion. (This argument was advocated in the influential Durham Report, *The Fourth R*, seventeen years ago). I fully agree — but what goes on in most school assemblies is so different (in feel and atmosphere, if not in content) from worship-freely-entered-into that it gives a false impression of what true worship is really like.

Perhaps it is different with younger children; but the present Act covers the entire age-range. When I was head of religious education in a large secondary school, I was responsible for organising school assemblies. Although I felt that compulsory worship was a profound mistake, a theological nonsense and a strategic error, and although I actively campaigned against it, I did not resign, because I believe strongly in religious *education*.

Despite my disquiet, I worked hard to make those



assemblies lively and interesting. I failed, and thus helped to reinforce the anti-Christian views of many teenagers (which is what I mean by "strategic error").

One day I was told that a fourth-form boy had absented himself from the daily act of worship. When I challenged him, his reply was honest and disarming. "I don't like it in there", he replied. I couldn't tell him that I didn't care for it much either.

As a result of experiences like this, many imaginative teachers — especially those working in multi-faith areas — have moved further and further away from assemblies seen as acts of Christian worship. Thank God for those with sufficient imagination, commitment (for preparing a good assembly takes a long time) and sensitivity to

encourage children to be interested, involved and creative. The results, especially with young children, are sometimes very moving. But they are usually stronger on aesthetic or ethical content than on theological content. And they are sometimes syncretistic and ultimately confusing.

In Britain today the need is for honest discussion of religious questions, based on accurate information and genuine experience. This is the stuff of good religious education. So let's put all our eggs into *that* basket, and none at all in the basket of school worship. For the eggs in this basket are stamped with words like "pretence", "out-of-touch" and "confusion".

Such words have no place in the Christian vocabulary — nor in sound educational practice either.

## Religion in Schools: the Secularist Case for Abolition

BARBARA SMOKER

The National Secular Society has consistently campaigned against the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act. It warned that the State financing of church schools would prompt non-Christian religious groups to demand the same privileges, thus increasing indoctrination and segregation of children. The NSS president has made a submission to the Department of Education and Science, giving the Society's views on the Government's proposed changes in the education laws.

We agree that changes in the education laws are very much needed, and the proposals to give schools greater flexibility with regard to the daily collective worship and to religious instruction (removing the compulsion on state schools, introduced in 1944) are certainly steps in the right direction.

The religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act were contentious even then, and this Society was among those that opposed them at the time, but the social changes that have taken place since then, particularly the decline in Christian adherence (with increases both in non-belief and in non-Christian religions) in this country, has made the 1944 provisions increasingly anomalous and unworkable.

Two of the reasons why non-Christian religious leaders are demanding public funding for their own denominational schools are (a) that it is patently unjust that they should be denied this as long as there are heavily subsidised RC and C of E schools, and (b) that they object to their children being taught their own religion by teachers who do not believe in it. Both these objections would be removed if (a) all denominational schools were to be phased out, and (b) neither religious teaching nor religious worship took place in school hours in the state schools.

The National Secular Society favours an open, multi-cultural policy and opposes segregation on grounds of religion, sex, or skin colour. We see denominational schools as socially divisive; as often denying to the children of immigrant families the basic right of contact with children from the wider community and access to ideas at variance with those of their home background; and, of course, as economically wasteful. We would therefore urge Parliament to call a halt to all new applications for voluntary-aided status and to set a date for all existing voluntary-aided schools to become either self-supporting or to be absorbed into the state system.

Unless this is done, the present Muslim, Sikh and Jewish applications for voluntary-aided status for their own schools cannot in equity be opposed. And as soon as one of them is successful, it could open the floodgates to applications from Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, Scientologists, Rastafarians, Seventh-day Adventists, and all the rest.

We issued a statement in 1986 on the subject of denominational schools, with the names of distinguished people who had signed it. And we are gratified to note that Bishop Montefiore has recently come out with a similar statement.

As for religion in "state" (county) schools, the most comprehensive statement of NSS policy is to be found in the House of Commons publication of Minutes of Evidence, 22 June 1981, to the Education, Science and Arts Committee (cmd no 110-xii), which includes two long memoranda from the NSS to the Committee as well as my oral evidence on the date given.

In summary: the NSS says that schools should not be used as part-time churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples; there are enough out-of-school hours for

religious instruction and services without trespassing on the time required for legitimate school subjects. We would like all religion to be dropped from school assemblies; RE to be cut out altogether; and moral education to be freed from its false association with religion. Facts about religion should, we think, be left to find their natural place in history and sociology lessons; but we agree with the British Humanist Association that, insofar as religious myths and doctrines *are* presented, then they should be required to cover a representative range of religious and non-religious views — i.e. to be, in the BHA phrase, “objective, fair and balanced.”

It is worth noting that in the USA — a country far more Christian than ours — religious teaching and practice in state schools is not only not compulsory, it is actually prohibited.

We are in favour of parental choice as far as this

is compatible with local educational policy, with an appropriate ethnic mix, and with the rights of children. But it is important, in our view, that every school should more or less reflect the ethnic proportions in the general population of the catchment area — which would avoid the current situation in Kirklees, where apparently nearly all the Asian children are in one school and nearly all the white children are in another, only a mile distant. And, as mentioned above, we do not think that parental choice should be allowed to override the basic right of every child to come into contact with a representative range of religious and cultural ideas. Also, unless children of different backgrounds mix together, we could build up for the future the sort of community hostilities which denominational schools have helped to perpetuate in Northern Ireland.

## Raising the Devil

**Robert Taylor (1784-1844) was an eccentric Cambridge graduate who took orders in the Church of England and held minor church offices in Sussex and London. He was forced to leave the Church of England because of his deist opinions which were an unorthodox mixture of astrology and etymological analysis. Taylor became a lecturer in deism and was twice imprisoned for blasphemy.**

Dubbed “The Devil’s Chaplain” by Henry Hunt, Robert Taylor was a witty, ebullient man whose ideas rocked the Christian orthodoxy of the 19th century and would do so today were they widely known. The keystone of Taylor’s “moral deism” was his conviction that religion originated in sun worship. He maintained that religious teachings, Christian, Jewish and pagan, were no more than allegorised astronomy, based on personifications of astral and planetary phenomena, and not human history.

Taylor propounded a universal typology of Christ, maintaining that the figure was an “emblematic personification of the SUN, one of many to be discovered throughout history. The terms Christ, Christ our Saviour, Our Lord, Our Blessed Lord and Saviour, are epithets that have no occult meaning. They were of familiar application, and always synonymous as applied to the Sun, to Jupiter, to Bacchus, Apollo and Adonis”.

If Taylor’s “astronomico-theological” discourses were to be republished in today’s climate of resurgent Bible-mania there would indeed be a crisis in the churches. The alleged blasphemies of the Bishop of Durham would seem childlike in comparison.

Many learned persons have supposed that Bible “history” is nothing more than astronomical allegory,

but Taylor is one of the few who were able fully to demonstrate this. He taught that there were two distinct sciences of astronomy; the practical, looking through a telescope and noting arithmetical truths, and the theoretical, interpreting the celestial mysteries of the ancients. Nothing can be more perplexing or mysterious to the uninitiated than the figurations on the celestial globes. The various divisions and subdivisions of unnatural objects in the pictured heavens plainly indicate that mysteries of some kind were intended, with the object of concealing important truths.

To what can these figures relate? Why have they been so religiously preserved? They are, with trifling variations, the same as those depicted before the period set down for the birth of the Saviour. All the celestial signs and figures must have meanings, and to the initiated their interpretation is as simple as with any other pictured primer. Taylor, in his role of The Devil’s Chaplain, proceeded to lay bare to the public gaze the lost science of allegorical astronomy.

Taylor was fearless in his outspoken lectures about the true origins of the Christian religion, maintaining that the whole affair of the birth of the blessed Saviour and the belief that he was both God and Man, referred not to persons who had ever existed on earth but to the stars of heaven. The Holy City, in which the birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension annually occur, was no place on earth but the Jerusalem which is in the heavens above. The gospel story is merely the natural phenomena of astronomy in allegorical guise. Taylor explained that the passage “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:2) meant that his listeners must



understand scripture as referring to astronomical science, and not to be so stupid as to suppose that Jesus Christ and his Apostles were persons that ever existed upon earth.

Albert the Great, teacher of Thomas Aquinas, wrote that "all the mysteries of the incarnation of our Saviour Christ, and all the circumstances of his marvellous life from his conception to his ascension, are to be traced out in the constellations and are figured in the stars". For there, in that heavenly Jerusalem, and only there, are the Bethlehem or "house of bread", the tent of the Virgin of August in which Christ is conceived, and all the Bethsaidas, Bethanias and Bethels in which every one of the imagined events of the gospels have their astronomical significance, and which the vulgar have stupidly mistaken for historical facts. The signs of the Zodiac were much the same in all ancient nations, indicating that there was a universal astronomical knowledge now largely lost.

The Zodiac is so called "on account of the living creatures that are imagined to be in it" (Gk zoon = animal). Mazzaroth, mentioned in Job, is the Chaldean name of the twelve signs. Job also refers to the Pleiades, Orion and Arcturus. Astronomers today are well aware that these are ancient names of constellations, but have no idea of their occult meaning. Even the so-called "modern" constellations are mostly old ones reintroduced under new names.

Taylor held that the sacred celestial knowledge was imparted to initiated persons under a pledge of secrecy and that divulging the truths to the uninitiated was a criminal offence deserving death. He claimed to have discovered the lost secrets of religion.

Robert Taylor was a brilliant student with a mastery of astronomy, using the pictured Zodiac to demonstrate his theory that the Sun was the only Jesus Christ that ever existed. As the solar God passes through the Zodiac, he assumes the character of each sign in turn and is identified with it. This is why we find Jesus being spoken of under the most opposite and contradictory qualities and attributes. Taylor showed that there was not one passage in the Old and New Testaments which could not be traced to its origin in occult astronomy which, under the allegorical veil of "sacred history", has for ages subjugated insulted reason to the power of priestcraft.

Down the ages the ignorant multitude have been quite as well satisfied with the shells and husks of science as the kernel. Believing the gory, monstrous and impossible tales of the Bible, they never endangered the power of the clergy by seeking to be wise beyond what was written as the word of God. Thus the Church, by teaching personifications as persons and allegory as history, has laid the barriers of pretended factual evidence across the path of knowledge.

## Begging for the Beeb

BBC local radio stations are power-houses of Christian propaganda, much of it of the yawn and squirm variety. A representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury has admitted that many parishes provide clergymen to take part in broadcasts. Now it appears that some of them are providing money for programmes as well.

Some time ago the Corporation sent a begging letter to churches in the Diocese of London. Congregations responded by contributing £10,000 which, by a happy coincidence, is half the budget for BBC Radio London's Sunday evening God slot.

Perish the thought that Auntie would vex the ghost of Lord Reith by indulging in moral blackmail. But there has been a gentle hint that if the faithful failed to cough up, the Sunday evening programme would not continue as at present. Broadcasting authorities admit that without the churches' donations it may be necessary to curtail the hour-long programme.

## Freethinker Fund

Contributions to the fund are much appreciated. It is through readers' generosity that we are able to meet the inevitable deficit and continue publishing Britain's oldest freethought journal.

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Total for August: £215.65.

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A congregation in Queensland, Australia, has decided to boycott the 57 varieties of Heinz foods. They are protesting against a new product, Spooky Spaghetti, the shapes of which include hobgoblins, witches and bats. The Rev Paul Camac said that eating Spooky Spaghetti might encourage children to "dangerous flirtations" with the occult.

## BOOKS

**THERESE OF LISIEUX**, by Monica Furlong. Virago, £3.95

This is the kind of book that puts one off Catholicism. However, such are my prejudices that I was very surprised to see a positive account of the life of a saint under the Virago imprint. All became clear on reading the Introduction by the author. Monica Furlong is an active Christian feminist who campaigns not only for the ordination of women but for a major rethinking of the fundamentals of Christian theology. This theology excluded women not only from the priesthood but from a state of grace by virtue of their association with sexuality and with Eve's sin — dealt with of course by the affirmation of the virginity of Mary. This book is an indictment of the effects of that heritage on late nineteenth-century girlhood.

By happy chance I read this book concurrently with a supposedly much "lighter" work, in fact a massive and well-researched novel called *The Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Bradley (London, Sphere Books, 1983), which is a reworking of the Arthurian legend in the context of the conflict between the spread of Christianity and the older religion of the Great Goddess, at the time of the Saxon invasions. The women of Arthur's family were reared in the "old religion", and his aunt and his half-sister Morgaine (Morgan le Fay) were priestesses of this faith. The novel's explicit message is that the old religion gave credence to women's wisdom and value both as priestesses and in civil life, and eschewed the possession or domination of women by men in marriage. In contrast, the Romans brought patriarchal marriage customs, including the possession of women and belief in their essential inferiority, and later Christian theology and practice institutionalised these further.

For the old religion, sexuality was greatly valued, and indeed a sacred duty for the priestesses, as a new king ritually "married" the Earth on his enthronement. For Christianity, sexuality was sinful and women were the repositories of sin. Yet the life of the convent for both Christian women and the women who had given their lives to the Great Goddess was similar; the devotion to the divinity requires deprivation, self-denial and contemplation.

Marion Bradley's novel is in the current wave of feminist iconography that tries to reclaim the life of religious dedication for women on female rather than on male terms; Monica Furlong's life of Thérèse of Lisieux shows how impossible this is, and what costs there are — and what pathology. Thérèse Martin was born to a couple whose own ambitions to enter

## FREETHINKER

the monastic life had been thwarted, and whose rearing of their children was so successful that all entered the convent walls. Thérèse differed from her sisters only in her fierce determination from an extremely early age; at the age of fourteen she argued with the Pope over the convent's refusal to admit her until she was sixteen — an event which one might compare (though Furlong does not) with Jesus arguing with the rabbis.

All her life she engaged in acts of self-denial and in efforts to be pleasing to her image of what God and Jesus "expected" of her — her peers considered her excessively pious and preoccupied with Jesus. Monica Furlong makes it quite clear that the young girl was really quite obnoxious. Once inside the convent walls, where her elder sisters were already nuns, she entered a life of commitment to austerity and suffering, which took the toll of her health so that at 24 she died of tuberculosis. Her eventual sanctity rested on the impact that her story made on others, particularly her writings which concerned the "little ways" in which one may serve one's faith in everyday life. Miracle cures associated with her relics and other symbols eventually led to her canonisation.

I cannot comment on the criteria used by the Vatican to grant canonisation: Monica Furlong makes no great effort to justify it, her concern is with the image of St Thérèse that the male hagiographer presents. This endorses the most conventional concepts of female piety; submission, docility, passivity and sweetness. And of course purity and asexuality. On the latter (at least ostensibly) Thérèse does remain intact — if only from lack of opportunity, though as Monica Furlong points out she was certainly in love with her Reverend Mother for a while. But on the other counts there is no evidence; she was single-minded, stubborn, flagrantly disobedient to human authority on occasion, and lacking in most characteristics associated with "sweetness". She had courage, determination and brains. It is this that Monica Furlong wants us to see.

But she also shows us the pathology of a patriarchal religion. Thérèse's determination was to serve God — specifically in the contemplation of Jesus. The contemplative life, the life of lonely self-denial in the belief that one's own suffering, or one's own communications with the deity, may serve the rest of humanity, may not be everyone's idea of an acceptable (let alone rational) ambition, but it is widespread and not confined to any one religion. For the fictional — or at least fictionalised — Morgaine this meant communion with a female deity and the



# REVIEWS

expression of the male-female principle through ritual sexuality; her femaleness served a female force, as the man who played the Horned God in the ritual served the male force. The sexuality was equal, explicit and recognised, and only a part of the priestesses' life and obligations to the contemplative process. For Thérèse the profession of her spiritual contemplation required her symbolic betrothal and marriage to Christ — within the rhetoric of surrender and obedience required by Christian patriarchal marriage. Her contemplative acts, her surrender of will, are, it is quite clear from the language used, highly eroticised. She had "given myself over to our Lord for his pleasure, his satisfaction, not mine". (p 89). For a nun, the act of submission of the soul to the deity had to be equated with the submission of the body (and soul) to a man; it could not, it seems, be an act of one essentially gender-neutral being to another.

Monica Furlong tries to make a case for taking a more positive and less dismissive view of Thérèse of Lisieux, as a way of bringing into question the patriarchal assumptions of the (Catholic) Church. There are many ways in which feminists are trying to do this: Marion Bradley's fairly gentle fictional epic reflects the tradition of seeking an alternative religious heritage. Far more extreme is Mary Daly, another (ex) Catholic, who has turned the mediaeval dualism of good and evil, equated with male and female, on its head in her blanket condemnation of all males as the evil Cockocracy (*Pure Lust*, London, The Women's Press, 1984). She has re-written even the old religion in ultra-separatist terms. The non-religious feminist asks for a more rational — or rationalised — way of dealing with the patriarchal religions of the sky-gods; Monica Furlong has perhaps persuaded me that there is a space for recognising the lure of the metaphysical contemplative life, but I do not think that presenting Thérèse Martin as the epitome of a self-defining young woman is enough to challenge the orthodoxies of the present monastic ethos.

HELEN HASTE

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT AND WRONG: AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL THEORY, by Bernard Mayo. Routledge and Kegan Paul, £9.95 and £4.95

A spirited introduction to moral philosophy. The major part of the book is devoted to a survey and critique of possible positions. Here there is some straw flying in the wind, as straw men disintegrate; but quite a bit of real fur flies too.

The "central question of meta-ethics" is said to be "what distinguishes 'moral' from 'non-moral'?". This remains the central question of the book, though it ranges more widely. However, the most interesting feature is the emergence of a different question, and Bernard Mayo's own attempted answer to it: "what distinguishes 'moral' from 'immoral'?". "Immoral" and "non-moral" are explicitly distinguished: the former compromises those things that should be moral but are not; the latter represents a shift outside morality. "Killing people is good" is immoral, "strawberries are good" is non-moral.

Mayo lists three tests which any satisfactory moral theory must pass (pp 47-8):

- (1) It must not involve occult properties; that is to say (as Mayo explains it) "peculiar properties, not accessible to ordinary methods of observation or reasoning, and accessible only to a peculiar kind of faculty, which is itself totally inaccessible to ordinary psychological investigation".
  - (2) It must account for the action-guiding feature of morality. By this he means that moral terms have a motivational force.
  - (3) It must give an adequate account of the phenomena of moral controversy. This is identified as the requirement of objectivity.
- A fourth test is added at p 127:
- (4) It must give an adequate account of what it is for the individual moral agent to adopt a morality and to conduct his own moral life. Mayo calls this "the autonomy test".

The first test seems to me somewhat tendentious, as a prior claim — though I personally agree with it. Some people might think the third tendentious. From my point of view the third is the most interesting. "Objectivity" is the claim that "moral judgements are objective not subjective; that is . . . they are true (or false) independently of who happens to be making them. Is there a real basis for moral judgements, or is it all a matter of personal feelings or attitudes? (These may not be the only alternatives.)" (p 11) So the third test presupposes that there is "a real basis". Clearly it is not unreasonable to suppose that "objectivity" is one of the things that distinguishes "moral" from "non-moral". But having got as far as this, one may be tempted to ask "what is this basis?" In shifting on to that question, one has left the first of the two basic questions I noted above, and become involved

with the second: what distinguishes moral from immoral, right from wrong, "true" moral statements from "false" ones?

I think one can say that the purpose of the book is first to work the reader round to accepting "prescriptivism" as essentially the right basis for understanding morality — "with suitable qualifications" (p 146); and then to introduce, in outline, the principal remaining elements of a coherent and adequate prescriptivism.

What is "prescriptivism" as Mayo means it? There is (I think) no explicit answer to this question. Prescriptivism is wider than Professor Hare (p 57). It seems to amount to the claim that moral judgements are "action-guiding"; but with the added requirement that "such notions as rules, principles and verdicts [are] at the centre of morality" (p 96). Is "prescriptivism" in any degree controversial? In so far as it is the recognition that moral judgements are action-guiding, it is totally not controversial! That is the very essence of morality. (This is of course not to say that people will consent to be guided.) In so far as the other views he discusses — Naturalism, Intuitionism etc — are presented in a form that fails to recognise this action-guiding aspect, they are worthless. But perhaps the point of "Prescriptivism" is to claim that moral judgements on right and wrong *must* be framed as "rules, principles and verdicts"; thus far it *might* be controversial. Mayo does discuss the place of principles and rules. There are points here; but "Prescriptivism" in pretty much a platitude.

So I move on to the more interesting question: How does Mayo construct his prescriptivist view of morality? This is of particular interest to us, for, if it worked, I think Mayo's theory would be an interpretation of Humanism. The main work is done in the last two chapters 11 and 12; and the second basic question, the distinction between "moral" and "immoral", begins to dominate the discussion. The title of chapter 11 is directed to the moral/non-moral distinction; but the discussion overflows beyond this in the first few lines. We move from "moral considerations" being "things like killing and stealing" to " 'Right means telling the truth. . . ' ". If one is concerned with *moral considerations*, then both "killing", and "the truth of what one says" are such, and one leaves open the question whether *one should* do the one or the other; and we are in the domain of "the central question of meta-ethics" as Mayo first defined it. On the other hand, if one is concerned with the question "what right means" then it is central whether "killing" and "telling the truth" are examples. One is concerned with the moral/immoral distinction. Thus:

|                       |           |           |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Strawberries are good | —         | Non-moral |
| Killing is good       | Immoral ) |           |
| Killing is not good   | Moral )   | Moral     |

Mayo does not note the point, but in the last two chapters he is very much interested in the question: If "morality" is "objective", i.e. there is a real distinction between "right" and "wrong", then *what is it?*

The basic answer he gives is: "What determines this content [sc. of morality], and makes it objective, is just one big fact about morality: the fact that it is, in some deep sense, *useful*, profitable, advantageous, beneficial" (p 148). This leads (as he notes) to the questions "Beneficial to whom?", and "Is a given 'benefit' of the right sort?" Mayo's response to these problems is a natural law theory of morality — only of course a prescriptivist form of it (p 156). Thus far, I personally agree with him. He tries to catch the point by the claim "So the word for 'man' (or 'human being') does have certain values built into it" (p 155). Here, I think, he is on the wrong lines. But at least he is facing the problem of the moral/immoral distinction, and he is looking in an interesting direction for an answer.

The last chapter of all faces the final and supreme problem of moral philosophy, "Why should I be moral?" This is even further removed from "the central question of meta-ethics", as Mayo had defined it. It is of the essence that "moral" here means "moral as against immoral". Again, he looks to the values built into the word 'man' to give him what he wants: human beings have "a certain rather special set of needs . . . which egoism cannot satisfy" (p 161).

I like his list of special needs. However, he does not notice the really basic problem which besets any solution to the moral/immoral distinction: Why pick *these* values rather than some others? If he had noticed this question, I do not think he would have been able to find any answer to it, within the framework of his view of morality. But again, the discussion is interesting, and valuable points are raised.

HARRY STOPES-ROE

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The current issue of *New Humanist* (88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW, price £1.50) carries a comprehensive range of articles. Contributors include Denis MacEoin on Islamic revivalism, and Janet Sheriton on Mary Wollstonecraft. There is a major article by David Tribe entitled *The Rise and Decline of Ethicism*. Author and entertainer Benny Green recalls his childhood of freedom from religion. Book reviewers include Beverly Halstead, Madeleine Simms and T. F. Evans. The contents also include an extensive Letters section, Jim Herrick's editorial and Nicolas Walter's *Rationally Speaking* column.



# Freethought in Fiction (4)

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

## *Catharine Furze* and *Clara Hopgood*

It was only in 1896, when he was in his mid-60s, that William Hale White was publicly identified as author of the books published under the name "Mark Rutherford". He is now once more in vogue. And deservedly so, says Andrew Whitehead, who discusses here the last blossomings of White's literary output.

As befits a man trained as a non-conformist minister, William Hale White's novels are concerned with religious and political dissent, social convention and its defiance, and the ambiguous status of the independently-minded woman.

Hale White never became a minister of religion, and after a brief dalliance with George Eliot and the *Westminster Review*, he pursued a career as a civil servant. It was late in life, under the pseudonym of Mark Rutherford, that White embarked on a brief but distinguished literary career.

He is best remembered for *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, a gentle and enticing novel of turbulent times and tempestuous emotions. It appeared in 1887, and is in two distinct parts. The first is cast against the political excitements of the years after the Napoleonic wars, while the second reflects on the much more parochial divisions in the sleepy town of Cowfold, north of London, during the 1840s. Not all revolutions stem from rebellion, and as if to make this point, the "revolution" of the title refers not to the insurrectionary interludes of the Regency, but to the eclipse of the mendacious minister of the Tanner's Lane Chapel in Cowfold.

Hale White was born and brought up in Bedford, and that town — under the guise of "Eastthorpe" — is the setting of *Catharine Furze*, his penultimate novel published in 1893. It is set in the 1840s, and concerns the daughter of the town's ironmonger. Her mother is concerned above all with social status, for there is little else to concern oneself with in Cowfold, and she determines "to exchange the chapel for the church" and to move to the fashionable end of town.

The social ambition of Catharine's parents in sending her to a local finishing school proves the undoing of their matrimonial strategies. For there, Catharine — intelligent, sensitive, but modestly educated — becomes enamoured of a married clergyman. That unconsummated relationship is the focus of the book.

It is only as an incidental that the author introduces as Cowfold's best-regarded doctor the peculiar character of Dr Turnbull, a freethinker and local philanthropist. He's a common-sense practitioner, who never advises physic or mesmerism where

simple rest might suffice. And he makes no secret of his unbelief:

He was a materialist, and described himself as one: he disbelieved in what he called the soap-bubble theory, that somewhere in us there is something like a bubble, which controls everything, and is everything, and escapes invisible and gaseous to some other place after death. Consequently he never went to church. He was not openly combative, but Eastthorpe knew his heresies, and was taught to shudder at them.

Although a remarkable individual himself, he is an anti-individualist: " 'Never, under any pretext whatever', " he advises, " 'allow yourself to do what is exceptional'. " As for his ethos, that is summed up in a sentence: " 'My notion is that our intellect is intended to solve real difficulties which confront us, and that all intellectual exercise upon what does not concern us is worse than foolish'. "

If *Catharine Furze* is a tale of sexual temptation denied, then *Clara Hopgood*, which appeared three years later, is a story of a woman succumbing to temptation. Again looking back to the 1840s, Clara and her sister, Madge, live in Fenmarket, a few miles the far side of Eastthorpe. They are well-read, having received some education in Germany, and of independent spirit.

Madge Hopgood is required to leave her boarding-school on the south coast because her cheerful admission that she has not been christened provokes suspicions of atheism. And it is Madge who, when a thunderstorm interrupts a country walk with her suitor, is partner to temptation. Claire Tomalin comments in an afterword to a recent edition of *Clara Hopgood* that Madge appears to be "the first English heroine to elect to become an unmarried mother on a point of principle, and to be given unequivocal credit for her decision by her creator".

The pregnancy obliges the Hopgood family to move to London, and there the sisters, cast adrift from conventional society, become involved with radicals and Chartists. Neither are freethinkers, but both display considerable independence of mind about religion as in every other field.

At one point, Madge criticises the blandness of Wordsworth's poetic imagery:

" . . . they convey nothing whatever to me. I find, though, they are much admired by the clergy of the better sort, and by certain religiously-disposed people, to whom thinking is distasteful or impossible. Because they cannot definitely believe, they fling themselves with all the more fervour upon these cloudy Wordsworthian phrases, and imagine they see something solid in the coloured fog."

Later in the novel, an incidental character criticises those radical politicians who sought to keep Chartism religious: " 'Let us once get the six points, and the Established Church will go, and we shall have secular education, and in a generation there will not be one superstition left'. ' This draws a fierce rebuke from Clara:

"I do lose a little patience when I hear it preached as a gospel to every poor conceited creature who goes to your Sunday evening atheist lecture, that he is to believe nothing on one particular subject which his own precious intellect cannot verify, and the next morning he finds it to be his duty to swallow wholesale anything you please to put into his mouth."

One of the pleasing twists to *Clara Hopgood* is the appearance in its closing pages of the Italian nationalist and reformer, Mazzini. Clara, always the bolder of the sisters, offers her services to his cause, while Madge settles down to domesticity with a half-Jewish mathematical instrument maker from Clerkenwell.

There are many sides to Hale White's stories — their boldness, their compassion, the craft in their telling. Of all the novels considered in this series, his — though very much of their period — are the most readable today.

*Mark Rutherford's novels, Catharine Furze and Clara Hopgood, are published in paperback by the Hogarth Press at £3.50 and £3.95 respectively.*

## LETTERS

### A SLUR REJECTED

What was the purpose of Antony Milne's letter (September): to display the inconsistency of his views on censorship or to cast a slur on one of the few bodies which has consistently fought against it, the National Council for Civil Liberties?

Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* ought to be censored, he tells us, but pornography ought not. NCCL's view is more consistent. We have argued against censorship of *Spycatcher* because the information it contains raises vital questions which must be resolved: if attempts were made from within the security services to undermine the elected Government of Harold Wilson, and MI5's surveillance of law-abiding members of the public was as widespread as Wright alleges, surely the public interest in protecting our democracy overrides Wright's duty of confidentiality to his employer?

NCCL has also consistently opposed state censorship of pornography. We have campaigned for reform of the Obscene Publications Act and lobbied effectively against recent attempts to extend it. When Gay's the Word bookshop was prosecuted for allegedly importing "indecent" literature, it was NCCL's lawyers who represented its directors until the charges were eventually dropped.

Antony Milne ought to get his facts straight and his arguments consistent.

SARAH SPENCER,  
General Secretary, NCCL

### INTERPRETING THE EVIDENCE

It is rather sad that both P. L. Lancaster (August) and Stephen Moreton (September) have to accuse me of deception in their attempts to reply to my letter. I am happy to accept that they are being quite honest and straightforward.

The dubious reputation of statistics is not helped by P. L. Lancaster's letter. The point is clear: if the odds are 1,000 billion to one against, the chances of anyone observing the event in question (whether his name is Tim Lenton or not) are unutterably remote. The fact that very nearly 5,000 billion people are not observing it can hardly mean that I (or he) as the remaining observer am virtually certain to do so. That would be true only if the event is known to happen once out of every 1,000 billion possible occasions. This is not so, and that is not what "odds against" means.

I am not half as devious as Mr Moreton would like to think. However, I am a little more suspicious than he is about things that scientists have "settled", which are "conclusively" proven and which appear in "standard textbooks". Experience teaches that textbooks must constantly be rewritten and that "proof" is often no more than a lack of imagination. Despite — and sometimes because of — the discoveries of science, very much is uncertain. If it is in the interest of anybody to be economic with the evidence, it is surely the establishment rather than creationists who have something to gain. My point was simply that certain evidence could be interpreted, honestly and scientifically, as indicating a relatively young age for the Earth, just as it was possible to come to the opposite conclusion through equally honest interpretation. It is up to us what we make of the mountains of evidence, but to assert that it all points one way is a little optimistic — if that's the right word.

TIM LENTON

### CHRISTIAN SIMPLICITY

David Tribe's article, *Guidelines for Gurus* (August), was a pleasure to read. It offered serious facts and home truths wrapped up in lighthearted banter. Despite the problems associated with cults there is obviously a funny side to it all, and if cult folk had a sense of humour (which they generally lack) they too ought to chance a smile at David Tribe's "Ten commandments for prospective gurus."

As a Christian who does not mind a bit of leg-pulling I expected the follow-up article, *Blue-chip God Companies* (September), to be written in the same spirit and to provide a chuckle or two. Regrettably the tone is quite different: the article is not funny; the attempt to provide an adaptation of the "ten commandments" (don't forget as Christians we already have such a set!) does not pay off — it sounds laboured — and one gets the impression that the author, unlike when writing about cults, has an axe to grind.

To see ourselves as others see us is always interesting, but I simply cannot identify with the lopsided picture of Christianity David Tribe has painted.

Of course the Christian churches have faults. Many of us would like to see less doctrine and ritual. And there have been prominent people, from the Borgias to Ian Paisley, who have had a bad influence. There is, however, a difference of vital importance: in the cults corrupt founder-leaders exploit their followers, while in Christianity-gone-wrong corrupt followers exploit the name of Christ.

Critics also seem to overlook that for every televangelist or whoever else attracts negative media attention there is a large number of rank-and-file Christians who



quietly and unpretentiously follow Christ by making the world a better place for somebody less fortunate than themselves — anonymous Mother Therasas.

Good news appears to be no news. Football hooligans and trouble at pop festivals are faithfully reported. A crowd of 25,000 young Christians from all over Europe who filled London's cathedrals to bursting point over the New Year were not mentioned by the media, not even in the local press. Yet these young people represented hope, being part of a "pilgrimage of reconciliation" organised by the Taizé community, Burgundy, France.

In July I spent a week at Taizé and felt that what was offered there was Christianity in its purest, most unadulterated form. Thousands of young people meet week after week in the spirit of joy, simplicity, mercy and openness. These are not just words but reality at Taizé, and the place seems to provide an antidote to cultism: group fellowship and spiritual fulfilment without pressure, without strings attached and without anybody trying to convert anybody else. Perhaps David Tribe should forget the Spanish Inquisition and other horrors of the past, and recognise that as yet nothing and nobody has managed to destroy the real spirit of Christianity. It always comes up again.

If I have not managed to make an impression, why not read C. S. Lewis? Up to the age of 36 he was an atheist, and while at Cambridge as lecturer he became a Christian via his intellect and logical reasoning. If this sounds incredible, read the first two chapters of *Mere Christianity*. They were written in the 1940s, but are not in the least dated, and the book has been reprinted again and again because of great demand. Take the challenge and read it!

URSULA MACKENZIE

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 1 November, 5.30 for 6 pm. Martin Horwood: Future Plans for the Humanist Movement.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** Annual Dinner at Langford's Hotel, Third Avenue, Hove, Saturday, 7 November, 7 pm for 7.30 pm. Guest speaker: Barbara Smoker. Tickets: £7.75. Bookings to George Vale, Newlands, Vale Bridge Road, Burgess Hill, Sussex, telephone Burgess Hill 43802.

**British Humanist Association.** Autumn School at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, 26 to 29 October. Theme: Religion, Humanism and Morality. Speakers: Jim Herrick, Martin Horwood, Don Liversedge, Dymphna Porter, Harry Stopes-Roe, Nicolas Walter and John White. Details obtainable from the BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8 5PG, telephone 01-938 4791.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group.** Programme for Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6UH, telephone 031-334 8372.

**Gay Humanist Group.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** The Unitarian Centre, 72 Berkeley Street (near Mitchell Library), Glasgow. Tuesday, 20 October, 7.30 pm. Jim Barr: The Woodcraft Folk — a Secular Children's Organisation. Sunday, 8 November, 2.30 pm. Charles Douglas: Nationalism.

## Humanist Holidays

Twenty-three years ago a number of humanists decided it would be a good idea to organise holiday centres for members and friends of organisations within the movement. In 1964, thirty adults and children had an enjoyable summer holiday at Brantwood House, the house built by John Ruskin on a hillside above Lake Coniston.

Since then, Humanist Holidays, as the group became known, has provided a service to the movement that is much appreciated by all who have participated. Holidays have been arranged at Easter and Christmas, and of course during the summer. A number of visits to overseas centres have also been organised.

Already this year there have been holidays at York and Jersey, in the Channel Islands. Bookings are being accepted for the Christmas holiday which will be at a Brighton hotel, 24-28 December. Details are obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL52 5AA, telephone (0242) 39175.

A considerable amount of planning and hard work is involved in arranging holidays, and the success of Humanist Holidays is a tribute to those members who have volunteered their services. A special tribute is due to Marjorie Mephram, the first secretary-treasurer and organiser of holidays until 1979. Those who knew Marjorie and her family will be greatly saddened by the news of her serious illness. She has been in a nursing home since April. Marjorie's husband George (of 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM1 4PD), carries on as Chairman of Humanist Holidays.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 3 November, 8 pm. Robert Thake, Robert Owen a Freethought Writer.

**Humanist Holidays.** Christmas at a central Brighton hotel. Information obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL25 5AA, telephone 0242-39175.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 29 October, 7.45 pm. Bill Abbey: A Century of Esperanto.

**National Secular Society.** Annual Dinner at the Coburg Hotel, London, Saturday, 19 March 1988.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47843.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 October, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. James Hemming: The Humanist Regeneration of Society. Wednesday, 11 November, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Roger Thatcher: Is Man a Flexible Computer?

## *Legislation no Guarantee*

Violence-free television would not only be dishonest, it would be boring. . .

"The impact of television on the viewer, either in programme or advertisement form is not, however, one of unqualified and unchallenged persuasiveness. The images transmitted on the screen certainly publicise, familiarise and inform the viewer, but that in no way ensures or compels approval or acceptance, or even any positive effect one way or the other of such images or ideas suggested by them. The notion that anything shown on television is automatically and uncontrollably desired or imitated may be the advertising industry's pipe-dream, but it is, in reality, a myth. A much more valid notion is surely that what is screened, particularly if it is disliked or unpleasant, will inspire aversion. That same criterion will also apply when violence is screened.

"The argument that children are at risk, even if adults are not, is also grossly over-stated. Children are perfectly capable of differentiating between fantasy and reality and are not nearly as vulnerable as many of our would-be censors would have us believe."

NCROPA believes that there will always be misfits and oddballs who will be a risk and at risk. No amount of legislation will guarantee society's protection against such elements.

"There are many anti-social activities in our lives, but in its wisdom, and in the wider, over-riding interests of a free society, Parliament does respond to these with harshly authoritarian restrictive legislation. It does not ban the sale of solvents because a minority of children (about one every six days) kill themselves by sniffing glue. It does not ban alcohol because a minority of people kill themselves and others by excessive drinking (about 1,000 people are killed on the roads every year by drunken driving). It does not ban motor vehicles because a minority of 5,000-6,000 lives are lost each year in road accidents. It does not ban smoking because a minority of approximately 100,000 people die each year as a direct result of the habit. And it should not ban TV and radio programmes because a minority of people become violent criminals, notwithstanding that any positive link between their harmful behaviour and what is seen on television has ever been proven, in spite of the many spurious and often ludicrous attempts at so-called scientific research to do so."

The statement concludes that the Government's ill-conceived plans for broadcasting censorship must be scrapped, "unless we are to end up with wall-to-wall 'Blue Peter', 'Gardener's World' and 'Songs of Praise'."

*NCROPA: details from David Webb, Honorary Director, 15 Sloane Court West, London SW3.*

## **Bible-Inspired Bashing**

A wooden paddle on which biblical quotations are painted is being used to beat children of religious families in New Zealand. One of the inscriptions is "Withold not correction from the child. . . Thou shalt beat him with a rod and deliver his soul from hell."

A leader of the Assembly of God Church said that most Bible-believing people believe in discipline with a rod or ruler.

"Our people are free to get things like that from the Scripture Union bookshop," he added. "Our Sunday school teachers might have them to show to the children, but if a child is naughty his or her parents are told and the discipline is up to them."

Mrs N. Dawson-Wheeler, an Education Department clinical psychologist, confirmed that there had been a disturbing number of child abuse cases involving religious families. The children were often covered in bruises.

"Some of the children I have dealt with have told me their mummies and daddies told them that the bluer the bruises the more the devil is driven out of them."

## **Christians' Bloody Squabble**

A born again Christian's home in Enfield, north London, was the scene of a bloody Sunday confrontation which left a 31-year-old woman fighting for her life. Gillian Mechora was found by police in the front garden of a house in St Mark's Road suffering from multiple stab wounds. She was taken to Chase Farm Hospital suffering from a collapsed lung and damaged liver.

It appears that a row broke out between Miss Mechora and two men shortly after all three had attended morning service at the local Pentecostal Church. That afternoon she was driven by one of them to the house where the other man, William Forbes, had a flat. It is believed that they had been having a relationship and she had gone to break the news that it was over. Neighbours heard loud screams shortly after Miss Mechora and her friend arrived.

Mr Forbes, who was suffering from a stab wound and a head injury, was also taken to hospital. He said that God told him what to do.

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Nine Mormon missionaries have been expelled from Grenada. They had been working without permits, but the main reason for expulsion was what a government official described as their "negro shut up" attitude. Black people were banned from membership during the church's early history and until 1978 were not allowed to hold high office.