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“PROTECTION OF RELIGION” OR BACK-DOOR EXTENSION OF BLASPHEMY LAW?

In its second review of the Race Relations Act 1976, the Commission for Racial Equality has resurrected the question of extending blasphemy law to protect religion other than that of the Established Church. In a foreword to the review, the Commission chairman, Sir Michael Day, writes: “The Race Relations Act does not give protection against religious discrimination as such. . . We believe that the Government should now give consideration to introducing legislation with enforcement machinery to combat religious discrimination.”

One of the Commission’s recommendations is “a specific law against incitement to religious hatred should be introduced and a law against religious discrimination should be given further consideration”.

The Commission declares that because it is discriminatory, the blasphemy law is unacceptable. But there is no criticism of the law’s unacceptably because it imposes restrictions on freedom of expression. Nor does the Commission recognise that it is not unbelievers and opponents of blasphemy law, but those religionists wishing to retain and extend it who foster hatred of believers in other gods.

Referring to laws in Northern Ireland which prohibit discrimination on religious grounds and incitement to religious hatred, the CRC declares “there are no equivalent laws in Britain”. However, there is a profound difference between the two societies. One is poisoned by fundamentalist Christianity; the other is described by church leaders as “post-Christian”. There are odd-ball religious minorities in Britain, ranging from born-again Christians who hold that Jesus was the son of God and saviour of mankind, to orthodox Muslims who believe that of all the religious teachers and gurus, the Prophet Mohammed was the cat’s whiskers.

Of course there is religious discrimination in Britain. But such discrimination is in favour of religion, with churches and religious organisations enjoying privileges

denied to others. Being automatically granted charity status, public-funded chaplaincies, an entrenched and legally enforced place in the education system, several hundred hours of air time in the broadcasting services at national, regional and local levels, are only some examples of discrimination in favour of religion.

Over thirty identifiable Islamic organisations submitted written evidence during the Commission’s public consultation. It is virtually certain that it was from that constituency from which pressure to extend blasphemy law emanated. Although the review has been published, there is no reason why freethought, humanist, civil liberty and literary organisations should not put their views to the CRE, Elliot House, 10-12 Allington Street, London SW1E 5EH.

Even without a law, religious zealots have little trouble in detecting “discrimination” although it does not exist. If passed, a law against so-called religious discrimination could create a range of problems. If an applicant for a job did not mention that he is a Muslim, or if an employee converted to Islam, the employer would be compelled by law to allow time off for prayer at certain times. Members of the Exclusive Brethren could plead religious discrimination if separate dining facilities were not provided in works premises and schools. Jehovah’s Witnesses could say they were being discriminated against if prevented from allowing their children to die for want of a blood transfusion.

When religious groups make public statements either through their representatives or writings, they have no grounds for complaint if challenged, contradicted, or ridiculed. Certainly they have no right to legal protection for their beliefs, nor are they justified in using terms like hatred in response to criticism.

The CRC is a statutory body which plays a difficult and important role in a society riddled with racial prejudice. It must not allow itself to be used by repressive religious groups to promote their special interest.

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NEWS

"Pro-Life" or Easy Death?

Young people can scarcely believe that until just over forty years ago a person who attempted to commit suicide was prosecuted, criminalised and punished by the courts. And no doubt future generations will also regard the trial last month of Dr Nigel Cox with utter incredulity.

Dr Cox, a consultant rheumatologist at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, was given a suspended prison sentence at Winchester Crown Court where he was convicted of attempted murder. His patient, 70-year-old Mrs Lillian Boyes, had asked doctors on a number of occasions to "finish her off" and put an end to the excruciating pain she was suffering. Drugs had failed to relieve the agony of burst blood vessels, ulcers on every limb, gangrene, three fractured vertebrae and deformed hands and feet. She died peacefully holding her sons' hands after Dr Cox, her physician and friend for many years, administered a lethal injection of potassium chloride. Nurse Roisin Hart, described as "a devout Roman Catholic", read the case notes and reported Dr Cox.

In addition to the jury's Guilty verdict, there was the unedifying spectacle of a highly respected medical specialist being subjected to a lecture by the judge on his "betrayal of your unequivocal duty as a physician". John Boyes said that he and his brother are certain that their mother "would be horrified that her passing had resulted in the trial and conviction of a doctor she respected and considered a friend".

Although it is being denied that the case had anything to do with euthanasia, two defence witnesses, Professor David Blake and Dr David Scott, said that by passing an "obscene" sentence, Mr Justice Ognall had "inadvertently advanced the cause of euthanasia". Certainly the subject is again in the public mind.

Few would deny that every year the intense suffering of thousands of terminally ill patients is ended by technically unlawful means. In such cases doctors act with compassion. They are not guilty of betraying their duty by acting as Dr Cox did in the case of Mrs Boyes (or as the Royal physician, Lord Dawson of Penn, did by lethally injecting King George V).

Any doctor who, through a long professional relationship, knows that a patient would not want life to be needlessly and painfully prolonged, faces a dilemma when the person becomes too ill and confused to express that wish. He can be guided by a "living will",

The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned to mourning.

AND NOTES

written when the patient was in a rational and clear state of mind. But such a document has no legal standing and would not protect a doctor who acted in accordance with his professional judgement and the patient's wishes.

There is another important aspect of the problem. In virtually every hospital and nursing home there are "pro-life" spies of both the Roman Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant faiths who will act as informers. So a doctor could end up in court, accused of betraying his duty, branded a criminal and possibly be struck off the medical register.

Opponents of euthanasia claim to be acting in the interest of patients, defending them from rapacious relatives and doctors "who want to play God". They are careful to play down the fact that their opposition is rooted first and foremost in religious beliefs. Life is a gift from God and only he can take it away, their argument goes. So in its latest "Prayer Guide", Christian Action, Research and Education implores the faithful: "Give thanks that attempts to legalise euthanasia in countries other than Holland have failed. . . Pray about any plans to introduce a Bill in Parliament to legalise euthanasia in certain cases. . . Pray that support for the pro-life movement will grow." And readers of a recent CARE circular are told: "We praise God for the fact that there has been no legalisation of euthanasia."

Relatives and friends of more than a thousand patients in a persistent vegetative state will not be praising God that there has been no legalisation of euthanasia. They include the parents of Tony Bland, a young victim of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster. Now 22, he lies in a hospital room near his home in West Yorkshire. Unable to see, hear, or swallow, he is kept alive by intravenous drip and food delivered to his stomach through a tube. He has major brain damage and is totally unresponsive. There is no hope of recovery. His father says: "His quality of life is nil. There should be a time when you say enough is enough."

Dr Peggy Norris, a prominent figure in a life-at-any-price outfit known as the World Federation of Doctors Who Respect Human Life, told the Roman Catholic weekly *Universe* it was a disgrace that the case of Tony Bland was being used to advance the cause of euthanasia. Admitting that he was in a persistent vegetative state, Dr Norris prescribed "nursing care, food and fluids".

As the law stands, Tony Bland's parents cannot grieve the loss of their son but watch his living death. Until Parliament acts, the cruel "pro-life" god of Dr Peggy Norris and CARE must not be thwarted.

This verse from Lamentations, chapter five, could well describe the feelings of ladies and gentlemen in Wiltshire whose innocent joy in Sunday afternoon tea dances has ceased by order of the District Council. There is no suggestion that these genteel affairs in Trowbridge (proceeds to charity) were "nurseries of popery, infidelity, and vice", as Beilby Porteus, Bishop of Chester (and later London) described all Sunday gatherings except those in churches. But it seems that tangoing in Trowbridge contravened a Sunday Observance Act which Bishop Porteus steered through Parliament over two centuries ago.

It would be interesting to know who laid a complaint against the dance organisers. Certainly sabbatarian organisations incite members to snoop and inform.

Mrs Elizabeth Shirley, organiser of a petition against the ban, said: "Sunday tea dances have become very popular. Most of the participants are over sixty who like to have somewhere to go."

Sunday dances in nearby Melksham have also been prohibited. Mrs Joan Morgan ran the dances at a social club in aid of hospital charities. She said they were greatly enjoyed by older people who are nervous about going out at night.

Alan Johnson, the District Council's director of leisure services, understands why people think the whole business is stupid. "It just emphasises the stupidity of all those Sunday restrictions," he said.

Owners of the Melksham social club are obviously unhappy about cancelling the dances. A spokesman managed to keep a straight face when he commented: "I am reliably informed they were never riotous occasions."

Every Sunday a wide range of sporting, cultural and social activities are enjoyed by millions. It is now up to the Government to abolish petty legal restrictions which result in the banning of Sunday tea dances. The Keep Sunday Special Campaign can then join its tottery Lord's Day Observance Society partner in the last waltz to, say, "The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended."

The Baptist Times made an unfortunate slip in its announcement of the show, An Evening with Cliff Richard. It reported: "A video of the whole evening was mad and will be used in evangelistic groups."

Canon Brian O'Connor was doing 104 mph when he was nicked on the A2 at Cobham. Magistrates at Gravesend imposed a fine of £105 but decided that a driving ban "would harm God's work".

UNWELCOME GUEST

The Virgin Mary's current American tour has caused much tumult, attracting considerable media attention even in this presidential year. Avoiding large centres of population, the celestial visitor has been touching down in rural communities like Colefax, California, where she was spotted up a pine tree.

Strangely enough, the Virgin Mary is not always a welcome visitor. Her arrival in the small town of Marlboro, New Jersey, for instance, placed an intolerable strain on the civic budget. An unprecedented influx of visitors forced the local authorities to foot a large bill for extra police time, barricades, parking space, emergency generators, toilet and other facilities. To make matters worse, the Virgin Mary promised — or threatened — to appear in Marlboro on the first Sunday of every month.

It all started on the first Sunday of May when Joseph Januszkiewicz was in his back garden sitting on a plastic bucket (for what purpose we will not even hazard a guess). Naturally he was taken aback when the Virgin Mary appeared.

Word got around and Mr Januszkiewicz's garden became a place of pilgrimage. Thousands of aspiring visionaries turned up, many in wheelchairs or on crutches. They felt "a presence" but saw nothing. Undeterred, thousands have been arriving in Marlboro throughout the summer. In time to come, Mr Januszkiewicz's plastic bucket may well become a venerated relic in the local church.

All this pious enthusiasm has caused the bishops considerable annoyance. They are becoming increasingly reluctant to endorse Marian signs and wonders, but at the same time cannot afford to upset the superstitious faithful. Like local treasury officials, they would prefer it to be a case of "Hail and Farewell Mary"!

"ALL CHANGE, PLEASE!"

Forced conversion is not entirely a thing of the past. Fortunately, however, Christians are no longer able to use sword and stake as recruiting aids. Their latest terror weapon is a bus pass.

An eleven-year-old Kent schoolboy has been told that he cannot have a free bus pass unless he changes his religion from Methodist to Anglican. Bramwell Blyth, is a pupil at Archbishop's School, Canterbury.

A Kent County Council spokesman said: "The Church of England has an interest in this particular school, so to some degree they have a right to say how it is run. With this in mind, the Council and the Church agreed to allow only children of the right denomination to have a free bus pass."

JUSTIFIED PROTEST

There are times when the high-handed behaviour of some Christians is, like their creed, beyond belief. From Watford, Hertfordshire, comes an example of such arrogance.

The Mayor of Watford, Councillor Peter Kieley, had the effrontery to suggest that Councillor Rob Marland should remain outside the council chamber during prayers. Councillor Marland had decided not to stand or bow his head during the talk-to-yourself interlude conducted by Fr James Brand, of St Michael's Roman Catholic Church.

In his letter, the Mayor informed Councillor Marland who, rather ironically, represents Vicarage ward, that the ubiquitous "member of the public" had complained about his non-participation in the religious mumbo jumbo. His refusal could be interpreted as a protest. Actually it wasn't, although there is every justification for protest when a civic building is used as a place of worship. And an elected representative of a mixed community has good cause to protest when he is treated like a schoolboy discovered eating sweets in class simply because he refuses to join in a Christian ceremony.

Councillor Marland says he believes in a secular, democratic society without patronage or privilege for any group. His refusal to conform is praiseworthy. But he would be on firmer ground had he not stood for prayers last year, when the Mayor was Councillor Mohinder Singh Chhina.

BLOOMING ODD!

Celebration of the 250th anniversary of Underbank Unitarian Chapel, Stannington, near Sheffield, took the form of a Flower Festival. Its theme was inspired by a popular hymn, with a central display based on the lines: "The purple-headed mountain, The river running by."

Unitarians are a mixed bunch (no pun intended). Their Heath Robinson theology appeals to those who cannot stomach fundamental Christian teachings and ritual, nor yet reject religion.

Like Quakers, Unitarians are traditionally associated with liberal, even radical, views on political and social questions. So the choice of theme for the Stannington Flower Festival was somewhat curious. Because the purple-headed mountain and river running by are immediately preceded by: "The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high or lowly, And order'd their estate."

Mrs Alexander's syrupy hymn was a firm favourite at a time when not just the Church of England, but nearly all churches, were "the Tory Party at prayer".

Abortion Law Reform After 25 Years: Some Secular Reflections

MADELEINE SIMMS

A 30-year programme of education and campaigning started in 1936 by a small group of women, played a crucial part in the passage of the Abortion Act 1967. In this 25th anniversary article, Madeleine Simms, a former press officer of the Abortion Law Reform Association, recalls struggles to achieve this important reform—and to defend it against unscrupulous religious opponents.

On 27 October the Abortion Act has weathered 25 years. It is astonishing to contemplate that it has survived unscathed for so long, given the powerful and fanatical forces arrayed against it. Its passage in 1967 was a victory for humanitarianism, secularism, feminism and tolerance. By the same token, it constituted a defeat for political reaction, Roman Catholicism, dogmatism and bigotry. These latter forces, however, are by no means extinct, even though, fortunately, less in evidence in Britain than in the United States where, in the interests of "the Sanctity of Life", over a hundred abortion clinics have been fire-bombed and otherwise wrecked by crazed "pro-life" followers.

However, there must be no complacency about this issue. The woman haters on the extreme Right of the Conservative Party, allied with the money, parish organisation and long experience of political intrigue of the Roman Catholic Church, may at any moment initiate parliamentary skirmishes designed to set back the clock. The success of the Roman Catholic Church in preserving its denominational schools at a time of falling rolls and educational cut-backs, shows what an astute force it is in obtaining whatever the hierarchy demands in the face of the public interest. Of course, now with a Roman Catholic Secretary of State for Education who sends his daughter to a Roman Catholic school, the Church, it may be surmised, does not have to push too hard.

In this anniversary year, I have been amusing myself by re-reading the first ALRA *Newsletter*. We produced it in 1963 in order to inform our members of what was going on in the abortion world so that they would know what to write about to newspapers and their Members of Parliament. It consisted largely of press cuttings, with some editorial comment.

I am reminded that as long ago as 1962, the students of Queen's University, Belfast, carried a motion demanding abortion law reform. Kenneth Robinson, a pioneer reformer and later Minister of Health in the Labour Government, spoke in support, while Dr Letitia Fairfield opposed. She was a Roman Catholic convert and a sister of Rebecca West, the writer. She was an assistant medical officer with the London County

Council and really had it in for her own sex. On another occasion she responded to the proposal that birth control advice be made available to working-class women in publicly-funded clinics, with the sardonic: "The State will equip the wife (at the expense of her husband taxpayer) with the means of defrauding or perhaps deceiving him." Why the Roman Catholic Church should endow its women members with so much self-contempt is an interesting psychological conundrum.

There were some other revealing press reports in that edition of the ALRA *Newsletter*. One was about nuns in the Belgian Congo who had been raped and obtained abortions. The cases were reported to the Belgian Public Prosecutor but "he closed his eyes to the offence". Could it have been because the rapists on this occasion were black?

Another case reported was that of a mentally retarded mother of 13 illegitimate children who was refused sterilisation because "her health was not affected".

The *Manchester Evening Chronicle* noted that the rise in illegal abortion had caused the regional hospital board to allocate "30 beds at the three main central hospitals in Manchester especially for abortion cases". Presumably this was to clean up the mess brought about by the not very expert back-street abortionists in the city. And much more besides!

Meanwhile, however, Sir Patrick Mayhew has not in 1992 arrived at the point reached in 1952 by Kenneth Robinson. Northern Ireland was excluded from the 1967 Abortion Act. It was taken for granted at the time that the outpost of sectarian bigotry would fall apart if its womenfolk were permitted to have abortions legally and safely, instead of illegally and dangerously. So the compromise was in effect reached whereby the Province would preserve its pristine anti-abortion laws, while mainland clinics would provide legal and safe abortions for the intelligent and the well-off, i.e. those women from the Province who could find out where to go and had the means to get there. In this way, some 30,000 Northern Irish women have had abortions in Britain. Thus the face of hypocrisy has been preserved to keep the Roman Catholic bishops and Protestant Paisleyites happy.

This spring, however, Ulster Marketing Surveys published a subversive national opinion survey which showed that a large majority of people in Northern Ireland wished to see their antique abortion laws reformed. But Sir Patrick Mayhew writes to me to say that one survey is not sufficient to set in motion reform on that benighted island. So we will continue carrying

out abortions for the mostly middle-class women of the Province for a little longer. The rest will continue to have unwanted children to add to the poverty and lawlessness of that most deprived corner of the supposedly United Kingdom.

Although the Abortion Act could never have come about but for the support of many individual freethinkers, it is sad that there was never a powerful, united institutional secularist movement to give reformers the financial, organisational and political backing that the Roman Catholic Church and its lay organisations have consistently given to anti-feminist movements throughout the world. The conclusion I draw from this is the one I drew in an article I wrote twenty years ago.

We need a national, united, non-religious political action group that will regularly discuss with freethinking MPs and Lords the political issues of the day in which we all have a vital interest — abortion, gay liberation, the ending of denominational education paid for out of public funds, voluntary euthanasia, the granting of regular broadcasting time as the Dutch agnostics enjoy, and many others.

Had we such a united, organised group in being, ready to support humane reforms, we might now have even more reason to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Abortion Act, and be less fearful of a possible backlash by the forces of religion and reaction.

Holy Matrimony — the Anglican Position

NEIL BLEWITT

A pamphlet entitled *An Anglican's Guide to Prayer* was reproduced, by permission, in the March 1992 issue of *The Freethinker*. A second pamphlet in the same series has now been received.

It is stated in the New Testament that, after death, one neither marries nor is given in marriage. It follows that matrimony as an institution is solely for the living. But it was made clear in the early days of the Christian Church, and endorsed by the authors of the Prayer Book, that enjoyment should not be sought in marriage; nor should it be expected — particularly in its physical aspect. St Paul outlined the position in his Epistle to the Corinthians where he wrote that the single state is to be preferred to the married variety, and that the former should only be abandoned for the latter if the parties can not otherwise contain themselves. This view was shared by St Augustine who regarded marriage merely as an institution for the safe release of sexual pressures; by Tertullian, who saw little difference, except in law, between marriage and fornication; and by St John who described marriage as “the experiment of the serpent”.

But however admirable the single state and however reprehensible the physical relationship within marriage, it is obvious that without the union of man and maid there would be no progeny to delight in celibacy or to continue the glorification of the Almighty. So the undesirable nature of marriage has to be reconciled with the necessity to perpetuate the human race; and the solemnisation of Holy Matrimony does that, we think, with distinction.

It declares that the joining together of a man and a woman is a symbol of the mystical union that exists betwixt Christ and his Church; and as this declaration occurs in the first sentence of the opening address it is clearly of prime importance. We shall be returning to this later.

But three other, and lesser, reasons are given for the institution of matrimony. The first is for the procreation of children. Marriage is certainly not, as the Prayer Book states, to be undertaken so that men can satisfy their “carnal lusts and appetites like brute beasts”. Women are not included in this stricture but, of course, it must apply equally to them. And although these words do not appear in the Alternative Service Book, we must conclude that this can not be other than an oversight. They are as applicable now as they were 400 years ago.

But in no circumstances, as the early Church taught, is the physical relationship within marriage to be enjoyed. The lady who confided to her diary that during it she lay on her back and thought of England was, probably unconsciously, close to the Christian ideal — which is to think not of one's native country but of something of a religious nature. The Collect for the Day is suggested. At the same time, the husband should be demonstrating a similar lack of enjoyment by, for example, committing to memory the Book of Job or reading the Epistle for the Day. For this purpose the Bible or the Prayer Book, open at the appropriate page, may be propped against the head-board. One could, alternatively, play a recording of the Queen's Christmas Message or watch a video of Songs of Praise.

The second reason why matrimony was ordained was to provide a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication. This is simply a reinforcement of St Paul's view that marriage is only for persons who do not possess sexual continency.

The third reason is that the parties might have of each other “mutual society, help and comfort”. But implicit in this being placed third is the fact that such solace may only be sought after the couple have understood that their union is largely symbolic, that they can not

contain themselves and that the procreating has been completed.

But let us return to the statement that marriage is a symbol of the union betwixt Christ and his Church. Now this may be difficult to appreciate but, as a holy mystery, it is similar to that which pervades the Song of Solomon. There the author writes, one may think, as a lover; and this impression may be forgiven when one considers such remarks as: "How pleasant art thou, O love, for delights. . . Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes. . . Thy navel is like a round goblet. . . Thy belly is like a heap of wheat. . . Thy breasts are like two young roes. . . Thy nose smells like apples. . .", and so on. But this is no erotic poem, as will become clear if the reader will only raise his eyes to the headings on the pages in which these remarks appear. There it will be seen that the poem represents "The beauty of the Church. . . Christ's awakening of it. . . The Church's faith and desire. . .". This may be difficult to comprehend but it is so. And that the union of a man and a woman is not primarily to do with their desire to live together and beget children but, rather, a symbol of the mystical union betwixt Christ and his Church may be equally abstruse, but couples should never lose sight of the fact — particularly during the consummation of the marriage and, indeed, in subsequent renewals. At those times, each should remind the other of it, although not so as to interrupt the contemplation of the Collect for the Day, the Book of Job or whatever other devotional exercises they may have undertaken. With practice all may be included and certainly as many as possible should be completed in the time available.

A promise is required from those whose matrimony is solemnised in a church that their union will be for life. And here it may be appropriate to deal with the subjects of polygamy and divorce since there is evidence of the practice of both in the Bible itself. In the case of the former, it is a fact that some of the Old Testament patriarchs and rulers, for example David, Abraham and Solomon, practised polygamy — and apparently without divine censure. God did object to some of Solomon's wives but on grounds of quality rather than quantity. As to the matter of quantity, it is well known that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. But Solomon tended to extravagance in many things. He also possessed 40,000 horses, 12,000 horsemen and 1,400 chariots. And he composed 3,000 proverbs and over 1,000 songs.

But, despite these precedents, polygamy cannot now be justified. It is not only illegal but, even if it were not, with sexual equality a fact, a woman today would be entitled to emulate Solomon (and we are concerned with spouses here, not horses and chariots) and that could only lead to confusion and, possibly, fatalities. But, more importantly, there is the consideration already mentioned — that the Prayer Book requires a

prospective husband and wife solemnly to vow that their union will be for life; that is that they must practise monogamy (not monotony, as it is sometimes described). The authority for this derives from the words of Jesus himself as recorded faithfully by St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke.

As to divorce, it is true that Moses taught it was lawful for a man to cast off his wife if she displeased him because of her uncleanness (or immodesty to use Dr Moffatt's word) although there is no provision for a woman to cast off her husband in similar circumstances. Moses' teaching was more loosely interpreted as time went on, according to Alexander Cruden, and it was held to be lawful for a man to divorce his wife if she did not dress his meat properly or if he found a woman he liked better (than his wife, that is, not the meat). But, as Jesus hinted, Moses was speaking without authority and he referred his audience to the first recorded marriage (of Adam and Eve) adding that what God had joined together man must not put asunder. Divorce, he declared, could be permitted only for the sin of fornication. It is true that in the Gospel of Bartholomew Jesus is quoted as saying: "A single marriage belongs to sobriety, a second marriage is lawful, a third is reprobated and he that sinneth after the third is unworthy." But as this statement is at variance with Matthew, Mark and Luke which supersede Deuteronomy which contradicts Genesis, one can not accord it much credence.

One must always approach biblical precedents with caution. They must sometimes be tempered by the general tenor of Christian precepts and current Church thought. For example, Simon and Andrew were fishing when Jesus called on them to follow him; and not only did they leave their nets forthwith but, in the words of the hymn for St Andrew's Day, they "turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake". But today, if a fisherman receives a divine call, although he may feel perfectly free to leave his nets to answer it, it cannot be thought to be God's will that he should desert his wife and family as well. This would be wrong in principle ("Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder"); it could also result in thousands of fishermen deserting their wives using as a pretext that God had called on them to do so. And if this were allowed for fishermen, who knows but that tax-gatherers, publicans and sinners would not soon follow?

On the other hand, where there is a definite, general, divine commandment one should always seek to obey it no matter how difficult it may be. For example, in Deuteronomy God commands that one should not marry a Hittite, a Girgashite, a Jebusite, an Amorite, a Canaanite, a Hivite or a Perizzite. Now as this commandment was not repealed by our Lord, it must be deemed to be still operative; but as Joshua claimed to

have slaughtered, at God's insistence, all the members of those tribes, one ought to be able to assume that it is redundant. However, it is not impossible that some may have survived, so it is recommended that if one desires to marry a person of Middle-Eastern complexion who looks as if she or he may be descended from a Hittite, a Gergashite, a Jebusite, an Amorite, a Canaanite, a Hivite or a Perizzite one ought to take advice and enquire diligently into the prospective partner's genealogy.

There may be some difficulty over another commandment in Deuteronomy concerning the situation where a man is living with his brother. It states that if the husband dies, then the brother must marry the widow and, if he refuses to do so in front of the elders (or sheiks, to quote Dr Moffatt again), then the widow is entitled to take off one of his shoes and spit in his face. The difficulty lies in the fact that in the Table of Kindred and Affinity in the Prayer Book, a wife is expressly forbidden to marry her husband's brother. So it can only be recommended to obviate any unpleasantness (and contravening the Table) that avoiding action be taken. It is suggested, therefore, that when a bachelor is living with his married brother, he should keep a close watch on his health and as soon as the slightest symptom of a malady manifests itself, he should move into lodgings elsewhere. This would render the obligation in Deuteronomy null and void. He may return, of course, if the brother recovers his former health.

Similarly with the commandment which follows it: that if two men are fighting and the wife of one of them seizes her husband's assailant by his private parts, then her hand must be cut off. Such penalties can easily be avoided by a wife anxious to intervene in such a situation by her seizing some other portion of the assailant's anatomy or encouraging her husband to seize his private parts. On the whole, common sense is what is required in the application of these laws in a modern society.

And now to the question of the marriage ceremony. This will largely concern the clergy, but it may be read with profit by all who may be involved in one way or another with the solemnisation of matrimony.

It is most desirable that a minister should rehearse with the prospective spouses the part they must play in the service. In the vows, for instance, the man should be told that the correct response to "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?" is simply "I will." Expressions such as "I should cocoa!" must not be encouraged. Nor should the bride, at this point, be allowed to say "He'd better!" Similarly with the bride's father when the question is put "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" He is not, in fact, required to answer at all and this should be pointed out

to him. He should certainly be discouraged from using such a response as "I do — and he's welcome, mate!"

The need for the woman to answer the minister's question and to repeat the marriage vows after him is hard to reconcile with the view expressed by St Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians that women should keep silent in church and, indeed, that it is shame for them to speak. But it should not be beyond the wit of the clergy and the wedding-party to reach an accommodation here. This part of the service could be conducted, for example, in the churchyard, or, if the weather is inclement, in the boiler house or the mortuary. But if none of these locations is convenient, then the woman should remain in the church and repeat the vows in a whisper or by using sign-language. We can find no objection by St Paul to either of these methods of communication.

There is no reason why favourite hymns should not be used in the service, but great care should be exercised in the matter. It hardly needs stating that "Rescue The Perishing" would be unsuitable, as would "Through The Night Of Doubt And Sorrow" or "The Call To Arms Is Sounding." In the Prayer Book one will find hymns prescribed for the occasion such as "O Perfect Love" and "The Voice That Breathed O'er Eden" and these should always be preferred. In connection with the latter hymn, however, the bride's father should be reassured that the fourth stanza ("Be present, awful Father") refers not to him but to our Heavenly Parent. The Psalm should also be carefully selected. Psalm 67 ("Deus Misereatur") appears in the Form of Service and is recommended. Psalm 69 ("Save me, O God") is not.

It is entirely fitting that in the marriage service the contracting parties should be reminded of their own mortality. This is a necessary sobering influence, particularly if they should enter the church in too jovial a mood. To this end, the compiler of the service contrived to include six references to death: "so long as ye both shall live" in the minister's question to each; "till death us do part" in the vows made by each; a reminder of the world to come in the Blessing; and a more explicit reference "unto their lives' end" in the final prayers. Thus it is ensured that both man and wife may reflect, not only during the service but also, it is to be hoped, during the ensuing days, that a period of threescore years and ten when set in the context of eternity is but ephemeral. And if these references are thought to be inadequate in specific cases, other hymns emphasising the point may be added to those already selected. "Brief Life Is Here Our Portion" would suit the purpose admirably. So would "Weary Of Earth And Laden With Sin" and "Who Knows How Near My End May Be?"

The officiating clergyman must make it clear to the

Sunday Shops Campaign

Two organisations, the Shopping Hours Reform Council and the Consumers' Association, supported by the National Consumer Council, have joined forces to conduct the new Sunday Shopping Campaign. This latest initiative, which will run until the end of November, includes an ambitious programme of meetings and presentations throughout England and Wales. It has been given a significant boost by the latest MORI poll showing that 67 per cent support changes in the law to allow more shops to open on Sunday.

Speaking in London at the launch of the campaign, Baroness Jay, chairperson of the Shopping Hours Reform Council, said: "The millions of shoppers who visit stores on Sunday are the silent majority in this debate, yet they are the people who are most affected by crazy laws. Their wishes are repeatedly ignored as minority vocal pressure groups try to stop them shopping."

Phillip Whitehead, of the Consumers' Association, said: "Consumers across the country are now voting with their feet and shopping on Sunday in their millions. The Government must now bite the bullet and change the law to reflect this reality."

The Shops Act 1950, the current legislation controlling Sunday trading, was a consolidating measure of The Shops (Sunday Trading Restrictions) Act 1936 and other legislation. There have been many attempts to reform the law, the most recent being the Government's Shops Bill 1985. It successfully completed its passage in the House of Lords but fell by 14 votes in the Commons.

Opposition to reform has come mainly from religious pressure groups like the Keep Sunday Special Campaign and the Lord's Day Observance Society. The unrepresentative Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and some left-wing MPs are also part of the anti-reform coalition.

Leaflets, petition forms, stickers and further information about the Sunday Shopping Campaign are obtainable from the Shopping Hours Reform Council, 36 Broadway, London, SW1H 0BH, telephone 071-233 0366.

Four women who work on Sunday at a B&Q store in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, are each to sue the local council for £464 in respect of lost earnings. They were unable to work on eleven Sundays last year when Kirklees Council forced the store to close under the Shops Act 1950. Mrs Ann Tuck said they all have children who cannot be left alone. "We can work only on Sunday when someone is at home," she said. "We got together with girls from another store and started the campaign to keep our Sunday jobs."

bride and the groom that the words "I now pronounce you man and wife" are not the signal for them to rush from the church in an unseemly manner. They should be informed at an early stage that an exit at this point would be ill-timed and undignified; it would also result in their foregoing the singing of the psalm, the offering of the prayers, the minister's address and the collection.

Choirboys can often be a problem. A whole pamphlet could be written on the subject. Suffice it to say here that, in connection with weddings, when they are in attendance, they must not be allowed to wink or leer at the bridegroom.

Finally, the subject of gifts and dowries — and in particular those given by the bridegroom to the bride's parents. In Old Testament times, this was not an uncommon practice, but it is a somewhat difficult matter to resolve given the Biblical precedents. Boaz, for example, acquired Ruth by purchasing a plot of land belonging to her mother, adding for good measure six pecks of barley and a shoe. Jacob worked for 14 years for his prospective father-in-law and was rewarded with two of his daughters (one for each seven-year period) and eventually with their maids (for whom he did not have to work at all). David was required by Saul to bring the foreskins of a hundred Philistines to gain the hand of Michal, his daughter. In the event, the enthusiastic David brought double that number, having slain their owners first, and was suitably rewarded — though not with two daughters as might be supposed but with just the one originally agreed.

These precedents notwithstanding, it is not customary nowadays for such extravagant dowries to be required or given. But there is no reason at all why gifts should not be exchanged between all of the members who make up the wedding-party. Indeed, it is to be recommended and examples of some of those which are sure to be found acceptable follow: A copy of John Wesley's *Sermons* or *The Confessions of St Augustine*, a subscription to *The Church Times*, a record of a setting of the liturgy by John Merbecke, a relief map of the Wilderness of Judaea, a colourful Church Missionary Society collecting-box, an advance purchase of a cemetery plot (perhaps for the bride's parents), a reproduction of a Victorian sampler embroidered with suitable text ("Replenish The Earth", "Come Unto Me Ye Weary", etc) and a framed photograph of John Selwyn Gummer.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Other titles in this series still to be issued include:

- The Peace Of God — Is It Enough?
- The Tower of Babel — A Tall Story?
- Feast Days Of The Saints — Pie In The Sky?
- The Resurrection Of The Body — Matters Arising
- The Company Of Heaven — Is It Limited?
- Jonah — The Inside Story
- Hairshirts — A Rough Guide To Their Use

JESUS, by A. N. Wilson. Sinclair-Stevenson, £15

A. N. Wilson is a fashionable writer who received an extraordinary amount of attention in the media last year when he very publicly abandoned his very public Christianity and wrote a pamphlet *Against Religion* (see *The Freethinker*, July 1991). As well as being a successful journalist and novelist, he is a successful biographer — his *Tolstoy* (1990) was particularly highly praised — and his *Jesus* may be seen as a combination of all his skills. It is a work of journalism rather than scholarship, of fiction rather than biography; and its interest lies not so much in the actual content of what he has written as in the attention he has once again received in the media — an astonishing number not just of reviews but of articles and interviews and programmes in the press and on radio and television, almost all taking it as a serious contribution to the vast literature on the subject.

The book is not in fact a serious contribution to anything, except Wilson's career. The best things about it is that it is readable and reputable. It is not original or profound, though it is sometimes amusing or intriguing, but at least it is never obscure or absurd. It is one of a long succession of books which have tried for two centuries to establish a natural Jesus by rejecting the supernatural elements of the original writings about him. Wilson generally follows the line of the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes — that Jesus was a real person who should be considered not as the Son of God or the Messiah, or a magician or street-fighter, but as a Jewish holy man, like others described in the Old Testament and the Talmud, who was primarily a healer and teacher. This process involves stressing some parts of the Gospels and suppressing others, and continually correcting and supplementing the text as you go along — dismissing the miracles and the stories of the Nativity and the Trial, the Resurrection and the Ascension, but accepting the teachings and the sermons and parables, the Passion and the Crucifixion, and so on.

This thesis of what Wilson calls "the Jesus of History" may well be true, but the trouble is that there is no more evidence for it than for what he calls "the Christ of Faith"; there is no better reason to believe in the human than the divine person. (Compare such religious figures as Hercules or Zoroaster or the Buddha, rather than such political figures as King Arthur or Robin Hood or William Tell.) It is a relatively straightforward business either to accept or to reject the testimony of the New Testament as a whole, but it is much more difficult to reject parts as false and accept parts as true, because

there is no safe way to decide which are which, and once you begin choosing between them there is no sure way to stop. Wilson's particular attempt to make sense of the evidence is as plausible as most, but it fails to convince because, while he now finds the supernatural material incredible, he still remains too credulous about much of the remaining material. He is quite open about this. He begins by admitting both that the New Testament contains no reliable material at all and that he must rely mainly on the material in the New Testament. He acknowledges this contradiction, but he is unable to escape from it, and in the end it destroys his own credibility. Moreover, his particular suggestions for the interpretation of the many problematic passages in the Gospels are so peculiar that they throw doubt on his more sober discussion.

The wish to reject most but to preserve some of Jesus results from and results in careless treatment of the material. As with the pamphlet *Against Religion*, Wilson seems to have written too fast for his own good and often trips up in his haste. The resulting errors and omissions have enabled believers to throw doubt on his whole thesis, and of course enable unbelievers to do so too. An irrelevant but revealing example is that Wilson (following Andre Gidé) remarks that "there is not a single mention of colour in any of the Gospels"; there are in fact several references to several colours in all of them, which suggests that he (and Gidé) prefer bright remarks to boring research. Another example which is more relevant to our concerns is the way Wilson deals with the mythicist theory of Jesus. Unlike many other writers, he doesn't dismiss such an idea with contempt, but discusses it seriously, if briefly. "Some writers, a minority it is true, but not an unintelligent minority, have surveyed the historical 'evidence' and concluded that no such person as Jesus ever existed; and it may be that . . . the reader will be tempted by this austere point of view." Fair enough. But he cites only one such writer, G. A. Wells, and only one book, *The Jesus of Early Christians* (1971), and not the three other books produced by Wells during the subsequent two decades, let alone the many other books produced by many other writers over more than two centuries. And his actual discussion of the mythicist case shows that he hasn't read even Wells' presentation of it. Thus in rebutting it he cites as the main non-Christian evidence for Jesus the well-known passage of Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (c AD 95), but fails to realise its weakness. He gives a misleadingly incomplete version of the passage, omitting the crucial phrases which describe Jesus as rising from the dead and being Christ, which could hardly have been written by a religious Jew such

REVIEWS

as Josephus; and he argues that such a passage couldn't have been interpolated by a Christian writer of the New Testament period, missing the point is that it was probably written (or rewritten) two centuries later.

In the end we are left not with any kind of proper biography of any kind of recognisable person, but with a series of random ruminations by an idiosyncratic intellectual on one of the dominant figures of our culture. The Fourth Gospel ends: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written." Yes, indeed. After reading this one, I am left with three thoughts. One is Wilson's opening point that virtually nothing can be known about Jesus; the second is that if anything can be known it is Wilson's concluding point that he would have hated the religion founded in his name; and the third is that the most serious question about this book is why it is being taken so seriously.

NICOLAS WALTER

WE DIDN'T KNOW AUGHT by Maureen Sutton, Paul Watkins
Publishing, 18 Adelaide Street, Stamford, Lincolnshire, PE9
2EN. £9.95

Plus ça change. . . ? If you ever wondered how far we have come in our society in our attitudes and behaviour in relation to sexual knowledge, contraception, marriage, birth and death, you have only to look at Maureen Sutton's book to see progress. It may still be true that menstruation is a subject that raises blushes and that too many relationships founder on the rocks of misinformation and embarrassment, but compared to the lives our grandparents lived, we inhabit an Age of Reason.

We Didn't Know Aught is a fascinating picture of the 1930s, 40s and 50s in Lincolnshire, although there is little doubt that the superstitions, taboos and ignorance reported here were universal. Sutton uses interviews with both men and women to look at sexuality (including menstruation, intercourse, pregnancy, birth, contraception and menopause), household beliefs and practices (including superstition in childhood, during courtship and in everyday life), and death.

Sutton looks at a time when menstruation and sexual awareness were areas we simply didn't talk about openly. Euphemisms were used, which often lead at best to confusion and at worst to a great deal of misery. One of her interviewees recalls: "I worked in a shop and one day one of the girls asked the woman in charge if she could have the afternoon off as her granny had

come. The woman said she could have had the day off if she'd let her know in time. The girl replied 'My granny's only just started.' She was referring to her period."

Lack of discussion often led to the inevitable. Those who seem to believe that teenage or pre-marital sex are inventions of the present should read Maureen Sutton's book and ponder on the results of pre-marital conception in those days. It was always the girl who was blamed, sometimes to the point of being incarcerated as a "mental or moral defective". As one woman recalled: "When my parents found out I was pregnant, my dad threw me out and said I brought disgrace to the family."

And yet another: "There was this family in Newport and the grandmother lived with them. Her granddaughter had an illegitimate baby and the girl's mother and father let her keep the baby. The grandma was very much against it. When they had a census form come to the house and the grandmother filled it in, she put down the number of people in the house, and then put 'plus one bastard'."

The picture, however, is not entirely one of ignorance or unhappiness. Communities, even those in large towns, were closer in those days and some of the traditions surrounding marriage and death displayed a degree of support that is perhaps absent today. It was, for instance, common behaviour to lend clothing considered essential for a funeral, such as a black coat, gloves and a hat, so that a family would not have to find the money to buy them from an already overburdened budget.

While much of what Sutton has found will come as little surprise to many people, she has unearthed some fascinating aspects of local lore. An interesting superstition involved pins and dead bodies. Apparently many people believed the ghost or spirit of a dead person had to be "pinned down", so a bowl was often put on the chest of the dead person and mourners would drop a pin into it.

One tradition that really should be revived was ran-tan-tanning, or rough music. If a husband beat his wife, the women of the village would band together to warn him off. One woman recalled: "I remember in 1932 in Silver Street in Coningsby a woman tying a ribbon to the front door (red for danger, she was in trouble). The ribbon was a signal for the other women to get up a ran-tan-tan as her husband had beaten her up. When they had got the ran-tan up, the local bobby kept well out of it. You couldn't move in Silver Street, there was that many folk came to watch."

The group would make as a great din as possible. The man would be summoned out of his house and told not to beat his wife again or he would be run out of town. It was apparently a great disgrace to be ran-tanned.

Maureen Sutton's book has the authenticity, charm

and intimacy of other windows into the past such as *Cider With Rosie*. She doesn't have the writing skill of Laurie Lee, but that hardly matters. What she does have is the conviction to let her subjects speak for themselves. It is their words that bring this honest and explicit portrait of an earlier Lincolnshire to life. So much of history is exactly that — stories of men's lives. This is her story — the lives of women and how they coped in the light of the beliefs and knowledge of the time.

SUZIE HAYMAN

AN IMAGINED LIFE, by Richard Hoggart. Chatto & Windus, £17.99

The Life and Times of Richard Hoggart have been well told in two previous volumes — *A Local Habitation* and *A Sort of Clowning* — and bowing to public demand, he produces the third in a well written and thoroughly entertaining trilogy. The author tackles the story of his life, from 1959 until the present time, with an understanding of the human predicament that arouses in turn his humour, anger and compassion; enabling the reader to share his assessment of society — this “unjustly divided society”, he calls it — with more than a modicum of that pity and wit joined together which make such a rare combination.

His life and times are shrewdly observed and commented upon. The fact that his multicoloured viewpoint embraces working-class Leeds and University, the Arts Council, the Pilkington Report, UNESCO, founding the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, dealing with the Great and Good from both inside and outside some big and powerful institutions (his judgment of Lord Goodman's mastery of all sorts of subjects is sound, as I know well) gives the book an insider's view that at times becomes quite Dickensian and is very funny as well as acute. He is never ashamed of righteous anger — the type of indignation that is best expressed by such masters of invective as Michael Foot in an angry contempt that has only been exceeded in modern times by Aneurin Bevan and a one time great editor of *The Freethinker*, Chapman Cohen. Richard Hoggart is an honourable figure to add to our gallery of notable Freethinkers.

Hoggart's part (with C. H. Rolph) in the famous Lady Chatterley case was all-important, and during his period of Wardenship at Goldsmiths' College, London, the crusader was able to engage in battle against censorship of the arts, films, print, and at the same time become a champion of adult education. One finds oneself lamenting the fact that he never became a Minister of Education.

But such men with lone voices rarely go after the glittering prizes of public life and are content, with

courage and self-effacement, to make the world a better place from the sidelines. Hoggart is a gentle chronicler, also, and he writes not unlike Chekhov when recounting the incidents in his domestic life that have clearly moved him to tears, which he is not ashamed of showing in this concluding volume to an exceptionally fine trilogy.

PETER COTES

Letters

HUMANISM A RELIGION?

I am grateful to Harry Stopes-Roe (Letter, September) for the information that the principal object of the British Humanist Association — “the advancement of humanism” — is charitable because it is analogous with religion, and that this is made “explicit” (does he mean “implicit”?) by the reference to “the mental and moral improvement of the human race”. I should be more grateful if he could give the source for this information — an Act of Parliament, a statutory regulation, a court judgement, a legal textbook, an official letter, or just his imagination?

After all, one of the objects of the South Place Ethical Society is explicitly “the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment”, yet when it was granted charity status in 1980 the court explicitly denied any analogy with religion. I should be interested to know whether the charitable objects or activities of the BHA are really analogous with religion, and if so how — and so would many other non-religious humanists.

NICOLAS WALTER, London N1

SANITY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Peter Cotes (Letters, September) writes of actors who come out of the religious closet. Michael Caine has now done so in the *Daily Express*. He states his attitude to religion as follows.

“I'm born of a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. I was educated in a Jewish school and I'm married to a Moslem. None of these religions has made a mark on me because I see the cant and hypocrisy in them. Each one teaches prejudice.”

ROBERT HARCOURT, Derby

Panic-stricken Koreans are getting ready for the Second Coming. The Tamil Church (“Prepare for the Coming Future”) has predicted that Jesus will return on 28 October at midnight (3 pm British time). He will gather up the favoured 144,000 and take them to heaven. Pastor Lee Jan Jim has advised his flock to enhance their chances by giving their money to the church. Families are selling their homes and businessmen are leaving their jobs. One woman is so keen to be among the 144,000 that she has had an abortion to weigh less at lift-off.

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Ernest Renan: The Fifth Gospeller

COLIN McCALL

Ernest Renan was a model student for the Roman Catholic priesthood who later abandoned the faith. His famous work, *Life of Jesus*, enjoyed a huge success in France and other European countries. It also provoked the wrath of the Church. Renan died a hundred years ago this month.

Fifty years ago Renan's *Life of Jesus* could be picked up at any bookstall. Published in 1863 as the first of eight volumes on the *History of the Origins of Christianity*, it was translated into most European languages and was enormously influential. Oscar Wilde even hailed it as the fifth gospel, not inappropriately, as Renan regarded Jesus as "an incomparable man" and accepted much of the non-miraculous parts of the Synoptics, treating the theme, as Geoffrey Brereton has said, "with the inadequate charm of a pastoral".

Vie de Jésus raised enough clerical wrath, however, to prevent Renan from taking up the professorship of Hebrew at the Collège de France, to which he had been appointed in 1862. He was finally allowed to do so in 1870 and, another eight years later, he was elected to the French Academy.

Ernest Renan was born in Tréguier, Brittany, in 1823. He was influenced in early life by a very devout mother and trained for the priesthood, notably at the seminary of St Sulpice. While there, he studied Hebrew and German biblical criticism and, in 1845, after a "spiritual crisis" (which he described in later life) he abandoned all thoughts of entering the Church.

But, helped by his sister Henriette, he was able to continue his philological studies and, in 1850, he obtained a post at the Bibliothèque Nationale. In 1860 he was one of a commission sent out by the French Government to study the Phoenician civilisation, and it was this archaeological mission which seems to have given him the idea of writing his history of Christianity. He then devoted his life to what the Arab scholar Edward W. Said has disparagingly called "Orientalism".

J. M. Robertson, needless to say a strong critic of Renan on many matters, acknowledged his immense scholarship, paid tribute to his "highly artistic and winning application of rational historical methods to early Christian history, with the effect of displacing the traditionalist method", and described him as "one of the most finished literary artists of his time". The French Cercle Ernest Renan was founded in his memory to continue his rational critical methods.

Said's criticism of Renan's ideas can well be understood — and shared. Today they would be called racist, though that is not a term I favour, as I don't think human beings can be divided into races. But Renan himself did so. In "all things", he said, "the Semitic

race appears to us to be an incomplete race, by virtue of its simplicity. This race — if I may dare use the analogy — is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to painting; it lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility. The Semitic nations experienced their fullest flowering in their first age and have never been able to achieve true maturity."

A centenary tribute, however, should end positively and we can follow Thomas Whittaker (*Reason*, 1934) and thank Renan for his work on Averroës. "It is largely in consequence of that outcome at once of unwearied labour and of penetrating insight," Whittaker wrote, "that we can now appreciate at its true value the important part taken by the Moslem world in promoting the emancipation of the West and preparing the recovery of Europe from the age of returned barbarism, as Vico called it, to a renewed intellectual civilisation." That may be a Western "Orientalist" attitude, but Edward Said should not complain when we thank the Arabs for intellectual help.

In this brief tribute to a great French scholar, who died on 2 October 1892, it is fitting, too, to remember Renan's sister Henriette (1811-1861) who gave him invaluable support and shared what I suppose we can best call his unbelief.

Off the Rails

British Rail Intercity employees recently received a letter from Headquarters Main Building, York. Signed by Brian Burdsall, Director, East Coast Main Line, it requests staff to think seriously about contributing to the funds of an organisation "which has always depended on voluntary support". There are thousands of such organisations, but Mr Burdsall's begging letter is on behalf of The Railway Mission.

"Should you wish to contribute through the 'Save as You Earn' Scheme," he adds encouragingly, "you will find an application form at your local Admin Office." He assures staff that "the work of this group of five full time Chaplains is incredible". Quite so; the dictionary definition of "incredible" is given as "surpassing belief".

According to Mr Burdsall, the chaplains' work includes "counselling people during personal crisis". However, few employees whose jobs may disappear as cost-cutting innovations like unstaffed stations are introduced will be mollified by a chaplain's words of consolation. They are more likely to be asking why British Rail is promoting The Railway Mission. Those of other religious faiths — and none — will be offended that favouritism is shown to an evangelical Protestant group.

Brook Beats the Bigots!

DAMIAN HAMILL

The opening of a Brook Advisory Centre in Belfast represents another advance for sexual enlightenment and individual freedom in Ireland. But Damian Hamill warns that the religious and political moral dictators have not given up their opposition.

The traditional view that people get the politicians they deserve must reflect particularly brutally on the population of Northern Ireland. Recent controversy, however, indicates that at last people are willing to put elected representatives in their place. The controversy in question surrounded the Brook Advisory Centre which opened in Belfast last month. The invitation to Brook was extended by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, which is concerned at the increasing number of unplanned pregnancies and the need for a centre where trained counsellors can offer advice on contraception, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

In Northern Ireland, however, such an innovation could not go unchallenged and reactionary forces were soon voicing their protests. Politicians of all persuasions, churches of all denominations and various other organisations dusted down their righteous indignation, pulled out their soap boxes and warmed up their megaphones ready for the fray.

Doubtless the pious opponents of Brook were confident of victory. In the past they had forced the closure of a sex shop on Belfast's Castlereagh Road, successfully picketed *The Last Temptation of Christ* and generally succeeded in maintaining an atmosphere reminiscent of the Inquisition. Their interpretation of grass-roots support for anti-Brook activities displayed strange idiosyncrasies. Nigel Dodds, a Unionist politician and former Lord Mayor of Belfast, claimed that in opposing the Brook Centre he was speaking for the vast majority of citizens. Where he got this idea from I don't know, but a straw poll conducted by the *Open House* programme during a television debate showed that the studio audience was overwhelmingly in favour of the centre. This was particularly significant, as reactionary groups usually attempt to pack the audience at such debates.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Sinn Fein Women's Committee made a strong recommendation in favour of the centre. But for reasons of their own, however, the party hierarchy ignored the recommendation and declared that the official line was against it.

Other organisations thrown into the spotlight by the Brook Centre controversy included Family and Youth Concern, a group whose name tries to convey a spurious legitimacy. In reality they are nothing more than self-

proclaimed saviours of Ulster's "decadent youth". The assertions made by their spokeswoman, Maureen Clarke, were somewhat illogical. She said that although some kind of advice centre was needed, it should be tailored to the Northern Ireland "ethos". This was a rather ridiculous statement as the Northern Ireland "ethos" has been not to talk of things sexual. When such discussion is unavoidable, a swift and frequently inaccurate biology lesson is given, with the inference that sex is an unpleasant necessity for continuing the species, not something that "decent" people could possibly get pleasure from, Heaven forbid!

The fact that the vast majority of young people no longer believe this neurotic nonsense and simply want undistorted information seems to elude Maureen Clarke. Her organisation's concern for family values is clearly indicated by Mrs Clarke's claim in the *Open House* television debate that the provision of unbiased information by Brook Centres is a "failed concept", and that all our problems would be solved by the strengthening of the family unit. Why she thinks that a young person's decision to enjoy a healthy sex life indicated family discord and breakdown is beyond me. Perhaps it is the only situation in which she could imagine one of her six children making such a choice. Furthermore, I am interested in her implication that a healthy family unity provides a young person with a effective form of contraception.

Fortunately, support for individual freedom and choice came from some unexpected quarters, including the Unionist MP, John Taylor. Despite being an elder of the Presbyterian Church, he is wise enough to recognise that "the church appears to be ignoring those who do not subscribe to its teachings. . . the church should accept that young people are not following its moral standards, and not close its eyes to this problem." This is a welcome divergence from the traditional moral dictatorship of the churches which have sought to impose their views on the entire population, Christian or otherwise, and have been happy to let democracy fall by the wayside.

Enlightened bodies fought their corner with determination. The Campaign for Information and Choice organised a public demonstration. The Queen's University Students' Union agitated for reform. The EHSSB stood firm on its decision to finance the centre. And of course the Brook organisation put its case eloquently and effectively.

An encouraging aspect of the controversy was the apparent groundswell of public opinion, with increasing numbers willing to stand up and be counted when politicians and church people try to take from them

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49.) Sunday, 1 November, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public meeting. Subject: The Changes Taking Place in Education.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth Monday, 19 October, 7.30 pm. Public meeting.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031-667 8389.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA). Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HD, telephone 0926 58450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Southsea, 24-28 December. Bookings must be received by 1 November. Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham GL52 5AA.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Centre, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 10 November, 7.30 pm. Public meeting. Recorded talk and discussion on Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 29 October, 8 pm. Tony Milne: Health and the Environment.

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 19 November, 7.30 pm. Ruth Blewitt: The Burston School Strike.

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 79829.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 November, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Don Pincham: Humanism for the Head and Heart.

The 30 September issue of *India Today*, a prestigious fortnightly published in New Delhi, carried extracts from an interview with Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan. The following exchange took place. Question: "Why do you sound so bitter?" Answer: "After all, they passed a *fatwa* against me and called me a *kafir* because I did not accept the Shariat Law. So they passed a *fatwa* similar to the one against Salman Rushdie. They said I was *wajibul qatl* (worthy of killing) for Muslims, that it is incumbent upon them to do so. The religious affairs Minister himself said so in the National Assembly. Nobody sacked him. It is that hysteria that worries me."

something which they value. Another recent example of this was the constituents in the Borough of Castlereagh voting against attempts by the Lord's Day Observance Society to have all Council leisure facilities closed on Sunday. The same popular feeling was evident over the Brook Centre.

However, this is not the end of the story. In Northern Ireland old habits like intimidation die hard. Church groups held a demonstration outside the centre when it opened, and members of the Rev Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church have announced that they will picket the building during counselling sessions. No doubt the protesters will claim they are exercising their democratic right to demonstrate, although they have never hesitated to trample on the democratic rights of others. It is one thing for pickets to demonstrate their anger and disagreement in an industrial or political dispute. But it is another thing entirely to intimidate young people attending an advisory centre. It is to be hoped that the press and television crews will have the decency to protect the anonymity of Brook clients.

Those who support the work of Brook Advisory Centres must stand by their convictions. During a recent five-year period 856 babies were born in Northern Ireland to girls under 16. The activities of a religious minority can only serve to continue this saga of misery. The Brook Centre must stay open.

Temptation to Censor

The Broadcasting Standards Council has received a record number of complaints about a film that has not been shown on BBC Television.

Although the film in question, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, has in fact been bought by the BBC, there are no plans to screen it. A representative said: "It was probably part of a package we got from the distributors. We often buy a huge number of films and there may be one or two we don't plan to use."

The Council said that over a thousand complaints about the film had been received. It added: "People are concerned about blasphemy, but there is nothing we can do unless it is shown."

There is nothing unusual about self-appointed censors calling for the banning of a work they have not seen or read. It is highly likely that complaints about *The Last Temptation of Christ* resulted from a letter-writing campaign orchestrated by Whitehouse-style evangelical groups.

Over a hundred pets attended an animals' church service at Blythburgh, Suffolk. Alfred the snail was among those upon whom a blessing was pronounced.

Satanic Scaremonger "Forced to Eat His Words"

Tim Tate, one of the most prolific promoters of the "satanic abuse" myth, has met his Waterloo in the High Court. His book, *Children for the Devil; Ritual Abuse & Satanic Crime*, has been withdrawn from sale following his admission that it contained allegations that were "utterly without foundation". He will have to pay substantial damages.

One of the book's targets was Detective Superintendent Peter Coles, of Nottingham, who was in charge of the Broxtowe satanic abuse case. His main "crime" appears to have been a healthy scepticism and, unlike some social workers, unwillingness to blindly accept allegations about satanic child abuse. This did not suit Tim Tate and fundamentalist Christian witch hunters who were endeavouring to create a panic about satanists' young victims.

Tate is said to be the originator of Roger Cook's *The Devil's Work* which did not enhance the broadcaster's reputation. He lectured at seminars, wrote extensively and appeared in radio and television programmes. He claimed that his book proved the existence of widespread ritual abuse.

Detective Superintendent Coles took action against Tate who said the policeman "didn't look too hard or too far", and implied that because of this, children had been left trapped in the misery of abuse.

The Leeds-based Sub-Culture Alternatives Freedom Foundation says the ramifications of the case are immense.

"The Broxtowe case was the first incident upon which all further alleged satanic abuse cases in the UK were built and absolutely pivotal to the acceptance of the myth. Tate played an instrumental part in promoting and publicising it in the discredited Cook report and collaborating with key social workers in seminars and programmes. In the process, Tate brought the public and many professionals to believe in his interpretation of events at Nottingham, yet when brought to book, has been forced to eat his words. The interpretation we were being sold as fact, turned out to be Tate's personal opinion and supposition. . .

"The outcome of this case also vindicates those people who have maintained, despite a welter of accusations by Tate, that satanic abuse is a figment of the imagination of obsessed religious fanatics."

Fr Augusto Gobeo physically attacked Fr Antonio Silverstri whom he accused of poaching his flock. A bishop managed to separate the fighting fathers at the church meeting in Pescara, Italy.

Civic Welcome for Gay Humanists

Councillor Gill Sweeting, Mayor of Brighton, sent a message of welcome and support to the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association on the occasion of its annual weekend gathering and annual general meeting. Being out of the country, she was unable to welcome them in person.

Councillor Sweeting was sure that the visitors would find much to interest and entertain them in Brighton.

She added: "Society contains many minorities and throughout history many who would now be accepted without question have been persecuted or otherwise discriminated against. Unless a minority group is threatening the rights or safety of others, I can see no reason why anyone should take exception. But unfortunately bigotry and prejudice still exist, even in Brighton.

"It is a sad fact that some of the worst bigotry and prejudice against your community comes from those who profess a loving faith. So much of what is good in the world is done in God's name, but so unfortunately is so much I would regard as bad, if not positively evil."

Five representatives of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group attended a reception on the first evening of the event.

The annual general meeting passed a resolution condemning the Vatican's latest "morally contemptible and inhumane" document which seeks to justify discrimination against homosexuals.

Freethinker Fund

This month the Fund is boosted by a generous anonymous donation. Glasgow Humanist Society is among other contributors whose financial support is much appreciated.

F. A. Stevenson, £1.80; C. F. Cooper, F. M. Hoare, T. Liddle, K. P. Shah, G. Thanki and E. Wakefield, £2 each; D. H. Dale, £2.50; W. R. Grant, £3; D. S. Andrew, £4; F. Munniksmas and A. Smith, £4.40 each; D. S. Austin, J. Barr, A. W. Briglin, W. H. and E. Brown, K. Byrom, R. Chadwick, B. Clarke, J. B. Coward, R. Crangle, R. J. E. Goldsmith, A. Hawkins, J. I. Hayward, W. Hill, J. R. Hutton, H. Jack, C. J. MacDonald, N. Moia, A. Negus, P. J. E. Paris, R. J. Tutton, A. Williams, G. Williams and K. Wootton, £5 each; E. Haslam, £7.50; S. Anderson, £9.40; G. A. Airey, D. A. Hartley, K. Haughton, T. J. Peters, J. A. B. Spence, A. C. Stewart and C. Thomas, £10 each; Anonymous and P. L. Lancaster, £20 each; Glasgow Humanist Society, £52; Anonymous, £500.

Total for August: £826