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Editorial

THE RUSHDIE READINGS

THE PUBLIC READING of extracts from SALMAN RUSHDIE'S novel *Satanic Verses* which took place in Conway Hall on Sunday July 2 was a major achievement for the Society. Arranged by our Secretary NICHOLAS HYMAN, who again showed notable organisational skill, this event was the first of its kind in Britain. No public platform had previously been granted to people wanting to read from *Satanic Verses*. SPES, notched up a "first"—no mean feat in view of the furore caused by the Rushdie affair, and the dangers and threats posed by some of the extremist elements in the Islamic fundamentalist movement in this country.

The event meant that the Society was pointing the way to other humanist organisations and advocates of free thought and speech. Let's hope these other groups will respond appropriately. Recently, in the pages of *The Ethical Record*, the humanist movement as a whole was justly criticised for missing opportunities, for not taking stands and initiatives when there was a positive need to. The Rushdie issue is a chance not-to-be-missed for asserting the values of intellectual freedom. One promising development since the Conway Hall readings has been the recent (televised) "Blasphemers' Banquet" held in Brad-

ford and featuring the poet TONY HARRISON. May there be many more.

People who criticise such occasions on the grounds that they are offensive to Muslims show an extraordinary lack of historical perspective. Since the Renaissance, and particularly since the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, intellectual and scientific progress in the West has inevitably involved hurting people's feelings. No advance is possible unless established views are challenged—a process which is both painful and necessary. Also, no-one holding a particular philosophical position should cite his feelings in support of it. The only support should be rational argument. It's almost impossible to list all the intellectual freedoms we enjoy in the West which would simply not exist if fear of giving offence had been uppermost in the minds of the pioneers of earlier generations.

The subject of religion in modern society is, incidentally, looked at in two booklets soon to be published by the National Secular Society. One is *What is Religion?* an extract from PANDIT NEHRU'S *Autobiography*, and with a Foreword by MICHAEL FOOT. The other is *Ghetto Schools in Britain*, by BARBARA SMOKER. This argues against denominational schools. Each booklet costs £1.50.

There will be a publication launch for both in the library at Conway Hall on Monday September 25th from 6.45-8 pm. All are invited.

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The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the Society.

NIETZSCHE AND CHRISTIANITY

Abridged from a talk given to the Sunday Forum June 18, 1989

S. E. PARKER

NIETZSCHE IS FAMOUS FOR THE STATEMENT "God is dead". He does not, however, concern himself with arguments for or against the existence of a god, although he was a declared atheist. He even thought that the image of a god could serve as the indicator of a people's strength or weakness. It could register the waxing and waning of "the will to power" which Nietzsche believed was the fundamental law of life. When the ancient Jews were a conquering people their god, Jehovah, reflected their power. He was a god of joy, strength and "justice". When they subsequently suffered the reverses and disillusionment of the Assyrian conquest and the Babylonian exile, the image of Jehovah underwent a drastic change. From being a god expressing their triumph, he became a god who was a crutch and a consolation for their defeat and their weakness. He changed from a god of conquest and aggression into a god of the weak and the "good".

It was this god of "goodness" and impotence that Nietzsche saw as being bequeathed by the Jews to the Christians. Nietzsche's "good" was, however, not the "good" of the Judeo-Christian creed. His "good" was power and its enhancement:

"What is good?—everything that increases the feeling of power . . . What is evil?—everything based in weakness. What is joy?—the emotion of power increasing, or a resistance overcome. Not contentedness, but more power! Not peace at any price, but war. Not 'goodness' but more ability . . . The weak and misbegotten shall sink to the ground; that is our humanitarian slogan; and they shall be helped to sink. What is the most harmful vice?—pity shown to the misbegotten and the feeble—Christianity" (*The Antichrist*).

For Nietzsche the attacks made upon Christianity up to his time had not only been timid, but false. Christianity was not only a supernatural creed, it was also a morality which attempted to reverse natural selection, to thwart the course of evolution by praising the weak and denigrating the strong, who alone are the justification for life. Proof of this can be found in the fact that Christianity originated and found its first followers among slaves. Fearing their masters and wanting to avenge their inferiority, the slaves fashioned a doctrine designed to undermine and overcome their masters' domination by means of the guilt-inducing notions of sin and pity. Christianity sprang from resentment and sought to bring down the ruling caste as does its offspring—socialism. The slaves were incapable of triumphing over their masters by force of arms so they resorted to stealth and cunning. For the morality of the powerful they substituted the morality of the servile. Christianity was the revenge of the impotent upon the potent.

The success of this slave revolt caused the destruction of the intellectual accomplishments of the ancient world. The scientific method, the art of reading, the sense for fact, were "buried in a night. Not trampled to death by German and other heavy feet. But brought to shame by crafty, stealthy, anaemic vampires. Not conquered—merely sucked dry." (*Ibid.*)

At the end of *The Antichrist* Nietzsche indicts Christianity as "the one great curse, the one intrinsic depravity, the one black impulse of resentment, for which no subterfuge is too vile, or too furtive, or too underhand, or too mean. I say the thing is the one indelible blot on the achievement of man . . ."

Nietzsche's attack upon Christianity, however, was not as all-encompassing as the title *The Antichrist* might suggest. Whatever hostility he showed to Christianity he did not show to Christ. Indeed, he let Christ off lightly and focussed his hatred

upon Paul, whom he regarded as the real intellectual founder of Christianity. He charges him with sacrificing "the Saviour: he nailed him on his own cross" (*Ibid*). He even blamed the disciples for possessing the "most un-Christly desire for revenge" (*Ibid*) as if the numerous threats of hell and damnation attributed to the Christ of the New Testament could be construed as anything other than a very *Christly* desire for revenge! Nietzsche, however, tries to wriggle out of this by claiming that such threats "were put into the mouth of the Master" by the disciples. And in another place he complained that "the character of the Saviour, his way of life, the meaning of his death, and even the sequel to his death—were all altered until nothing in the record even remotely approximated to fact." (*Ibid.*) Just *what* this "fact" was and *how* he knew it differed from "the record", Nietzsche did not say. Indeed, so odd was Nietzsche's attitude to Christ compared to his attitude to Christianity that even Dr OSCAR LEVY, an ardent Nietzschean, was compelled to admit that "we are confronted here with a weakness in the strong mind of Nietzsche who, with all his deep insight, was more of an anti-Christian than an anti-Christ and who had, from his ancestral stock, a remnant of veneration for the saviour in his blood." (*The Idiocy of Idealism*, 1940.)

But there is more to Nietzsche's reverence for Christ than the influence of his ancestral stock. He clearly felt an affinity with Christ as a redeemer since he, too, wanted to redeem mankind—despite his statement in *Ecce Homo* that "the very last thing I should promise would be to 'improve' mankind. I do not set up any new idols: may old idols only learn what it costs to have legs of clay." The "death of God" had created for Nietzsche an anguishing void that he sought to fill with a new goal for mankind: the Superman. "All beings have created something beyond themselves, are ye going to be the ebb of this great tide? Behold, I teach you Superman." (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*.) The language he used to describe the advent of his ideal being was redolent of that of a religious prophet: "Awake and listen ye lonely ones! From the future winds are coming with the gentle beating of wings, and there cometh good tidings for fine ears/Ye lonely ones of today, ye who stand apart, ye shall one day be a people: from you, who have chosen yourselves, a chosen people shall arise and from it, Superman. (*Ibid.*) The godless were to have a new god.

And in the tradition of all good religious prophets Nietzsche, for all his scorn for Judeo-Christian morality, and his claim to be an "immoralist", is a fervent moralist. In place of the levelling and servile morality so glibly preached by the pious of the pulpit and the political platform, he sought to instal two types of morality: that of the masters and that of the slaves. Although he depicted his Zarathustra as a "destroyer" who "breaks values" this is done in order "to be a creator of good and evil". Instead of rejecting the authority of any moral code, no matter *what* categorical imperative is invoked to sanction it—God, Man or Superman—Nietzsche is incapable of ridding himself of the "moralic acid" he denounced in others, and remained a possessed man. His philosophy was shaped by a belief in the existence of supra-individual entities to which the individual must subordinate his interests and, where necessary, give up his life. So that the "elevation of the type 'man'" can be achieved, self-sacrifice is demanded, not in the name of God, but of the Superman. The irony is that Nietzsche himself once observed that "the man of faith, any kind of 'believer', is necessarily subservient to something outside himself: he cannot posit himself as an end, and he cannot find ends within himself . . . Any kind of faith is an expression of self-denial, and of estrangement from self . . ." (*The Antichrist*.) His failure to grasp the implications of his own words turned him into an instrument of a fixed idea, a prisoner of his own fantasy.

Nietzsche set himself up as the Antichrist. He was not. He was, at the most, merely anti-Christian. Obsessed with the Christ myth, all he succeeded in doing

was replacing it with a new myth carrying with it its own conceptual tyranny. In the words of A. FOUILLÉE:

"His philosophy is composed of poetry and mythology: it resembles in this way all the myths to which humanity has given birth. His philosophy is a faith without proof, an unending chain of aphorisms, of oracles, and of prophecies, and in this respect it is also a religion. The Antichrist of the dying century believed himself to be a new Christ, superior to the former one." (*Nietzsche et Immoralisme.*) □

The Redevelopment Issue Again

At the meeting of the General Committee held on June 7, 1989, it was decided to set up two working parties, one to investigate the possibilities and financial implications of the demolition and subsequent rebuilding of Conway Hall, and the other to investigate those same matters should the present building be retained but greatly improved.

I write now about the second of those working parties. The General Committee invited NAOMI LEWIS, STEPHEN NARLEN, SAM BEER, one other and me (as convener) to constitute the working party investigating the retention and improvement of the present building. I now ask all members of the Society who feel sympathy and interest in our approach, and who have information and skills to back up their opinions, to contact any member of this working party as a matter of some urgency. I stress that what is needed is not simply strong feeling, but relevant information, skills, and imaginative ideas. Members writing to us would best be advised to send letters to: "The Limited Redevelopment Working Party" c/o Conway Hall.

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I refer to the correspondence between PETER CADOGAN and NORMAN BACRAC in the July/August *Ethical Record*.

On the subject of points of order:—Under universally accepted Standing Orders a Chairman cannot refuse to accept a Point Of Order. What he *can* do is to rule that a point of order is not a point of order. This saves him from those people who raise points of order knowing that the Chairman cannot decline to accept them.

If the Chairman refuses to accept a genuine point of order it means that he is putting himself above the meeting and this is clearly a wholly unacceptable situation.

In connection with the foregoing there are two other matters that urgently need to be considered.

The first is the viability of the AGM decision on development. In my submission it would not stand up in a court of law in view of the contrary decision taken by the Special General Meeting. The answer to this is either to take a legal opinion or call another Special General Meeting.

Secondly, there was the strange ruling at the AGM preventing employees who were also members from voting on these matters. There is no such provision in the Constitution. This is a matter that should be clarified and rectified forthwith.

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