

# The Freethinker

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## AUTHOR CHALLENGES THE POPE TO ENQUIRE INTO PREDECESSOR'S DEATH

David Yallop, author of the international best seller, *In God's Name*, has challenged Pope John Paul II to set up an independent Commission of Enquiry to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul I, in September 1978. In an open letter to the Pope, Mr Yallop says he has information making it abundantly clear "you believe that the USSR master-minded your attempted assassination by Mehmet Ali Agca . . . The evidence to support your belief of Russian involvement appears to me to be highly tenuous, stemming as it does largely from the mouth of Agca himself". But the evidence recorded in *In God's Name* is of a different calibre to that of a man who told the Italian court that he is Jesus Christ.

David Yallop has told the Pope that if mere suspicions that the KGB involvement in the Agca assassination attempt are to be pursued, then his own "firm incontrovertible evidence" that John Paul I was murdered "must be examined with equal diligence.

"You are on record expressing love and deep affection for the late Holy Father. I ask that you now demonstrate publicly that love and affection by creating an independent Commission of Enquiry whose task would be to examine all the evidence surrounding the death of Pope John Paul I, not least the extensive corruption that has riddled the Vatican Bank for many years.

"The Commission should be given the authority to arrange for the exhumation of the body and a full independent autopsy.

"It would also have the power to call for any witnesses and any records.

"For my own part, I am prepared to make freely available all the evidence that I have acquired over the past four years. I am also prepared to testify before such a Commission".

David Yallop is not a paranoid Protestant zealot (in fact he was born a Roman Catholic) but an investigative writer with an impressive record. He was originally contacted by people in Vatican City who asked him to investigate the circumstances relating to the sudden death of Pope John I. After three years of intensive research, *In God's Name* was published in 1984.

In a prologue to the paperback edition, published by Corgi last month, the author declares: "Not one single statement, not one single fact, not one single contention concerning the murder of Pope John Paul I contained within this book has been proved false . . .

"If the Vatican can prove . . . that my account of who found the dead body of Albino Luciani is incorrect, and can prove that my account of the papers he was holding in his hand is incorrect, then I will donate every penny of my royalties from the sale of this book to cancer research".

David Yallop asserts that six men in particular had much to fear if the Papacy of John Paul I continued. Each of them stood to gain in various ways if he should suddenly die.

First, there was the arch-conservative Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Jean Villot, one of the last men to see John Paul I alive. He had received a list of resignations, transfers and new appointments the new Pope required. Villot had been overruled on these proposals and he realised that their implementation would have far-reaching implications.

Others who had cause to be alarmed by John Paul I's determination to root out corruption and shady dealings included Cardinal John Cody, ruler of the arch-diocese of Chicago. He was boss of the richest and most scandal-ridden diocese in the world. Pope Paul VI, always a ditherer, had for years con-

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# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## MRS WHITEHOUSE'S OWN GOAL

Fleet Street really plumbed the depths when reporting and commenting on the horrific events at the European Cup Final in Brussels at which 38 people died in an orgy of violence and rioting. The *Sun*, particularly, was in characteristic slimy form. Thus: "Your caring *Sun* . . . launches an appeal for those injured and the relatives of those who died in the Brussels soccer disaster".

The "liberal" *Guardian* chipped in its two pennyworth with an article entitled "The Obscenity That Fuelled the Brussels Brutality", by none other than Mary Whitehouse. She commenced by saying that "there is no easy, superficial answer to the terrible violence which now so dreadfully disfigures the football scene". This sensible observation was followed by a very superficial analysis of why some young people's idea of a good time is going on the rampage at football matches.

If Mrs Whitehouse made a detailed study of this disturbing trend she would discover that many (probably most) of the perpetrators of football violence are motivated by "patriotism". But that would be too embarrassing for the president of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, so instead she blames it all on "the soft-centred, self-interested liberal-humanist sentiment which has beguiled our universities, schools and indeed churches for the last three decades".

The influence of soft-centred, self-interested liberal humanists on football crowds has been unnoticed heretofore, except by Mrs Whitehouse. What has been evident for several years is that the football terraces of Britain, particularly in London, have been recruiting grounds for extreme Right-wing groups like the National Front and the British Movement. Coloured players are constantly barracked and harassed by chanting, flag-waving "patriots", a tendency that is on the increase as the Commission for Racial Equality pointed out in its annual report last month. Violence of this kind always appears to escape the keen-eyed, would-be censors of television programmes. Or could it be that racial abuse and other manifestations of xenophobia by "patriotic" yobs are acceptable to puritanical pressure groups?

Fleet Street's lie factories have assiduously fostered the extreme nationalism that is the cause of much of the viciousness that is prevalent in football crowds. The tabloids which have been shedding crocodile tears over the Brussels victims are the

# AND NOTES

worst offenders. Not so long ago they were gloating over the deaths of hundreds during the Falklands campaign, cheering on Britishers as well as Argentinians to injury and death. They created an atmosphere of almost hysterical enthusiasm for the false glamour of war that enabled the upholders of Victorian values to laugh all the way to the polling station.

Voluntary workers in political, religious, social, sporting and cultural organisations are rightly praised for their public-spirited contribution of time and energy. But people who contribute their time and energy to promoting racial harmony are sneeringly dismissed as "the race relations industry".

Those people endeavouring to create a tolerant society in Britain are faced with formidable problems and influential enemies. On the Conservative side there is almost the entire national and provincial press. The Federation of Conservative Students is a happy hunting ground for racists and Right-wing extremists. Many of today's FCS members are the local and parliamentary candidates of the future.

It was in traditional Labour strongholds that the National Front made its biggest (if temporary) electoral gains. And there are now elements within the Labour Party who want to introduce political apartheid in the form of "black sections".

The disaster at Brussels was just the latest if most deadly outburst of football violence that has made British fans the most unwelcome anywhere. It is a telling comment on British society that the country where the game originated should now be banned from the football grounds of Europe.

And whatever Mary Whitehouse may say, this state of affairs has not been brought about by "girlie" magazines or "soft-centred, self-interested liberal-humanist sentiment".

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**Martin Jones, a 29-year-old insurance clerk, has been jailed for ten years at Bristol Crown Court for twice attempting to murder his wife. He cut the brakes of her car, but she managed to swerve the vehicle off the road. Then Jones set fire to their home where his wife was alone and asleep. He hoped to collect £120,000 insurance money. The judge told Jones: "This was a quite dreadful crime, motivated by greed. To my mind it is a worse crime than a number of murders with which I have had to deal". Jones and his wife are members of the fundamentalist Christian Brethren sect.**

## COMMERCIAL BREAK

The Jimmy Young Television Programme is described as a series in which "Britain's best-loved interviewer" examines "some of the thornier issues in the headlines". The first programme turned out to be a 45-minute commercial for Britain's leading spiritualist, Doris Stokes.

Constant reference was made by participants — they included Agony Aunt, Claire Rayner — to the fact that Doris Stokes is a good listener. Being a professional listener, she ought to be good. Her tours of the country are arranged in a style befitting a pop star. So are the admission charges.

Doris Stokes is a nice old thing and a skilled performer. She was not responsible for this awful programme. The blame lies entirely with Jimmy Young.

Instead of being a firm and fair interviewer, Jimmy Young hopped around the platform like a hen on a hot-plate, patronising those who obviously were fans of Doris Stokes and being dismissive of her critics. But he was at his creepiest worst when drooling over the Queen Mum of spiritualists herself.

If the Trades Description Act applied to television programmes then Yorkshire Television would be in hot water over this one.

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**A couple who committed adultery have been stoned to death near Jamrud, at the foot of the Khyber Pass. The punishment was approved by tribal elders after it was suggested by a Muslim priest who declared the couple to be sinners.**

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## THE LAST LINK

The recent death in Taunton of Patrick Power Smyth-Pigott ended a chapter in the history of batty religious sects. He was the son of the Rev John Hugh Smyth-Pigott and last surviving member of the Agapemonites, whose Abode of Love at Spaxton, in Somerset, once scandalised Britain.

It all started in the 1840s with the Rev Henry James Prince. A gifted preacher, he was much attracted to the ladies. Rumours and gossip circulated and soon fell on the ears of the Bishop of Bath and Wells who banished Prince from the pulpit. The young clergyman later got into the bad books of the Bishops of Salisbury and Ely, and for all practical purposes found himself outside the Anglican fold.

He continued to preach in barns and open spaces until becoming the minister of a chapel in Brighton. The town was then a fashionable resort, and Brother Prince soon attracted well-to-do followers. He had accumulated £30,000 by the time he left for Spaxton to establish the Abode of Love in 1849. It housed

about sixty disciples, including servants.

Brother Prince was known as "the Beloved", and there were sundry office-holders including one whose title was "the Angel of the last Trumpet". He issued a Great Declaration announcing that God had chosen him to be the perfect, sinless man. Not only was he immortal, but those of his followers who had enough faith in him were immortal too. Furthermore, if they were really strong in faith, sexual relations — particularly with "the Beloved" — could be regarded simply as a spiritual exercise.

Prince's immortal state ended in 1899 when he was in his 88th year. The sect was without a leader until 1902 when the Rev J. H. Smyth-Pigott assumed the role. Like his predecessor, Smyth-Pigott was an Anglican clergyman who had fallen foul of the Church authorities. A year previously he had proclaimed himself the Messiah when preaching to another sect, the Children of the Resurrection, at their Ark of the Covenant in the Clapton area of London. And like Brother Prince, now interred in the Abode of Love lawn (for some reason he was buried standing up), the Messiah was believed by the faithful to be immortal.

There were about a hundred women but only a few men when Smyth-Pigott came to Spaxton. Already married, but without offspring, he took to himself a disciple named Annie Ruth Preece. Sister Ruth, as she was known, was his "spiritual bride-in-chief" for many years and bore him three children whose names were Power (Patrick), Glory (David) and Life (Lavita).

Sister Ruth shared the Messiah with a succession of "spiritual brides". It may have been this happy arrangement that caused one visitor at the Abode of Love to describe Smyth-Pigott as "white as a sheet" and the leanest man he had ever seen.

Smyth-Pigott died in 1927 and the sect slowly dwindled. During the last war the Abode of Love served as an Air Raid Precautions Centre. Sister Ruth died in 1956, convinced till the end of the Messiah's immortality. Six years later the building was sold.

Prince, Smyth-Pigott and many other Messiahs of the period did not use their influence to promote Right-wing politics. They coned the wealthy rather than exploiting the young. Their randiness was healthier than the sexual repression and guilt feelings fostered by run-of-the-mill Christian propagandists. Altogether they compare more favourably with today's religious charlatans.

## Embryo Research—

Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill failed in the House of Commons last month, although its supporters were declaring themselves to be "cautiously optimistic" and "sensing victory". Its success would have virtually put an end to experimentation on human embryos.

The Powellites' hopes were pinned on a ploy by Andrew Bowden (Conservative, Brighton, Kemp-ton), which aimed at the resumption of debate on the Bill and continuing it over the weekend if necessary. The prospect of carrying on after the Friday 2.30 pm deadline did not appeal to MPs, most of whom spend the weekend in their constituencies. And the implications of a weekend sitting depressed further the careworn, death-warmed-up visage of Mr John Biffin, Leader of the House.

Powell's Bill had been supported outside Westminster by a thoroughly unscrupulous campaign in which Romanist luminaries, including Cardinal Hume, played a significant part. MPs were inundated with petitions and deceitful propaganda, while the newspapers carried lurid stories about experiments on human beings.

The Bill had a majority of 172 at its second reading in February, but was "talked out" at a later stage. There seemed to be no hope for its revival until Mr Bowden had the good fortune to be drawn first in a private members' ballot. He decided on a motion to bring the Powell Bill back to the House for its remaining stages.

Proceedings commenced as usual with those MPs of either a pious or a conventional disposition paying homage to a figment of the imagination. Prayers over, they got down to business.

The Powellites were confident that his Bill would survive if Mr Bowden secured enough time to have his motion debated. But they had not reckoned with their opponents' mastery of parliamentary procedure. The clever Mr Bowden was neatly outwitted by Dennis Skinner (Labour, Bolsover), who moved a writ for the by-election at Brecon and Radnor. He and other opponents of the Powell Bill kept the discussion going for most of the time available.

A Powell supporter, Dale Campbell-Savours (Labour, Workington), complained of Mr Skinner's tactics. Mr Skinner retorted that Mr Campbell-Savours had a bit of cheek; "because he is part of a small group in the House which proposed to change the business of the day in a way which many people . . . thought was an abuse of the procedures". He hoped that Members would talk about issues that will be discussed during the by-election campaign, and not become involved in genetic engineering and other matters.

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**Up to thirty Salvation Army officers are under investigation in New York for allegedly receiving bribes. According to federal prosecutors, the Salvationists received money from a second-hand clothing company in return for clothes which had been given to the Army for free distribution.**

# Powell Falls Prey to "the Beast of Bolsover"

"I should say in passing", he added, "that it is a bit rich that there is all this complaint about genetic engineering, yet the right honourable Member for South Down (Mr Powell) is acting as the master scientist and pottering about with that young embryo, the honourable Member for Brighton, Kemptown".

Dennis Skinner is not generally recognised as an expert constitutionalist. He is on the Labour Party's far Left and is frequently referred to (either disparagingly or admiringly according to the commentator's politics) as "the beast of Bolsover". He can be best described as being of the Mauling Tendency, Conservatives who tackle him soon discover. But on this occasion his allies included ardent Conservatives, Government ministers among them.

Commenting on the Powellites' defeat in the House of Commons, Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, said it was unusual for secularists to find themselves on the same side of a moral argument as an archbishop and Mrs Thatcher.

"But on this occasion we are glad to support them, since they are on the side of morality and common sense", she added.

Miss Smoker referred to the ill-informed media coverage that was given to the Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, "not only before and after its second reading and report-back stage, but again on its abortive second coming. The newspapers and broadcasts fed on one another.

"The columnist George Gale devoted his Friday page in the *Daily Express* to attacking an article in *The Times* by the Archbishop of York the previous Monday, and (updating his piece, one imagines, at the last minute) with an additional few lines from Cardinal Basil Hume, culled from Thursday's *Times* — though without mentioning the source of either.

"Not content with dealing with the particular moral issue under discussion, all three commentators went back to the roots of 'moral absolutism' — the Archbishop of York coming out courageously against it, the Cardinal taking the absolutist stand of traditional theology, and Gale showing his ignorance by assuming moral absolutism to be a synonym for 'to distinguish between right and wrong'.

"In actual fact, of course, moral absolutism means sticking to a principle whatever the consequences — such as refusing to tell a lie that could save a life. The opposite of moral absolutism is not, as Gale seems to think, immorality or amorality, but 'consequentialism' and utilitarianism — that is, after weighing up the probable consequences of alternative actions, making one's moral choices so as to increase happiness or decrease misery".

Dennis Skinner deserves all praise for his part in

bringing about the demise of Powell's dangerous Bill. But the SPUCites and LIFERs will not let this latest setback deter them. They are still endeavouring, after eighteen years, to wreck the 1967 Abortion Act.

Barbara Smoker's illustrated pamphlet, *Eggs are Not People*, expanded from a *Freethinker* article, was sent to all MPs in early April, eliciting a considerable response on both sides. *Freethinker* readers are urged to obtain copies from the National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, telephone 01-272 1266. It contains information that will be invaluable in the continuing fight against the anti-human, anti-scientific promoters of superstition and ignorance.

• Embryos and Ethics, page 109.

## THE HAZARDS OF UNCONTROLLED POPULATION

Following on the harrowing television reports from famine-stricken Ethiopia and Sudan we have seen the effects of the tidal wave which swept away nearly ten thousand people on the delta islands off Bangladesh. While international aid has been rushed to the scene it must be remembered that the scale of the disaster would be smaller if these deltaic islands were not so thickly populated as a result of the burgeoning population explosion on the mainland. The peasantry has to occupy and cultivate whatever land is available, even at the risk of their lives.

An unpopular military regime in Bangladesh does not inspire such confidence that it can mobilise the people to counter the effects of this disaster. There is talk of ambitious plans to construct defence walls which may afford some protection. Such schemes could provide rich pickings for corrupt elements and are unlikely to be completed before a tidal wave strikes again, possibly within the next three years.

A really effective programme of population control would provide at least a partial long term answer. If, however, the relief schemes are going to be channelled through Roman Catholic agencies, this aspect of the question will be totally neglected.

The new Sheriff of Gloucester, David Short, has announced that he is an atheist and will not be attending church services. He was elected to the office by Labour and Liberal groups, and is Gloucester's first Labour Sheriff for twelve years. Mr Short said: "I am not prepared to bend my principles and strong beliefs. . . I have made it clear that I am unwilling to attend church services because I am an atheist and it would be hypocritical of me to go".

The evangelical tradition in Christianity goes back to the Gospels and Paul's message to the Gentiles. But what is the message now? The fundamentalists who ring my door-bell say it has not changed. Nor did my Anglican mentors when I was a schoolboy. At Lincoln School, the second oldest foundation in England after St Peter's, York, with nine centuries' association with Lincoln Cathedral, we began every term with a service there before going on to school. The South Transept was filled with our kit-bags (inspection of games kit on the first day of each term) and we trooped into the Angel Choir. The service was usually conducted by a visiting Bishop, sometimes patronising, usually platitudinous, but neither threatening us with hell-fire nor fanning much fire in our souls. At school, "Scripture" (the "progressive" terms RI, RE, and RK had not been invented) consisted of one lesson from the Old Testament and one from the New each week, usually reading two verses each of Kings I or Matthew around the class, with "lines" for anyone who did not know the place when it came to his turn.

This tedious procedure was not, as might have been expected, conducted by some indifferent young atheist teacher, but by an Anglican clergyman. I do not recall ever being told that any part of the Bible could be disputed or was even to be regarded as allegory.

Living my life up to that time in a city crowned by that great, beautiful and mysterious Cathedral, the dedicated labour of unknown men undeterred by the knowledge that they would never see its completion, I have often wondered what was in their minds; something, I feel, far more powerful than the trivial sentiments, narrow doctrine and intellectual poverty associated by custom with it.

What can evangelists offer today? They hint at what they no longer offer. Honesty to God, they say, means the end of "Old Nobodaddy", no longer an old greybeard in the sky, no longer Hell, and Heaven is not quite what it used to be. But how coy and reticent about what has been preserved and what has been abandoned! It is like people on a Russian sledge pursued by wolves, throwing out impedimenta to lighten the load, old vestments and old texts. What has gone and what is left?

Genesis is a natural starting point. Adam and Eve are presumably allegory, but what about Original Sin? And if no longer Adam's sin, what was it? And, after a few generations of novem-centenarians, except for the unfortunate Enoch, son of Jared, who died young at 365, there came the Flood. There is only the vaguest hint at the reasons for God's displeasure, which was considerable enough for him to exterminate not only men, but everything that breathed, except, of course, for the passengers on the

Ark. The Flood is stranger still because only shortly before there had been the mysterious reference to the sons of God finding the daughters of men fair, coming in unto them and bearing children. There were also "giants in the earth in those days", but whether they, too, had incurred God's wrath is not stated.

After the Flood this strange capricious God strikes again; not destruction this time, but sabotage on the plain of Shinar. All people had one language and they were gathered together. And they said: "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth".

A more civilised story might have described God commending his creatures for their unity, co-operation and endeavour. Not so the Bible. God is vindictive and fearful of men's success.

*And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men built.*

*And the Lord said "Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.*

*"Go to, let us go down, and then confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech".*

*So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the city.*

If I were the High Priest of the Goddess Scientia I would preach on this text, Babel being Science, and God bigotry, fear and obscurantism.

Another problem for the evangelist is how to sustain, in modern times, the notion that vacarious atonement and salvation can be obtained through human sacrifice. Did he die to save us all?

So much emotion has welled and flowed and trembled from the words atonement and salvation that I may be permitted to write with feeling: *Jesus, the Sacrificial Lamb of God; Washed in the Blood of the Lamb; Let the Water and the Blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure; Hide me, O, my Saviour, hide; Saved! Glory, Hallelujah.*

When I was a very little boy I liked the hymn "There is a Green Hill Far Away". I did not know what "crucified" meant. When I grew up I felt that adults, their motives unimpugned, had tried to draw me, innocent, into a grotesque and ghastly ritual sacrifice.

We are appalled at the animal and human sacrifices of the old fertility cult religions. The Mayans, we are told, were an aberrant civilisation,

crazed with blood lust. These old cults were imbued with deep feeling about death and re-birth, about death and regeneration, about death and resurrection. They also had spring and harvest festivals. Believing ourselves civilised we do not accept that the scapegoat, driven into the wilderness, carried all the sins of the tribe away with it, or that

the blood of the sacrificed lamb cleansed and purified anyone. They are relics of barbarism.

Worthy men and women do not seek atonement or someone else to take the blame. They are prepared to bear the burden of their own "sins" and those of others (but not Adam's) where they know that they have misled others or failed to help them.

## Malthus: the Report of His Death Was Greatly Exaggerated (Part 2)

DAVID TRIBE

Himes and the Royal Commission on Population agreed on five inducements to disinflation (not decline, but reduced rate of increase) of population in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: (1) decline in religious belief and growth in rationalist and scientific thought; (2) urbanisation; (3) female emancipation; (4) individual desire to advance economically; (5) social mobility. Himes advanced six further reasons: (6) rise in hedonism, utilitarianism and materialism; (7) growth of preventive medicine; (8) widespread fear of overpopulation; (9) spread of communications; (10) sexual prophylaxis by the army during the First World War; (11) industrialisation. The Royal Commission added four more: (12) decline in agriculture; (13) loss of security with competitive individualism; (14) growth of popular education; (15) spread of humanitarianism. Banks says that today "most sociologists and demographers . . . are said to be agreed that: 'the basic causes of the general decline are: (a) a major shift in functions from the family to other specialised institutions, so that there was a decrease in the number of children required to achieve socially valued goals, and (b) a sharp reduction in mortality which reduced the number of births necessary to have any desired number of children'". (I am somewhat surprised to find myself on the side of the majority.) All very well, comments Banks, but why was there "a major shift in functions" at that time, and why was there a time lag between the declines in mortality and birth rates?

His desire for answers to these questions was the reason for his sally into history. Concerned by the contemporary population explosion in the Third World and the diversity of remedies proposed for the situation, he believed it would be helpful to discover what brought about effective population control in the First World at an earlier period. The further back he looked, the more his enquiries were inhibited by a lack of reliable statistics. Indeed, it was as recently as 1911 before the first "Fertility Census" was made of the British population, revealing the numbers of children, years of marriage and occupations of parents then living. As a professional sociologist, he

was also concerned by a lack of attitude surveys. As an amateur, I am far less concerned by this deficiency; for I believe that in this area, above all, people are least aware of their own motivations and most likely to give the sort of answers they think are expected. These problems do not, however, prevent Professor Banks from reaching, in his convoluted book, fairly definite conclusions on the merits and demerits of many of the fifteen arguments advanced by Himes and the Royal Commission.

All of them he concedes to be plausible, and I suspect that all have had some impact. But he is anxious to eliminate as many as possible so as to reduce the options for today's planners. He appears on strong ground in dismissing (8). Relatively few people in the nineteenth century were likely to have agonised over overpopulation in theory, and even fewer to have modified their own family size to this ideal. Item (3) is a little more difficult. Smaller families came before female emancipation or even the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. But aristocratic women had long been largely independent through regulated marriage settlements; at the Knowlton trial Annie Besant made much of the effects of overbreeding on women's health; and women have always and everywhere exercised more influence in the home than their political status or public image might suggest. The early feminists, by the way, opposed artificial contraception, presumably because it facilitated male insistence on conjugal rights.

There is, of course, much overlap among items: for example, (2), (3) and (11). Banks seems to believe that mill work in towns took women away from their children more than agricultural work in fields, and thus reduced family size, while at the same time the extra income made it possible for families to support more children. In fact, the factory system allowed for many "outworkers" at home, and it was common for those women who worked in mills to keep their children with them drugged. Whether such labour should itself be seen as a sign of emancipation or exploitation is another issue. If industrialisation is regarded chiefly as a vehicle for technological change,

Banks is on strong ground in dismissing it. The French are credited with pioneering smaller families as early as the eighteenth century, yet their society was largely rural, non-industrialised, given to early marriage and Roman Catholic. Further, the "democratising revolution" in England came well before the age of cheap condoms, cervical caps and vaginal diaphragms, and was probably associated with restraint and *coitus interruptus*. This has a clear message for demographers. A flood of cheap — or free — contraceptives will not drown fertility fires kindled by social sparks.

Despite his book's subtitle, Banks does not say a great deal about (1); and, in my view, dismisses it too glibly. I agree with him that secularism was never a mass movement; that it, or its precursors, had little influence on the families of the gentry or professional middle classes, where smaller families became the norm from the mid-nineteenth century; and that religion in England was then staging one of its many revivals. I also agree that, while the close association of family planning with secularism at a later date led some secularists to feel the latter was becoming disreputable, many religionists thought the same of the former. Thus I do not think the population explosion of Latin America would readily be compressed by matching every bible with a *Bible Handbook*. And there is much to be said for bringing liberal clergy into family planning organisations. Apart, however, from the strange coincidence already mentioned of overall family reduction with maximal secularist promotion of birth control, Banks appears to have given too little credit to the work of free-thinkers over many decades. The first working-class group to have smaller families was the textile workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire; and while this may have been a seat of working wives, it was also a hotbed of Owenism and secularism. Though some free-thinkers have always believed they were on the point of emptying the churches, the more thoughtful have seen their real influence as the modification of social views, even of those still in the pews.

The birth-control "crusade" is part of a wider movement of human responsibility for solving human problems. Another, less familiar point can be made. Though secularism has not lacked its pruders, it has played an important role in undercutting sexual superstitions. The extraordinary devotion to the "natural law" that religionists traditionally showed when artificial contraception was proposed can be explained only as a sexual tabu. It springs from the notion that sexual gratification is nasty in itself, that conjugal sex is justified if conception is intended, that it may be tolerated if it comes about spontaneously or "naturally", but that it is wrong if premeditated for pleasure and "tarted up" with contraceptive preparations or channelled into the madness of masturbation. That such attitudes are now widely seen as "Victorian" aberrations is largely due to the

work of secularists.

Banks is on similarly shaky ground in dismissing (7). Though he produces surprising figures to show that infant (ie, under one year) mortality had not declined before family size, he acknowledges that the death rate of older children was declining from the 1840s. But, he protests, the "pioneers" of birth control had curbed their families before they had statistical proof that existing members were likely to live longer. In demographic terms, we do not need to worry too much what were the motivations of pioneers so long as a sufficient number of people are prepared to emulate them. In this case, however, the pioneers were the very professional classes that introduced the 1848 Public Health Act and subsequent improvements in water supply, drainage and sewerage, in the conviction that these innovations would reduce mortality.

Banks puts his main faith in (4) and (5), but not in their mainstream interpretation. This argument has developed into a controversy between Malthusians and anti-Malthusians. It stems from the paradox that, by and large, the poorest parents in the poorest countries tend to have the largest families, whereas simple economy might have suggested the converse. This has raised the issue: Are families poor because they are large, or are they, for some curious reason, large because they are poor? The early Malthusians and neo-Malthusians chose the former alternative and argued that having fewer mouths to feed would raise the family's living standard and, more questionably, producing fewer future workers would ultimately lift wages by the law of supply and demand. Today the emphasis is on the latter alternative, and efforts are made to discover the curious reason for this anomaly. Some commentators have said that poverty brings malnutrition, mental deterioration and lack of forethought; others see poverty alleviated by the supposed jollity of big families; and others again, more contentiously, associate both poverty and fecklessness with genetic characteristics. One does not, however, need to get drawn into controversies like this to examine socio-economic reasons for individuals to choose bigger or smaller families.

• To be concluded next month.

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# "A Very Honest Priest"

JIM HERRICK

Jean Meslier is one of the lesser known Deists, Sceptics and Atheists whose lives and work are recounted in Jim Herrick's new book, *Against the Faith*. Meslier's career was extraordinary for two reasons. First, the vehemence of his attacks on Christianity; secondly, all his life he was a conscientious priest. Meslier died in 1729; later Voltaire proposed that his epitaph should be: "Here lies a very honest priest who at death asked God's pardon for having been a Christian".

Jean Meslier (1664-1729) was a country *curé* who wrote one of the most vehement and thorough-going attacks on religious institutions and religious faith in general and Christianity in particular that has ever been written. His *Testament* was a handwritten manuscript of five to six hundred closely written pages in which he bequeathed his contempt for Christianity and despair that ordinary people should be kept in bondage by the imposture of clergy and rulers.

Meslier was born in the Ardennes in 1664. His father entered him for a seminary at Rheims, presumably after some instruction by the local *curé*. He allowed himself to be directed towards a career in the church because, as he regretfully admits in the *Avant-Propos* to the *Testament*, his parents hoped to secure for him a life which was "more gentle, more peaceful, and more honourable in the world than that of ordinary people". He was nominated to a curacy near his birthplace in 1689, resided in Etrépigny and served the few hundred inhabitants of this and the neighbouring village of Balaives until his death in the summer of 1729.

Little else is known about his life, except that he came to the notice of the archbishop of Rheims in 1716 for speaking in the pulpit against "the seigneurs and great of the world". He was reprimanded and taken to Rheims for one month's confinement. An anonymous *Summary of the Life of Jean Meslier* which circulated underground in the eighteenth century, refers to an occasion when he refused to recommend the local *seigneur* in his prayers. Apart from this there is no evidence that he was not in all respects an efficient and effective local priest, with a strong sense of duty and an unusually large library. There was a suggestion in the *Summary* that weariness with life and disgust with his task led him to commit suicide by refusing food and drink. His almost schizoid channelling of all his detestation of Christianity on to paper while steadily undertaking his function as a priest has led to accusations of his being a "psychological monstrosity". But the dangers of publication were such that only a foolhardy wish for punishment could have tempted the author of so ferocious a manu-

script. He may well have felt that he could genuinely best serve the community by counselling and helping the ordinary folk around him with as little reference to religion as he could get away with.

His manuscript quickly went into circulation as one of the most widely known of clandestine publications and came to the attention of Voltaire, d'Holbach and other *philosophes* who must have been startled by its forthrightness and the completeness of its materialism and atheism. Voltaire published an edited extract in 1762; it gave sections critical of Christianity acceptable to deists and left out the arguments against the existence of God and the sections on the tyrannies and injustices of the great. The first edition to be published was that of the Dutch nineteenth-century rationalist Rudolf Charles d'Ablaing van Gienerburg in 1864. Not until 1970 was a complete and thoroughly edited French edition begun. Meslier, like Thomas Paine, whose plainness and fire he shared, almost slipped out of the conventional history books. Nevertheless, his voice still comes through to us as the cry of anguish, fury and despair at the injustices and deception of Christianity.

The *Testament* is divided into eight sections, each of which presents a different "proof". In the first and second it is argued that religions are "inventions and purely human institutions" and faith, especially the Christian faith, is founded on uncertainties, contradictions and absurdities. In the third and fourth parts Meslier examines the Old Testament and proposes that the claims of revelation are false and that the prophecies are contradicted by history and cannot be interpreted symbolically without becoming ridiculous. In the fifth and sixth parts Christianity is accused of propounding false doctrines and morality and perpetuating the misery of the people by favouring oppression and injustice. Christian morality is attacked for the idea that pleasure is wrong, the belief that poverty and renunciation are virtues, and the instruction to love your enemies, which is impractical and leads to injustice.

The seventh and longest section constitutes half of the book and argues against belief in a God. Meslier says that the natural order did not require a sovereign creator since it could be seen as purely matter and motion in so far as we could comprehend it. He also thought that the disorder and evil on earth destroyed the idea of an all-powerful and all-good God. The final section suggests that the soul is not spiritual and immortal, but simply a modification of matter (in animals as well as humans) which is perishable. He concludes with an appeal for

(continued on page 111)

# BOOK

JOHN XXIII: POPE OF THE COUNCIL, by Peter Hebblethwaite. Geoffrey Chapman, £14.95

One of the puzzles that freethinkers often ask me to explain is the entry under John XXIII in Joseph McCabe's mine of information, *A Rationalist Encyclopaedia*. The answer is that the cruel and licentious 15th-century pope of that name — though duly elected by a majority of the cardinals and recognised at the time as the rightful pope, in opposition to two (only slightly less obnoxious) claimants to the papal throne — later became an "anti-pope", his name being expunged from the official list of popes. Even so, the name John, once the most popular of all papal names, was shunned by every new pope for the next 543 years — until Angelo Roncalli, succeeding to the papacy in 1958 (three years after McCabe's death), courageously adopted the name so as to fulfil a long-held dream of seeing the name John, which had been that of his own father, restored to papal acceptability.

His strong family roots are evident throughout his long and varied career. Though, in common with most biographies, this one is at its most human and readable when covering the childhood years, it manages to remain very human and readable throughout, in spite of being by far the most scholarly of the many John XXIII biographies that have already appeared.

The author's background is ideal for his subject. A member of the Society of Jesus from the age of 17, Hebblethwaite studied philosophy in France, took a first at Oxford, and read theology at Heythrop College, before becoming assistant editor of the Jesuit journal *The Month*, for which he went to Rome to report on the final session of the Second Vatican Council. After writing books on Georges Bernanos, on atheism and the Council Fathers, and on the theology of the Church, he went free-lance by parting "amicably" with the Jesuits in 1974, since when, in addition to television and radio broadcasts and miscellaneous writings, his books have included *The Runaway Church*, *Christian-Marxist Dialogue and Beyond*, and *The Year of Three Popes*. It was his appointment as Vatican correspondent to an American paper that enabled him to research the book under review — which (we are told in the author's Preface) took seven years to write.

The book includes some historic photographs (many of them published for the first time), seventeen pages of bibliography and sources, and an adequate index, and is undoubtedly the definitive biography in the English language, and possibly in any other. Its primary source is Pope John himself — who, in his own words, "spent sixty years . . .

# FREETHINKER

with pen in hand" (writing Church history as well as endless diplomacy reports), and who, like others brought up in poverty, rarely threw away any scrap of paper. Its major secondary source is Mgr Loris Capovilla, John's secretary (in Venice as well as the Vatican) and literary executor.

Much of the material will also have been subjected to the even slower researches of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints — for John's beatification (the prelude to canonisation) is a highly popular cause, which cannot be long denied.

Angelo Guisepppe Roncalli spent his early years in an overcrowded farmhouse with the survivors of twelve brothers and sisters and ten second cousins as well as two older generations of the family, so that mealtimes meant more than thirty mouths to be fed — generally from a bowl of soup followed by a dish of *polenta* (ground maize). Except during the winter months, little Angelo worked in the fields from early morning till late at night — and early rising remained a lifelong habit with him, even after changing his name to John at the age of 77. He was generally up by 4.30, and when upbraided for this replied "It is my time".

Though not yet twelve years old when he went off to the junior seminary to study for the priesthood, he developed a remarkably wide view of the world and of people. This book shows him to be less naive in some ways than he is generally painted — indeed, in strategy and diplomacy he could be very shrewd, and he was a competent historian — but in atheist eyes he was, at least in the certitude of his religious faith, extremely naive. He really seems to have had no doubt that he was an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, in a sense (though a supporter of collegiality, and aware of his own inadequacies), infallible.

This made him very decisive once he had thought an idea through — in marked contrast to his successor, Paul VI, whose chronic indecision was largely responsible for the utter collapse of papal authority. John himself is often given the blame — or credit — for this catastrophic collapse, as an outcome of the Second Vatican Council; but it was really Paul's four-year delay in responding to the report of the Birth Control Commission (which had been set up by John) that was the direct cause: for many Catholic women, naturally thinking this delay meant the Pill was about to be sanctioned, jumped the gun and went on the Pill, and then, when Paul finally brought out the reactionary *Humanae Vitae*, refused to go back to the old

# REVIEW

Vatican Roulette. If only John had lived another year or so, he would almost certainly have taken advantage of the Pill loophole, opened up by the Commission's findings, to sanction non-obstructive methods of contraception. Although this would probably have left the papacy in a stronger position, it would, on balance, have had a beneficial effect on human welfare, since birth-control programmes would have been given far more support by international agencies as well as in Catholic countries.

It is paradoxical that John was so much more progressive than Paul in practice, since the main reason that Roncalli was elected as "the stop-gap pope", and Montini (not yet a cardinal) had to wait for his dead shoes, was that the curial diehards were not ready to accept as pope someone as supposedly progressive as Montini — who, for instance, had been more openly supportive of the French worker-priests than Roncalli. But perhaps, lacking John's simple certitude, Paul was temperamentally unsuited to having the final word.

While such certitude generally leads to intolerance, with John XXIII it seems to have had the opposite effect: knowing little about biblical scholarship, he nevertheless supported the biblical scholars against the censorship of the old curial guard, since he felt no need to fear free inquiry. He was always far more interested in people than in ideology. Perhaps a strong religious faith is a bit like drunkenness: malicious people become aggressive when drunk, while generous people seem to become even more congenial.

The media (especially the non-Catholic media), taken in by the present pope's stage tricks and "charismatic" personality, have dubbed him "the humanist pope" — but if ever there was a humanist pope it was surely Pope John XXIII.

He had none of the physical grace of John Paul II — according to the book under review, he "waddled" — but he was a man of wide human compassion. He would never have denounced liberation theology, or threatened maverick theologians with excommunication, or disparaged feminism, or condemned women to endless childbearing, or refused to release priests and nuns from their vow of chastity — all of which have been inhuman features of the present pontificate.

Equally, he had none of the austere paternalism of his predecessor, Pius XII, who was concerned mainly with Catholicism. John was more like a kind uncle than a "father" in any sense of the word — and he embraced the whole of humanity in his con-

cern, not just members of his own Church.

Not only was he fired with the ecumenical vision of a reconciliation of all the Christian sects, particularly of the Orthodox Church with Rome, but he was concerned with the welfare of non-Christians too. During the war, he had saved many thousands of Jewish lives, he was interested in Islam, and he even formed friendships with atheist Marxists, on a personal as well as a diplomatic level.

Most important of all was his remarkably friendly relationship with Khrushchev, which not only enabled him to get Slipyi released from a Russian labour camp, but to play at least as influential a part as Bertrand Russell in cooling the Cuban crisis. When, already terminally ill, John insisted on receiving Khrushchev's daughter, Rada, and her husband in a private audience, he wanted an account of the meeting to be published, but the Secretariat of State overruled him. ("That's how much freedom and sovereignty the Pope has.") Five months later, however — by which time John had already been dead for two months — it was published. Rada is quoted as saying: "We come from a peasant family too. In Russia it is said that you are a countryman. You have hands that have been hardened by toil, like my father".

John was never an innovator in the sense of generating new ideas himself, but he must be given credit for backing the innovators. The idea of the Birth Control Commission was not his own. As for the ecumenical Council — the importance of which is emphasised in the sub-title of this book — the idea had first been mooted as long ago as 1908, by the old Modernist bishop, Bonomeli, with whom the young Roncalli spent three days at that time. The proposal was revived by other popes in 1923 and again in 1948 — but never came to fruition.

When, after considerable research into those abortive plans, Pope John took up the Council idea in January 1959 — and stuck to it like a limpet, in spite of considerable opposition, including the cautious advice of his own secretary — he expressed the proposal in almost identical terms to those of Bonomeli, half-a-century earlier. They were far more progressive than the terms proposed in 1923 and 1948, and John's vision of the Council needed to be implemented by a man who shared that vision. That man (though older even than the pope) was Cardinal Bea, whom John supported through thick and thin. Tardini (Vatican Secretary of State) was, on the other hand, kept in the dark about everything as long as possible!

Bea's historic lecture of January 1963, "Truth in Charity", condemned religious wars as evil and asserted that the traditional Church maxim, "Error has no rights", was manifest nonsense since only persons (not an abstraction like "error") can have rights, and these are independent of ideology. Not

surprisingly, this was denounced in no uncertain terms by the Holy Office. Nevertheless, it survived as the basis of John's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (written by him personally, three months later, as, in effect, his last will) — "A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man" — and then of the Council declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* ("On Religious Liberty"). (I remember, shortly after that, being surprised when a member of my own family said that it had been morally right for me to leave the Church if it was in accordance with my own conscience!)

Never again could the Church justify having "heretics" tortured to death, as did the 15th-century John XXIII. Even McCabe would surely have found some good things to say about the 20th-century pope of the same name and number.

BARBARA SMOKER

## OBITUARY

### Oswell Blakeston

The death has taken place of Oswell Blakeston who had a long and varied career as an author, artist and critic. He was 78.

Oswell Blakeston's involvement with the cinema included associate editorship of the magazine *Close Up*. He directed several privately made experimental films — Paul Robeson appeared in one of them. He created, in collaboration with the American photographer, Francis Bruguière, the first purely abstract film, *Light Rhythms*.

As an author Oswell Blakeston wrote for a wide range of journals including *Time and Tide*, *Arts Review*, *Ambit* and *Tribune*. During the 1950s and 60s he contributed many pieces to *The Freethinker*. He participated in a forum on Freethought and the Arts which was part of the National Secular Society's centenary celebrations (1966) and was a signatory to A Statement Against Blasphemy law (1978).

### John Boulting

John Boulting, who with his twin brother Roy made an outstanding contribution to British films, died last month at the age of 71.

He joined the film industry in 1933 and four years later the Boulting brothers formed an independent company, Charter Films. With John producing and Roy directing, they made two important feature films, *Pastor Hall* (1940) and *Thunder Rock* (1942). Their partnership was interrupted by the Second World War during which John served in the RAF and Roy in the Royal Armoured Corps.

After the war they made a series of notable films including *Fame is the Spur*, *The Guinea Pig*, *Seven Days to Noon* and *Brighton Rock*.

There was a small family gathering at Eastham-

stead Crematorium attended by John Boulting's wife (Anne Flynn, the painter), and his brothers Roy Boulting and Peter Cotes. His sister-in-law, Joan Miller, herself a well known actress, gave a reading from one of Rosetti's stanzas. The occasion was marked by a complete lack of solemnity, and this fact was stressed by Roy Boulting and Peter Cotes in their addresses regarding their brother's lack of religious belief.

## James Cameron Memorial Meeting

There was a memorial meeting for James Cameron, the distinguished journalist, at the Royal Institution, London, on 13 June.

*Peter Cotes writes:* They came from far and wide to honour him. A letter from Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, was read to the audience of many hundreds by the Acting Indian High Commissioner at this celebration of the life and work of James Cameron. Film actors jostled with statesmen, journalists and critics with painters and scientists, men and women from the shires and the back streets of mean, provincial inner cities rubbed shoulders in a striking display of unity for the man who was described as "a very special correspondent".

Michael Foot said that James Cameron was up front with the very best this country has ever produced, comparing him with H. N. Brailsford, Henry Navinon and William Hazlitt — all free-thinkers. Michael was himself in sparkling form, in love with his subject's talents and fine qualities. When he extolled the splendour of Cameron's writings, his battle against chronic ill health and his never ending struggle against injustice he brought the packed auditorium to its feet with the kind of oratory so beloved in a previous period by both Churchill and Aneurin Bevan, Foot's own mentor.

That apart, there were speeches and oral tributes of outstanding worth, intelligence and wit, from Studs Terkel, Tom Bastow (one of Cameron's old Fleet Street buddies), CND's Bruce Kent and, from the other side of the political spectrum, George Gale. Peggy Ashcroft and Eleanor Bron were among the artistes who read from the finest of Cameron's writings. But then everything he wrote was of the finest, even towards the end when he was fighting for his life and still contributing his weekly column to the *Guardian*.

Cliff Morgan introduced a programme to celebrate the man and his work. It was underscored by the music James loved and those television films (many of them directed by Stephen Peet, whose clips we applauded wildly) which without effort served to remind us of the life of this simple genius.

For in our time has there ever been a life

dedicated to humanitarianism so transparently decent — a blend of liberal conscience and powerful pen, fought from the beginning on behalf of the different readerships to be found in the *Scottish Daily Express*, the *News Chronicle* and finally the *Guardian*, before it was to lose its *Manchester* prefix and some of its greatest radical essayists, critics and foreign correspondents. But of all the great names we recall — Cardus, Scott, Wadsworth, Crozier, Cooke, Phillips, Spring, Brown, Agate — Cameron was arguably the greatest, towering over, without trouble and without any wish to do so, even such fine war correspondents as Sefton Delmer, Rene Cutforth and Alan Moorhead.

No single reporter of world events was so momentous in his range as James Cameron, nor so charm-

ingly apt when describing with mischievous wit those popinjays in public affairs busily dismantling a National Health Service that was created to serve the poorest in the community; or that other who “celebrates” a battle won, with so many dead or injured for life, with a call to *rejoice*. “Mrs Finchley” is now the name that She-Who-Must-be-Obeyed must be known for evermore. It is James’s last dry, mocking cough from that Other Place, assessing the true worth of the street-corner mentality let loose upon world affairs of consequence. Only he, humourist as well as tragedian, could have coined a phrase that may well pass into the language — that is if the Thing he feared and wrote against so valiantly does not obliterate the human race.

## Embryos and Ethics

JAMES SANG

Enoch Powell’s Unborn Children (Protection) Bill was introduced, it must be assumed, to pre-empt the Government’s own legislation on experimentation with human embryos. That planned legislation would have been based on the recommendations of the Committee of Enquiry Into Human Fertilisation and Embryology (the Warnock Report) which would have provided the data and arguments for a rational discussion of the subject. The Powell Bill was “talked out” and an attempt by Andrew Bowden, MP, to reintroduce it was frustrated by another Member, Dennis Skinner.

While these parliamentary manoeuvres may have added to the gaiety of nations, it is important to realise that the Powell Bill is not dead since it has achieved part of its purpose: it will have forced the Government to bring its legislation forward and, acknowledging Powell’s parliamentary support, that legislation will be tougher than it might have been. Powell’s opportunism has already paid off.

Of course experimentation with human embryos is a sensitive subject. Even so, we can ask if criminal legislation is really needed to deal with it. Up to now the work has been done under the supervision of the Medical Research Council and, more recently, of its Ethical Committee. No one has suggested that this (often MRC sponsored) work has transgressed any sensible code or standards. On the contrary, workers in the field have been very responsible, for they are sensible people working to help fellow humans suffering from fertility problems or liable to produce abnormal children. It is their successes that have brought the subject into the limelight, not abuses of their skills.

I beg leave to doubt that Parliament can legislate sensibly on this subject when only a handful of members, on either side of the House, *understand*

what it is all about. But we shall have a Bill, and it will be a struggle to temper it with sense when the pro-Powellites wave banners, as they have already done, suggesting that anything short of a complete ban on experiments with embryos will open the door to Nazi-like experiments on humans.

The essential difference between Powell and the Warnock Report is that Powell rates the fertilised egg as an embryo and human development as a continuum from the moment of fertilisation, whereas Warnock recognises that embryonic development is a discontinuous process. In fact, the fertilised egg divides two, four, eight, etc, to form a ball of cells whose outside members become the trophoblast and whose inner members form an inner cell mass. The trophoblast cells are involved with the implantation of the egg in the uterus and the formation of the placenta, which is ultimately discarded as the afterbirth. The inner cell mass develops into the embryo proper, progressively differentiating skin, nerve, muscle, gut, etc, and eventually taking the form we recognise as a child.

For the first two weeks after fertilisation one cannot tell which of the dividing cells will form the embryo or trophoblast, and the Warnock Committee decided that regulated and controlled research could be done up to this stage. Powell rejects even this limited possibility.

What shall we lose if the Powell line prevails? In the first place, researches on mammalian embryos will go on, using mice. Mice provide a better source of embryos than humans, and have been used successfully for *in vitro* fertilisation, embryo culture and transplantation for about a quarter of a century. (Surrogate mothers are the basis of the commercial expansion of prime stock in cattle; that will go on.)

What we shall lose is the more difficult work directed specifically to the problems of human fertility and human genetic diseases. For example, we do not know why transplanting single *in vitro* fertilised human embryos into their mother's uterus is successful only five per cent of the time when transplanting four embryos has a fifty per cent chance of success. There are innumerable technical problems like this still to be solved. Britain leads in this kind of experiment, and it will stop. It is true, of course, that other nations will not follow such a lead and scientific information, still free, will come here. However, that is no substitute for the training and technical skills which are the by-products of research and are essential for practical applications in hospitals and clinics.

Technical expertise is also necessary for the developments which may enable us to cure some inherited diseases. Deoxyribo-Nucleic Acid technology is developing so fast that its use for this purpose is now on the agenda. Genetically defective cells have been cured of their lesion by providing them with the DNA for the normal gene, and their progeny are not defective. The insulin gene has been introduced into mouse embryos and the growth hormone gene similarly introduced has made giant mice.

The problem is not replacing defective genes anymore, but sorting out how they should be introduced so that they function normally in the right tissues at the right time. That, too, will be resolved, and if history is any guide it will take less than a decade for what can be done to mice to be applied to humans. Further, since (some) human genes can now be isolated as fragments of DNA, it is possible to use them as "probes" to check if the embryo's own gene is normal or not. Thus, a Powell-like Bill will not only frustrate these areas of British research, but will saddle our society with unnecessary infertilities and the pains and costs of genetic diseases.

Those who have followed the debate on the Powell Bill must have been impressed by the contradiction between his supporter's profession of care for humans, even if unborn, and their lack of interest in the human suffering of parents who are either sterile through some physiological fault or carrying the burden of a defective child. They can also learn a great deal by trying to sort out the roles of ignorance and prejudice, and of pragmatism and political expediency, in determining the outcome of this example of everyday ethics. Even a divided church cannot cope, and when that happens the fundamentalists have a field day. So it is important to note, lastly, that the medical profession, particularly the obstetricians, have thrown their weight behind the Warnock Report.

We can hope that Powell, having fired his squib, will have alerted our legislators to the dangers and inhumanity of his reactionary views.

## LETTERS

### NOT ANTI-SEMITIC

To describe Christ's words in John 8,44 as "scurrilously anti-Jewish" is, I believe, a gross distortion (The Big Christian Lie, June issue).

Jesus was at the time specifically addressing the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees. These men who considered themselves the custodians of the truth were denounced by Christ with damning irony as the liars and hypocrites that they were. There is no hint in the passage that Jesus is denouncing them because they were Jewish. After all, Christ was himself a Jew and kept the Jewish law.

Both Christ and the apostle Paul express great love for their compatriots who had not embraced Christ as the Messiah (Luke 13, 34 and Romans 9, 1-5).

I cannot deny that many who call themselves Christians have with others been involved in anti-semitism. These people cannot, however, find a shred of justification for their actions from the behaviour and teachings of Christ. No doubt Christ's caustic words to the Pharisees, "You belong to your father, the devil", will be equally applied to the religious charlatans of today.

S. J. NICHOLLS

### KIPLING AND THE KING

T. F. Evans' article, *The Princess and the Prince* (June), passes certain judgments concerning Rudyard Kipling and King Edward VII.

As to Kipling's having been "besotted with royalty", I would observe that he wrote *The Widow at Windsor*, which, in the view of some people, cost him the Laureateship.

As an uncompromising republican, I would say of King Edward VII that he compared favourably with most of his predecessors and with all of his successors. We now know that the cause of his death was lung cancer. But it is a fact that in his last two years he was deeply troubled by the situation at home and abroad.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

### HEAD OF THE CHURCH

T. F. Evans (June) states that when in Scotland "the monarch does a double act by being head of the Presbyterian Church as well as of the Church of England".

This, however, is not so. Unlike the established Church of England, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland recognises only one Head, namely Jesus Christ. The idea that the monarch should ever usurp this function would be regarded as the height of blasphemy. It is true, however, that the incumbent to the Throne mysteriously changes from Anglican into a Presbyterian when he or she crosses the Border.

JOHN L. BROOM

### HUMAN OR SUPERHUMAN?

Trevor Millar (Letters, June), while opposing "rational" interpretations of the Gospels, makes a strange one of his own (following Thomas Paine).

Perhaps Paine was not aware of it, but I think it is well known by now that Isaiah did not foretell an abnormal birth for the Messiah, and the belief that he did so arises from the fact that a Hebrew word which he uses was incorrectly translated into the Greek as "virgin" — the correct translation being "young woman" — and so it appears in the Universities New English Bible.

Regarding Mr Millar's last paragraph, surely he must have heard of supernatural events and miracles being attributed to persons who undoubtedly existed? In fact

it seems to be a common desire to give certain persons superhuman qualities (think of Uri Geller).

The life of Buddha is filled with miracles, yet he is believed to have been a real man. King Arthur undoubtedly existed, yet our knowledge of him is mainly legend and myth. No one doubts that Joan of Arc really lived, yet her pious friends invested her life and career with many signs and portents.

That a real man existed, to whom was attached the supernatural accretions which gave rise to Christianity seems a more rational attitude for freethinkers to take, and might absolve us from the rather pointless task of trying to disentangle the various threads in the Gospel story.

It is a pity that among your contributors the desire to prove the "non-existence" of Jesus has been elevated to the status of a dogma, sometimes argued with an intensity worthy of a mediaeval churchman. This has resulted in the odd situation that The Freethinker surely contains more comment about Jesus than many religious publications. Is it not time we left the first century and got into the twentieth — stressing the rationalist solution to today's problems rather than forever wrangling about ancient histories and origins.

E. M. KARBACZ

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In the News and Notes item, **The Big Christian Lie** (June issue) a New Testament quotation was given as **John 9,44**. It should have been **John 8,44**.

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## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** Details of summer programme obtainable from Joan Wimble, Secretary, Flat 5, St Aubyns, Hove, telephone Brighton 733215.

**British Humanist Association.** Summer School, Debden House, Debden Green, Loughton, Essex, 19-23 August. Details obtainable from the organiser: Don Liversedge, 25 Chandlers Road, Harrow, HA1 4QX, telephone: 01-861 1730.

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

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Norman Macdonald, 15 Queen Square, Glasgow G41 2BG, telephone 041-424 0545.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Harold Wood. Tuesday, 6 August, 8 pm. Eugene Levine and Julia Pelling: Report of the British Humanist Association Annual Conference.

**Humanist Holidays.** Exmouth, Devon, 20 July-3 August (either one or both weeks). Details from Betty Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12, telephone 01-673 6234.

**National Secular Society.** Annual Outing, Sunday, 15 September (Chichester). Full details next month. Enquiries: NSS, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, telephone 01-272 1266.

## "A Very Honest Priest"

the oppressed to unite against their oppressors and for those readers who had been convinced by his arguments to use their influence to persuade others of them.

Meslier is direct and comes to clear-cut conclusions. Although his writing shows evidence of wide reading, it has the flavour of a deeply-convinced man speaking straight to another individual:

You will think, perhaps, my dear friends, that among the great number of false religions there are in the world, my intention will be to except from their number at least Christianity, apostolic and Roman, which we profess and which we say is the only one to teach genuine truth, the only one which recognises and adores, as is required, the true God, and the only one which leads men on the path to salvation and eternal happiness. But disabuse yourself, my dear friends, disabuse yourself of that, and generally of all that your pious ignoramuses, or your mocking and self-interested priests and doctors, press you to say and to believe, under the false pretext of the infallible certitude of their supposedly sacred and divine religion . . . Your religion is no less vain, no less superstitious than any other; it is not less false in its principles, not less ridiculous and absurd in its dogmas and maxims; you are no less idolaters than those you blame and condemn for idolatry; the idols of the pagans and of your religion are only different in names and figures. In a word, all that your priests and doctors preach to you with such eloquence touching the grandeur, excellence and sanctity of the mysteries that they make you adore, all that which they recount to you with such gravity, with the certainty of their zeal and such assurance concerning the grandeur of the rewards of heaven, and concerning the terrifying punishments of hell, are no more at bottom than illusions, errors, dreams, fictions and impostures, invented firstly for political ends and ruses, continued by deceivers and imposters; finally received and believed blindly by the ignorant and rude common people, and then eventually maintained by the authority of the great, and the sovereigns of the earth, who have favoured the abuses, the errors, the superstition and the imposture which are upheld by their laws in order to hold the mass of men in yoke and make them do all that their rulers want.

### JIM HERRICK

#### AGAINST THE FAITH: SOME DEISTS, SCEPTICS AND ATHEISTS

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sidered removing Cody. On one occasion he actually made the decision to do so but changed his mind at the eleventh hour. But with a new, determined Mr Clean on the papal throne, it was certain that the Chicago despot for the chop.

Another American, Bishop Paul Marcinkus, head of the Vatican Bank and known as "God's Banker", also had reason to worry. He already experienced an uncomfortable grilling in 1972 over exceedingly questionable dealings involving the Vatican Bank, the Banca Cattolica del Veneto and one Roberto Calvi. The investigator on that occasion was the Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, now Pope John Paul I.

Roberto Calvi probably had more to worry about than anyone. He was being publicly blackmailed by Michele Sindona, a crooked financier who was later sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for fraud. Posters appeared all over Milan accusing Calvi of financial trickery, quoting "secret" Swiss bank account numbers in his name. But this was a minor worry compared with the election of Albino Luciani as Pope.

When David Yallop interviewed Calvi in 1982 the banker was at first calm and composed. But when Yallop informed him that he was researching a book about the death of John Paul I, Calvi's "calm and control vanished". A few days later Calvi himself vanished, and he was eventually found hanging underneath London's Blackfriars Bridge.

Michele Sindona was in New York fighting a legal battle (represented by the Richard Nixon-John Mitchell law firm) to prevent his extradition to Italy to face fraud charges. Sindona knew that he would be seriously compromised if the Pope continued to investigate the Vatican Bank. The trail of corruption, including laundering of Mafia money, would lead through Calvi back to Sindona and ensure his deportation.

The most dangerous enemy of John Paul I was Licio Gelli, known as the Puppet Master and Chief of the P2 Masonic Lodge. He was closely associated with international fascist movements and organised the return to power of General Peron, an achievement publicly acknowledged by Peron himself.

The night that John Paul I died there were two problems uppermost in Cardinal Villot's mind. He knew that the Pope had acquired evidence indicating there were over a hundred Freemasons within the Vatican. The network included priests and cardinals. The sinister P2 Lodge which had penetrated the Vatican maintained links far beyond Italy. It was clear that the Pope was going to make a clean sweep.

Villot's other worry was of a different nature. Pope Paul VI had wavered on the question of birth control. Eventually he came down on the traditionalist side and issued the disastrous *Humanae Vitae*

encyclical. But the new Pope, as Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, had sent a memorandum to Paul VI, and there was no doubt that he opposed *Humanae Vitae*.

Villot was aware of this. He was also aware of the dialogue taking place between John Paul I and the State Department in Washington. A Congressional delegation was due at the Vatican the following month and their programme included a private audience with the Pope. The main item for discussion was birth control.

Cardinal Villot had good cause to suspect that the Pope had already made a decision on birth control that would dramatically change the Church's course. No doubt he regarded this as a betrayal of Paul VI. Many others — most of whom would probably still be in the Church today if John Paul I had lived — would have regarded it as enlightened and humane.

John Paul I was succeeded by the Pole, Karol Wojtyla, now Pope John Paul II, who was more to the liking of Cardinal Villot and the Vatican "old guard". Surrounded by crooked financiers and fugitives from justice, the Vicar of Christ has pontificated on a wide range of social and moral questions, including banking ethics. And it is notable that at a time when Protestant churches are strongly repudiating freemasonry, the Catholic Church's new Canon Law, which came into effect in November 1983, dropped the ruling that membership of a Masonic organisation would result in automatic excommunication.

• **In God's Name**, by David Yallop, is obtainable from G. W. Foote & Co Ltd, 702 Holloway Road, London N19, price £2.95 plus 50p postage.

## Freethinker Fund

A donation of £100 from an anonymous supporter has again pushed the Fund total over the £200 mark. Donations large and small are needed to maintain Britain's secular humanist monthly.

The latest list of contributors is listed below with our thanks.

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