

# The Freethinker

secular humanist monthly

founded 1881

Vol. 106. No. 2

FEBRUARY 1986

30p

## SUNDAY TRADING: RELIGIONISTS CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT REFORM

"The British freethought movement, which has opposed the Sunday laws for more than a century, opposes the new campaign to Keep Sunday Special through the criminal law", declared a group of freethinkers in a statement issued to coincide with the press conference arranged by the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. The managing editor of the Rationalist Press Association (Nicolas Walter), President of the National Secular Society (Barbara Smoker), editors of *New Humanist* (Jim Herrick) and *The Freethinker*, welcomed the Auld Committee's 1984 report and the resulting Shops Bill now before Parliament.

The statement continues: "We consider that people should of course be able to keep Sunday or any other day special for religious or any other reasons, but not to impose their views on other people. We note that the great majority of the population now opposes the Sunday trading laws, that they are increasingly widely broken in England and Wales (by religious and Government shops among so many others), and that they have long been abolished in Scotland without any dire consequences to anyone.

"We hope that the Shops Bill will now be passed without delay, and that Sunday will at last be set free".

The anti-Shops Bill campaign has gathered momentum in recent weeks. A group known as the Pro-Sunday Coalition distributed copies of a leaflet entitled *Your Sunday is About to be Hijacked*. In addition, 15,000 posters were sent to churches and organisations.

The Lord's Day Observance Society was particularly active during the Conservative Party conference in Blackpool last October. It is one of the five groups in the Coalition and, according to its journal, *Joy and Light*, has spent £80,000 on the campaign. The LDOS enjoys the advantage of charity status

which forbids political campaigning.

A more high-powered and widely-based organisation, Keep Sunday Special Campaign, launched its attack at a press conference in London last month. MPs Sir Bernard Braine (Conservative), Donald Anderson (Labour) and Simon Hughes (Liberal) shared the platform with the Bishop of Birmingham, Hazel Threadgold, president of the Mothers' Union, and Nicholas Coote, representing the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Messages of support were received from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Roman Catholic Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council.

The Lord's Day Observance Society does not appear to be involved with the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. No doubt the participation of Roman Catholics in the new group will not be to the liking of a fundamentalist Protestant organisation like the LDOS. And they cannot be too pleased with a KSSC statement that it wants the Government to introduce legislation to protect the "special character" of Sunday by maintaining regulations "in conformity with our European counterparts". This is an ominous portent for LDOS defenders of "our Lord and his day" to whom the dreaded Continental Sunday has long been a fearsome bugaboo.

The RPA has also published a leaflet, *Set Sunday Free*, which is being sent to Members of Parliament. Referring to the argument that deregulation would damage the traditional Sunday and family life, it points out that social patterns have already changed. Greater mobility and more purchasing power mean that it is increasingly used for special shopping and travelling.

"Buying for gardening and Do-it-Yourself activities has become as much part of Sunday as gardening and Do-it-Yourself activities.

(continued on back page)

# The Freethinker

UK ISSN 0016-0687

Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

The Freethinker was founded in 1881 by George William Foote and is published mid-monthly. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Publishers or of the Editor.

Articles, Reviews, News Reports, Obituaries, Letters and Announcements should be sent by the 10th of the preceding month to the Editor at 14 Coundon Road, Coventry CV1 4AW, West Midlands (telephone Coventry 20070). Unsolicited reviews should not be submitted.

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Postal subscriptions, book orders and donations to the Freethinker Fund should be sent to:

G. W. FOOTE & COMPANY,  
702 HOLLOWAY ROAD, LONDON N19 3NL  
(Telephone: 01-272 1266)

## SPECIAL POSTAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

UK and overseas: twelve months, £3.60. (UK six months, £2). USA: twelve months, \$8. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland), please add the equivalent of £5 sterling or USA \$7 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$2.

David Neil & Co Printers South St Dorking

# NEWS

## PAPAL BULL

In his latest epistle to the presidents of the European bishops' conferences, Pope John Paul II warns that a tide of "scientific atheism and humanistic atheism" is sweeping Europe. Describing this calamity as "a phenomenon of vast proportions", he declares: "What is in question here is a new evangelisation of culture, in which there must be sown once more those 'seeds' of Christianity which in the past produced such a wonderful blossoming". He believes that the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, in which "the ageless message of Revelation is put forward in a manner better fitted to the sensibility of our time", must be the basis of a new crusade against dissent and unbelief.

It is rather odd that John Paul II should pin his hopes for revival on the shifting sands of the Second Vatican Council. How could even Pope John XXIII and his advisers have made acceptable in the 20th and 21st centuries the mad ravings of those who compiled Revelations? The Council initiated a series of ecclesiastical reforms that rocked the Church, alarming the conservatives and confusing the simple faithful. Probably more damaging in the long term, the Council raised in liberals and reformers false hopes that were later dashed when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*. This encyclical, affirming traditional teachings and prohibition on birth control, marked for many Catholics — particularly the young — their point of departure from the Church.

When John Paul II talks of Christianity's "wonderful blossoming" he is indulging in flowery rhetoric rather than speaking truth. Its seeds germinated in human flesh and blood, and while invariably advantageous to rulers, warmongers, popes and bishops, Christianity was for many centuries a menacing shadow over the scientist, the enquirer and the independent thinker.

During the periods of Christianity's "wonderful blossoming", the Pope's church — and its Protestant rivals — condoned slavery, fostered the witch-hunting mania that gripped Europe, butchered the dissenter (often other Christians) and forcibly converted vanquished peoples. It exalted a moral code that was rooted in fear and selfishness rather than in altruism and social betterment. Fortunately another "wonderful blossoming" of Christianity in Europe seems rather unlikely. During the past two centuries the roots of Christian superstition have not flourished in the richness of democracy, Darwinism and doubt. Now the blossoms are wilting.

If, however, the Pope's plan to evangelise Europe succeeded, it would mean the triumph of an Opus

# AND NOTES

Dei-Moral Majority brand of Christianity. So there is no room for complacency. Our fervent hope must be that his assessment of atheists' strength and influence is correct. Of course there always have been atheists and agnostics, even in the most church-ridden countries of Europe. But for centuries they had to keep their heads down if they wished to keep them on. During the present century the Church, in cahoots with her "faithful sons" like Hitler, Franco and Salazar, hunted and hounded opponents. Francisco Ferrer ("Let no more gods or exploiters be served") is probably the best known but by no means the only 20th-century freethought martyr.

Pope John Paul II is one of the most reactionary and opportunist pontiffs of the century. His most anti-social and inhuman pronouncements — like those on population control — are treated as holy writ by the international media. Sometime an actor, he is still a skilled performer. But behind the mask and showy vestments there is the fierce religious zealot and head of the Roman Catholic Church.

Christianity is no longer on the high ground, and it is this commanding position that John Paul II aims to recapture. It is noteworthy and encouraging that he regards "atheistic" humanism as the enemy. For their part, the humanist movements of the Continent and the British Isles should not forget that they are in combat with an organised religion that Bertrand Russell said "has been, and still is, the principle enemy of moral progress in the world".

## FUNDING FRAUD

At a time when the Government is slashing grants for scientific research it was no great surprise that Lyall Watson complained on the BBC Radio 4 programme, *PM*, that scientists like him are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain public funding for carrying out so-called "research" into the so-called "paranormal". This work has become more demanding because of the rigorous investigations by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

We might have thought, however, that scientists would welcome the exposure of fraud, which saves them from the disturbing alternative of having to jettison the whole basis of physics. The fact is that CSICOP exposures have made it more difficult for simple scientists to be conned by clever conjurers like Uri Geller, and this should free them to apply for grants to carry out genuine research into the laws of nature.

Incidentally, the CSICOP team is led by Paul Kurtz of Buffalo University, not by the conjurer, James Randi, as stated in the programme. Randi is one of Professor Kurtz's specialist helpers. The true specialist in the field of the so-called "paranormal" is the conjurer, not the scientist.

And, unlike Lyall Watson, the CSICOP team does not bemoan the fact that their research is not publicly funded. They expose fraud simply for the hate of it.

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There is growing opposition to the Bishop of Durham in his diocese. Some parishes have refused to allow him to take confirmations. As a desperate last attempt to make the bishop change his mind on traditional teachings, some have actually resorted to prayer. One vicar said: "We believe him to be in gross error according to the word of God, and we daily pray for him to accept the traditional interpretation of the scriptures".

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## THE REV IS CUC-KOO

Even ardent republicans will spare a sympathetic thought for Prince Andrew who features in a tasteless exercise thought up by the Rev Christopher Neil-Smith, vicar of St Saviour's Church, Hampstead, in north London. This gentleman of the cloth, described as "Britain's top exorcist", has challenged the young royal to take part in a bizarre exorcism ceremony with Koo Stark.

It appears that the prince's former girl friend still has a lingering love for him. She is now married to Green Shield Stamps heir Tim Jeffries, but they are living apart. Mr Neil-Smith, who married the couple 18 months ago, says that he offered "cleansing" prayers for Koo Stark before the wedding. Now he believes her marriage could end in divorce.

The vicar of St Saviour's described the proposed exorcism ceremony in which Koo Stark and Prince Andrew would take part.

"After talking to the person concerned, I make the sign of the cross over his head.

"I then symbolically cut with the sword of the spirit all links with his former partner.

"After that come the blessing and the laying on of hands.

"For maximum effect, an exorcism should involve both partners from the earlier liaison.

"That way the tie-cord is severed from either end".

The Dark Ages have not completely vanished — even in Hampstead.

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A unique ecumenical service is reported in the *Newsletter of Oulton Friary, Solihull, West Midlands*: "The service was taken by a Priest, a Minister and a Rabbit".

## THE BORING MRS W.

It is gratifying to note that not all journalists and broadcasters treat Mary Whitehouse with the awe usually reserved for her virginal namesake. When our national nanny took part in a phone-in debate some time ago, her blatherings prompted one reviewer to describe her as "a woman who combines softness in the head with a hide like a rhino".

Critic Stephanie Alexander said that years of soaking up sex-and-violence for campaign purposes have taken a hideous toll of Mrs W.

"She is a long-winded bore. Worse, she is a sentimental long-winded bore. Worse still, she is a purient sentimental long-winded bore. . .

"Her interminable monologues added nothing. What they did was restrict the number of callers and compel people who had useful things to say to keep silence. Frustrated sighs heaved very close to microphones gave the only light relief".

It is quite surprising when Mary Whitehouse receives such a blistering. Even more surprising is the fact that it appeared in South Africa's *Natal Witness* newspaper.

## FOR THE "RECORDER"

The *Methodist Recorder* recently appealed for information about a pious outfit known as the Midnight Meeting Movement which was active in 19th-century London. A short item in an 1861 edition of the *Recorder* sheds a glimmer on the organisation's work by reporting a meeting at Shaftesbury Hall, Aldersgate Street. "The Midnight Meetings for fallen women have been resumed. . . A large number of poor women were present and were addressed by the Rev Aubrey C. Price, of the Lock Hospital".

The Midnight Meeting Movement, founded in 1859, was one of many evangelical groups formed to convert prostitutes. Its members went around the streets distributing tracts to the fallen and inviting them to meetings for tea, prayers and hymn singing. These mawkish affairs were harmless enough, although male members of the Movement were earnestly advised never to kneel down with women at midnight meetings, especially behind a pew.

This nocturnal group was but a small part of the mid-Victorian "rescue" industry. Many so-called homes and refuges were established, ostensibly offering prostitutes an escape route from lives of drudgery and danger. In fact most such establishments turned out to be little better than prison. A committee set up by the Bishop of London to investigate diocesan homes uncovered appalling evidence of sweated labour, inadequate feeding and degrading punishments. Small wonder that many of the "rescued" preferred facing the hazards of the streets to accepting Christian charity.

Incidentally, the Lock Hospital, with which the Rev Aubrey C. Price was associated, presumably as a chaplain or governor, was founded in the 1740s. In a report on its work, it was recorded that during the first six years over 50 children suffering from venereal disease were admitted. Their misfortunes resulted "from a received opinion . . . that if they have commerce with a sound person they will get rid of the disease".

There is a lesson here for opponents of sex education and others who believe that all social ills were spawned by the "permissive society".

## DEFYING THE HIERARCHY

An umbrella organisation for dissident priests, nuns and members of religious orders — the first such group in Ireland — is being set up by the Larne, Co Antrim priest, Father Pat Buckley, who has been involved in a celebrated and lengthy dispute with the Bishop of Down and Connor, Cahal Daly.

Last month a group of 30 church members, 12 of them priests and two of them nuns held their second meeting in Dublin to form the as yet unnamed organisation and there are plans for further meetings next month when a decision may be made to go public.

Fr Buckley said that he was hopeful that the organisation, which will provide support and help to the clergy and religious who are in conflict with the church hierarchy will grow. He added that the main reason for setting up the organisation was to provide support for those who have been disciplined by the Church or were in trouble with their superiors.

The first meeting was held in Athlone last December when seven priests and nuns got together under the chairmanship of Fr Buckley. They had all contacted Fr Buckley to express sympathy with him in his conflict with Dr Daly.

According to Fr Buckley those involved are in various ways alienated from the authoritarian nature of the Church in Ireland. "Some, like me, had been hammered by the hierarchy and were put out and had gone on to do their own thing. Others are still in the system and finding that they are being frustrated".

The group's members have agreed on the need to confront the hierarchy over certain issues. "This means that when people are told to do something they don't agree with they will get the courage to say no to the machine — and the Church is one big machine".

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**The Press Council has rejected four complaints by Mrs Victoria Gillick against an article in the British Medical Association's News Review about girls under 16 on the Pill.**

# ACE: The Classroom of the Lord

JOHN CAMPBELL

While Christians attempt to control and censor our children's education, some of them are pulling their own out of the State system. Unable to wait for victory over "creeping secularisation" and multi-faith religious education, parents are being advised to enrol their children in one of the ACE schools that have been set up. The organisers aim to establish twelve hundred such schools in Britain by 1995.

ACE stands for Accelerated Christian Learning, a system devised in Texas by a Dr Donald Howard. The first one in England, the Emmanuel Christian School, was opened six years ago in Fleetwood by the Full Gospel Church.

The system comes highly recommended by the Family Concern movement because of its high standards of conduct, lack of sex education, censorship of English Literature and extremely low fees. Not a word about academic standards.

The "children" — between the ages of five and sixteen — will be found sat at a booth facing the wall of the classroom, bent over a "workbook" which contains the text, learning activities and tests in the particular subject. Apart from the last test the students mark their own work. If they pass the last test they move on to the next stage and another "workbook". If they get stuck, the students raise a small flag on top of the booth to gain the teacher's attention, who will then answer the query. Cheating or even turning around, for whatever reason, leads to demerit points. Collect several of these and you are in detention; gain another one and it's corporal punishment.

The reason for the cheap fees is obvious. All you need is a room in the local fundamentalist church, a few copies of the American workbooks, a couple of supervisors without professional qualifications and you are in business.

It's hardly surprising that HM Inspectors found the standards wanting at the Coventry Christian "Academy" using this system. Not one member of the staff had a professional certificate let alone teaching experience. The Principal did have "degrees" from the Springfield, Missouri, Bible Baptist College, but for some reason these are not recognised by the DES. The school was closed, but the local Elim Church immediately opened another. The parents were not bothered about the academic standards or facilities, because this system has one major advantage over State schools — its fundamentalist Christian approach to knowledge.

Donald Howard actually boasts its "the most completely Christian curriculum on the market". Anyone setting up an ACE school or using the materials has

to sign a declaration of "Faith and Practice". Teachers must live a life of "righteous works, separate from the world", "abstain from questionable practices", wear "modest clothing and appropriate hairstyles", and show "general deference to the tastes of fundamentalist Christians". Parents know their children are in good hands because not any old Christian will do; those who have any association with the World or British Council of Churches are excluded.

The courses are designed for "programming the mind to enable the child to see life from God's point of view". This means they learn that the rhinoceros is the fourth largest animal God made. The science workbook includes the question: "How long did it take God to make the world?"

One wonders what the children will learn as the schools are assessed by the ACE co-ordinator on its adherence to the systems procedures rather than by the progress of the students. The teacher's BA stands for Born Again. Qualifications seem to mean less to parents than the satisfaction of knowing their children will not suffer from "conflicting ideas about truth, right conduct and attitudes" taught in State schools. ACE brochures actually imply that parents who leave their children to the mercy of the State system are not real Christians.

A testimony from a pastor warns what happens when children do not go to a Christian school: "They didn't care about church youth activities they had happily participated in earlier. Before long, they were begging to go to games and activities at the school". The pastor had problems with his conscience: how could he send his children to "Sodom and Gomorrah" every morning and not expect them to be tainted? So he set up his own ACE school and now his children are "spiritually sound" again. Not only that, his church congregation doubled.

And here lies the real reason for ACE schools. The academic progress of children comes a poor second to their continuing church membership. The aim is to ensure the growth of the fellowship or church the school is attached to. This can only be secured by the message and methods of ACE — fundamentalism and isolation from the worldly influences outside the Christian community. It can work with a small number of students like the children of the Tower Hamlets Christian Fellowship and the two-hundred pupil Antioch ministry at Hemel Hempstead.

What will happen to the students if they do not proceed to one of the hundred Christian colleges when they leave the schools. Obviously the churches hope they will become missionaries in the big bad world outside. They will hardly be fit for anything else.

Nothing would be the supreme logic; no world, no gods, no Creation, no Creator, "no matter, never mind", nothing to explain and no one to explain it. Yet there is a material universe, yielding, infinitesimally, at its margins, to the nibblings of science, repeatedly repudiating the silly dogmas of religion and ultimately inexplicable to finite minds. There remains the Paradox of Nothing. Is there anywhere, within or without, where such a thing as nothing can be found?

When I was quite small an old man told me all about creation. God, he said, made the world out of nothing, the animals and the plants out of nothing, and Adam out of nothing. But when He decided to make Eve he found that He had run out of nothing and had to use one of Adam's ribs instead. Of course, in Genesis, chapter two, God creates Adam out of dust, and, indeed, until St Augustine, orthodoxy did not require creation out of nothing. Many ancient gods, like creative artists, created the world out of a pre-existing formless substance. The Homeric gods did not even shape the world; they merely conquered it and oppressed its earthly inhabitants, being heavenly delinquents, immortal but immoral. Marduk, the Babylonian god, found water everywhere — "All the lands were sea, Marduk bound a rush mat upon the face of the waters; he made dirt and piled it beside the rush mat". If the Pentateuch was written during the Babylonian captivity, this explains the striking similarity with biblical creation — "darkness was upon the face of the deep" and God creates the dry land, not with a rush mat, but with a mysterious "firmament".

St Augustine, that subtle theologian who, more than any other founding father, shaped Christian orthodoxy, would have none of this. He insisted upon creation out of nothing. Otherwise one ended in pantheism, with God embodied in an imperfect world of matter. Nor could St Augustine accept the Gnostic view that matter had been created by an evil deity. Therefore God had to create the universe out of nothing and yet be entirely separate from it. Augustine was good at anticipating objections. Some might ask, "Why didn't God create the universe sooner than he did?" Putting it another way, what was God doing before He created the universe. Surrounded by nothing, He would have nothing to think about and could only contemplate His celestial navel, except that He wouldn't have one. St Augustine replies with a sophisticated view of time, worthy of modern relativity. With God there is no "before" and "after", no past and future. God created time, and our view of it is subjective. Augustine was a remarkable and versatile man. His reasoning about

creation is found in Book XI of the "Confessions". In Book II he had devoted seven chapters to morbid obsession with a schoolboy prank of stealing pears, from which he deduced the doctrine of Original Sin. By Book VIII he has discovered the delights of sex, pursuing the theme with more enthusiasm than discrimination. He prays "Give me chastity and continence, only not yet". Clearly his talents included those of a comedian.

In everyday speech "nothing" generally means no more than the absence of something. "Nothing" in an empty drawer or cupboard means the absence of expected contents but ignores dust and air. "Nothing to it" means the absence of difficulties. Sometimes "nothing" can cause excitement as with the Emperor's New Clothes. Unlike the Emperor, Lady Godiva had only one spectator, but suppose that we describe Peeping Tom as "Naughty". There's a strange word — naught, naughty, nothing, nothingy. How did "nothing" become improper? Does Shakespeare provide the answer with Hamlet's appalling puns in Act III, Scene II? Was "nothing" an Elizabethan euphemism? Hamlet, perhaps exhausted by his famous soliloquy, starts playing the fool with Ophelia just before the play within the play:

HAMLET: "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?"

OPHELIA: "No, my lord".

HAMLET: "I mean, my head upon your lap?"

OPHELIA: "Ay, my lord".

HAMLET: "Did you think I meant country matters?"

OPHELIA: "I think nothing, my lord".

HAMLET: "That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs".

OPHELIA: "What is, my lord?"

HAMLET: "Nothing".

A prim Victorian governess would habitually have employed the mild epithet to admonish her wayward charges. Apprised of its indelicate etymology she would doubtless have swooned.

In fifth-century BC Greece there was much ado about nothing. Parmenides, who regarded experiment and the evidence of the senses as worthless, and who believed that the truth could be attained through logic (the Enoch Powell of the Ancient World) denied the possibility of nothing. "You say there is a void; therefore the void is not nothing; therefore there is no void". Parmenides seems to have thought that where there is a name there must be something corresponding to it. Empedocles of Sicily, one of the few Greek experimenters, proved that air was a substance by inverting the funnel of a water-clock and pressing it down upon the surface of water. While his thumb rested upon the small

aperture, now at the upper end, no water could enter the funnel. But when the thumb was removed the air was released and the water could enter. This experiment might seem to support the plenum rather than the void, if all space was filled with air. No one seems to have asked what would happen if one removed the air as well as the water, possibly because the Greeks did not possess the mechanics to produce a vacuum.

While Greek thought generally favoured the plenum, there was one important exception. Leucippus and Democritus put forward an atomic theory of matter 22 centuries before Dalton. The atoms were minute solid particles, too small to be visible. They were indivisible, indestructible and unalterable, but in constant motion. All matter was composed of atoms, and the ever-changing, apparently evanescent quality of material things was explained by the atoms ever forming new patterns and new groupings. Epicurus described the atoms as falling through space, a misunderstanding. Democritus was far more subtle. With an imagination anticipating the space age he said, "There is neither up nor down in the infinite void". The point, however, is that the atomic theory, as then presented with solid atoms, required the void, nothing, absolute space in which the atoms could move. This is not true of modern atomic theory since the atom is no longer irreducible, indivisible and does not logically require the medium of absolute space.

One field in which "nothing" was of supreme importance was mathematics. The Greeks and the Romans were imprisoned by the cage-bars of the abacus, or counting-frame. Their system of notation did not allow them to calculate on a writing surface, because of the lack of positional notation and the lack of a zero symbol, the two defects being inter-related. When we write 2 in one place it means two; move the same 2 to the left and it becomes twenty; once more and it becomes two hundred. This is obvious on an abacus, but is not obvious on paper without the zero signs to indicate empty columns. The Romans called their abacus bars I, C, X, M, etc, with V, L, D, etc, for halfway marks. But they had no sign for an empty column. The Indians invented zero, the word "sunya" meaning empty, and the symbol "0" was later borrowed by the Arabs, leading to algebra and modern mathematics.

The problem of "nothing" appears again with Copernicus. If the earth moves around the sun, what is it moving through? One objection was "Why don't we feel a rush of air?" Since the earth's orbital speed is more than 60,000 mph we would not be here to feel a rush of air. The earth would be scoured to billiard-ball smoothness or, more likely, disintegrated. This objection seemed insuperable, but, in the 17th century, Torricelli invented

the barometer, leading quickly to the discovery that atmospheric pressure diminishes sharply with altitude, and hence to the conclusion that there is only a limited amount of air above the earth's surface — in short, an atmospheric envelope which the earth carries with it through space. Shortly afterwards von Guericke showed how to produce a vacuum with the Hemispheres of Magdeburg. To crown the 17th century, Newton demanded absolute space for his celestial mechanics.

So "nothing" seemed to triumph. Yet a new difficulty arose. In the field of optics the wave theory of light was increasingly accepted. But did not waves require a medium through which to travel, just as there can be no ocean waves without water? The answer was the "ether" (Aristotle's fifth element) revived to be "Lumeniferous" — light-bearing. By the 20th century the "ether" theory had been abandoned, but this has not meant the reinstatement of "nothing". Today's world of science does not involve "lumps of matter existing and moving in space". "Things" have become "events", space and time are merged. In the world of relativity "absolute" space, or "nothing" goes the way of other absolutes. With matter and energy no longer separate entities we cannot call space empty merely because of the apparent absence of material particles.

Believers or not, we face another kind of "nothing", namely eternal oblivion. Why should we fear the oblivion aspect of death? Unless we are vegetarians, we chew our way through millions of cows, sheep, pigs, birds and fish, cheerfully consigning these living things to oblivion, without graves or headstones. Even those who are arrogant enough to believe that they are "special", their bodies holy temples housing immortal souls, are equally indifferent to their own kind. We consign our ancestors to oblivion. How many can name their great-great-grandparents or know anything about them? One century from now, how many of our descendants will remember us? Yet, better oblivion than to be an inmate of God's zoo, or His farm, or His vivisection laboratory, or, if He is a retarded child, part of His box of toys, to be played with, discarded, forgotten or broken. As a species possessing this mysterious consciousness to a high degree, and not knowing whether it exists elsewhere in the universe, I think we have a duty to behave well and leave our mark for others to find — "Kilroy was here, and he tried". But, as individuals, without nihilism, without despair, with hope for those who follow rather than ourselves, can we accept, for ourselves, but not for the universe, these words of Omar Khayyam?

One moment in Annihilation's Waste,  
One moment, of the Well of Life to taste.  
The Stars are setting and the Caravan  
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing. Oh, make haste.

# Will the Superforce Destroy Jehovah?

ANTONY MILNE

The belief that Jehovah created the universe is undermined by the way in which he is portrayed as having carnal attributes. But if God thinks and plans, then he is subject to the physics of time and space, doomed to die when the universe collapses. Physicists talk of a "Superforce"; but as this cannot have moral qualities, or intervene in events, it cannot logically be God.

In recent years I have been plagued with visitations of Jehovah's Witnesses on my doorstep. Each time they call I state categorically — sometimes apologetically — that I am an atheist, belong to a Humanist movement, and am university educated. In short, I tell them they are wasting their time.

Yet within a few weeks a different lot turn up with the same spurious arguments. This in itself is proof enough that these people are congenitally incapable of learning anything; neither the error in their reasoning, nor the fact that a committed atheist lives at my address. But I am my own worst enemy. I love an argument, especially when I know I am bound to get the better of it.

The other Sunday morning, for example, I succumbed to the temptation of inviting one of the Witnesses indoors for a more lengthy discussion. He insisted that I read a profusely illustrated Watch Tower Bible Tract book on creationism. This seemed at first glance to be a rather plausible work for the uninitiated. It reiterated several well known criticisms of Darwinian theory, and was well versed in the earth sciences, biology and zoology. However, just as the book began to get interesting it seemed to fall apart at the seams. The text switched awkwardly and somewhat self-consciously to the familiar doctrinal issues concerning human suffering, the truth of the Bible, the coming of heaven on earth, and so on.

I saw at once the futility of trying to blend the scientific with the religious, of juxtaposing incontrovertible fact with theological metaphor. The book defeated its object of proving religious propositions as soon as the argument moved away from the purely descriptive.

It was seriously flawed in other ways too. The author incautiously mentioned the works of Hoyle and Wickramasinghe. Fred Hoyle, an eminent astronomer in his own right, is something of a scientific gadfly. And yet his "panspermia" theories are well on their way to being accepted by the scientific fraternity, although probably after considerable modification. But the idea that life on earth could have originated in microbes from outer space in no way gives credence to religious arguments. Hoyle, in

his book *Evolution from Space*, actually strengthens Darwinian theory by eliminating the billions-to-one chance of organic molecules being generated spontaneously from some "primeval soup".

The most serious deficiency of the Watch Tower book (entitled *Life—How Did it Get Here?*) was its total ignorance of the fastest moving scientific discipline of today — cosmology.

I first became aware of the importance of keeping up to date with physics when religionists kept posing cosmological questions; i.e. related to the origin of the universe and the intricacy and symmetry of all phenomena within it. "How could all this", they ask with childlike naivety, "have arisen out of nothing?" Many of them, of course, have heard of the Big Bang theory. But they have great difficulty in understanding the latest reasoning of Post-Einsteinian physics that decrees that not just matter, but time and space, were created simultaneously in a sudden blinding flash of primeval energy.

This is certainly a mind-boggling claim, since we are used (no doubt because of our Christian heritage) to think of empty space just waiting to be filled with matter by some unseen force. The most perplexing aspect of the Big Bang is that time itself did not exist prior to the event. If God is real then he must have once been beyond time and space, and hence beyond physics. He then became part of time as soon as he created the universe, and this implies that he then becomes subject to the laws of physics. But by doing so he at once relinquishes his own omnipotence.

Much of the problem with the Christian God is the way he or it is portrayed as a sentient being with human mental attributes. He is supposed to have planned the universe, to answer prayers, to ponder over the state of the world and to ultimately decide when to end it all. But if God thinks, then he is embedded in the flow of time, implying physicality and carnality rather than spirituality. However, if God is subject to time, he could not have created it. Neither can he destroy the universe in which space, time and matter are interconnected realities. Indeed, as entropy and disorder in the universe increase, and the universe runs down to its ultimate destruction (what is known as the Big Crunch theory), God will be destroyed along with it.

Still, there is yet vague hope for the religious mind. Although physics can provide laws to explain the complexity of the universe, it cannot explain why those laws operate to create an orderly, rather than a chaotic, universe. Whereas physicists have discussed interminably the first few minutes after creation, little is understood about the nature and origin of the Big Bang itself.



Some theoretical physicists, like Paul Davies of Newcastle University, author of *God and the New Physics*, become so dazzled by the stunning elegance and coherence of nature that they say that there is "more to the universe than meets the eye".

But this is an understandable human reaction to awesome and seemingly miraculous propositions, a failure of both intellect and imagination. In such cases, as throughout history, religion seeps through the gaps in knowledge and comprehension. This implies that Man needs a discipline that answers questions of a different order from those posed by science, to answer the "why" questions rather than the "how" questions that even philosophy cannot answer.

However, what physics has destroyed for ever is the idea of the controlling, temporal, thinking God. God has now been replaced with Paul Davies' concept of a "Superforce". But this is a cosmological,

not a religious, concept. It is impossible to attribute to a superforce human values of goodness and omnipotence.

Whatever God is, it is meaningless to say that it is good and caring (indeed, the cynic would argue that if moral attributes *must* apply, then God is both evil and uncaring). The central function of religious activity, the act of worship, therefore becomes pointless if the moral nature of the superforce is unknown or ambiguous.

Religion, on its last legs in the West and enforced at the point of a gun in the East, will ultimately collapse when the innermost workings of the superforce are finally made plain to all. The magic will have gone, and we will understand both the "why" and the "how".

Only the Jehovah's Witnesses, blinking uncomprehendingly on thousands of suburban doorsteps, will still be with us.

## A Loving Father With a Strong Sense of Smell

ROY SAICH

Fashions come and go these days so quickly that it is difficult to keep up with them. It is not just clothes and hair-styles that enjoy a vogue and then virtually disappear from public view, but pop stars, sports personalities and politicians too. Lasting ideas, like humanism, enjoy greater popularity at some times more than others. And when it comes to fashion even God is not immune.

People seeking to make the idea of God popular dress him up in a way they hope will appeal at the time. Today it is the idea of a loving god — a loving father (the Christian god is definitely male).

For people to promote the idea of a loving God it is necessary for them to ignore the Bible. A carefully chosen phrase may come in handy for them, but if you try to discuss their views at length with Christians, and refer to the Bible, your argument is likely to be dismissed because "you are thinking like a fundamentalist", or "taking it too literally". In other words you suppose the Bible means what it says! However, Christians cannot ignore the Bible.

When we look through the Bible, how do we find this loving father treats his children? He creates the world as a home for people in which they can live only by killing other creatures he has created (Genesis 1). He then drowns almost everyone, young and old, even new-born babies who have not done anything, because of wickedness (Genesis 6, 5). Later, God hardens the Egyptian Pharaoh's heart so that he can bring plagues and death to the people of Egypt, as he himself admits, just to show off (Exodus 10, 1).

He is quite happy about slavery and for freeborn daughters, if not sons, to be sold as slaves (Exodus

21, 2-7). God is quite happy too about aggressive war (Deuteronomy 20, 10-15), and its ill-treatment of women (Deuteronomy 24, 1-3). He has encouraged many massacres (Numbers 31, 1-18, Deuteronomy 20, 16 and Joshua 10 v 40 etc, etc), and he is quite happy, indeed orders that capital punishment should be used (Leviticus 20, 6 and 24, 16 etc). In 1983 he apparently changed his mind about capital punishment, at least according to the Pope.

He also has a strong sense of smell because he once killed two people for burning incense he didn't like (Leviticus 10, 1-2). He has also been known to be hard on nosey-parkers. He killed 50,070 of them for looking inside his box (I Samuel 6 v 19); and once sent a bear which killed 42 children after they had been rude to a bald prophet.

This loving father, apart from breaking many promises often deludes people deliberately as well (2 Thessalonians 2, 11-12). With such a father is it surprising that his only son Jesus should appear from the Gospels to suffer from paranoid schizophrenia according to some modern psychologists? After all, what loving father would only show mercy if his son let himself be tortured and killed?

### ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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THE WILD GIRL, by Michèle Roberts. Methuen, £2.95

Move over Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, here is the Gospel According to Mary Magdalene. The fifth gospel sounds like an idea for a ribald send-up, but it is a very intelligent and imaginative novel. This Mary Magdalene is also Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Although they seem to be two different Marys in the New Testament, these characters were often combined in mediaeval tradition. Michèle Roberts continues that tradition and fuses other traditions and myths to the teachings of Jesus. In fact, a major theme of *The Wild Girl* is integration and the toleration of diversity.

As the episodes we know from the Gospels are only representative snatches of three years of itinerant teaching, there are many gaps to be filled in. It is entertaining to see how Michèle Roberts fills in these gaps with plausible details. Taking her cue from the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Roberts describes Jesus getting acquainted with the people of a new town at the common well and then lining up shelter for the night for his rag-tag following. Lazarus brings Jesus home from the pub, as it were, to meet his family. Much later, after Jesus raises Lazarus and Mary dries Jesus' feet with her hair, they make love in an earthy but soft-focus sort of way. Mary and Martha join the band of disciples. "The Jesus that I met and loved and began to know intimately gave me and the other women in our company a special grace: namely, the courage to acknowledge our capacity to carry God inside us and to give birth to God in our preaching and songs. Jesus named us all ministers of his Word, men and women alike".

In one witty invention, it is the housewifely Martha who engineers the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus asks Martha for advice, and "within minutes Martha had the disciples organised, sending us hither and thither amongst the crowd, and within what seemed only a short further space of time we were all sitting down to feast of bread and dried fish and fruit that people ran back to their homes to fetch and then to distribute".

Besides its content of what sounds like sincere, if unorthodox, Christianity, *The Wild Girl* is a vehicle for a feminist message: "We have lost the knowledge of the Mother. We do not fully know God if we drive out this name of God". The Redemption is largely this rediscovery of the two complementary parts of humankind. Even after Jesus came to teach his message, his followers ruin it again by being too authoritarian. The unsympathetic disciple, Simon Peter, puts forward the paternalistic reasons for men playing the main public role in religion. Jesus was a man, so his priests must

be men. Furthermore, this is the real world, "a wicked and corrupt world where women are at risk of being exploited or abused by sinful men. How can we allow our sisters to go about in public and expose themselves to this danger?" When the women disciples are politely shunted out of the prestige positions of the new sect, four of them decide to strike off for Alexandria and teach their own message. The four are Mary Magdalene, her sister Martha, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome, a wise, earthy, retired midwife. After many ups and downs they reach the coast of southern Gaul and form what amounts to the first convent. Mary the mother of Jesus turns into an interesting old lady, in sharp contrast to her usual portrayal as a limp and acquiescent girl. She becomes a perceptive philosopher and resembles a salty but profound Mother Superior.

Michèle Roberts, who has apparently been swinging on the Golden Bough, has dismantled the Judeo-Christian myths and reassembled them, with many additions, in an interesting new pattern. Mary's dream-visions serve to link up these themes, reinterpreting the Creation and the Garden of Eden and recasting the prophecies of Revelations. In one dream-vision Mary Magdalene meets someone called the Queen of Heaven, who turns out to be practically everything female. "I am the Ancient One. I am She who has many names. I am Ishtar and Astarte, Athar and Artemis and Aphrodite. I am Isis, busy with the work of re-membering my husband, and I am Inanna, she who descends from heaven to marry the shepherd Dumuzi and make him king after harrowing hell and reuniting heaven and earth. You have seen me as the witch Hecate, and as her sister Demeter, mother and nurse. But I am also Persephone, borne off by Pluto into the underworld, there to eat the pomegranate seed and bring the human and the divine together again".

For the very orthodox and unimaginative Christian, *The Wild Girl* is probably blasphemous; for atheists who discard the entire Christian idea it is too reverent; but for more flexible Christians and Jews and agnostics it is an imaginative treatment of some of the most potent myths and legends of our civilisation.

SARAH LAWSON

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The BBC was forced to cancel a Songs of Praise programme from St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, Dungannon, Co Tyrone, because no Protestant congregations would participate. Only three replies were received from 24 Protestant churches.

# REVIEWS

**DID THE VIRGIN MARY LIVE AND DIE IN ENGLAND?**  
by Victor Dunstan. Megiddo Press Ltd, £7.50

*Did Jesus and Mary Live in England?* would have been a more suitable title for this book, since it attempts to establish that both propositions are historically credible. Victor Dunstan is aware that the human existence of Jesus and his mother has been questioned, but such doubts are not for him — the veracity of the Bible record is taken for granted. He tells us that Jesus was God incarnate, “and that tenant (*sic*) of faith we hold dear”.

The blurb calls Mr Dunstan “a dealer in facts”, his book “well documented” with “an impressive array of ancient manuscripts”. In reality the facts and documents offered are decidedly dodgy. Much is admittedly legendary. Unacknowledged sources include apocryphal gospels and the mythical History of the Kings of Britain, by Geoffrey of Monmouth. A family tree of Jesus, in the English College of Arms, goes right back to Adam. Another, in “Jesus College”, wherever that might be, shows that Joseph of Arimathea was not only an uncle of both the Virgin and her husband but also grandfather of the wife of King Lear! We would like to know when and by whom these impressive documents were drawn up, but Mr Dunstan doesn't tell us.

Joseph of Arimathea is the key figure in this thesis. It appears he was a very wealthy and important personage, no less than the Roman Minister of Mines according to Jerome. He was probably a mine-owner himself, and legend credits him with an interest in Cornish tin production. Now we can work out why the Gospels know nothing of Jesus' life between babyhood and his final year, apart from a solitary incident at the age of 12. He wasn't in Palestine but in England with his mother Mary, helping Great-uncle Joseph with the management of his tin mines.

Joseph is said to have founded Glastonbury Abbey, where he and the Virgin Mary are buried. Indeed, we can still see Joseph's tomb, in which he rests under the name of John Allen!

It is true that Glastonbury claimed, and still claims, to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea. But in assessing the probability of this assertion we should bear in mind that it originated in an age when religious fraud of every kind was widespread and accepted. Of all ecclesiastical liars the monks of Glastonbury were reputedly the worst, having earned themselves the rare distinction of a papal rebuke.

The trouble with this book is that almost everything is accepted uncritically. Mr Dunstan has the

idea that a large volume of dubious evidence amounts to near certainty, but he frankly admits he has not proved his case. To quote the blurb again, his book “is destined to be talked about for many years to come”. By a tenant of faith, probably.

R. J. CONDON

## CINEMA

1919. Directed by Hugh Brody

“How do you find who you are in relation to your own history?” asks Hugh Brody, director and co-writer of his first feature, *1919*. “If you try to catch in your hand the events that have shaped you, you very quickly find that you can't. They elude you. . .”.

Brody and Michael Ignatieff have taken two of Freud's case histories, *The Psychogenesis of Homosexuality in a Woman* and *Wolfman* (the story of a depressive Russian aristocrat), fleshed out the characters and given them names and a history to cover the half century between 1919, when they were both patients of Freud, and 1970, when they meet for the first time. She, Sophie Rubin, has gone to live in New York. He, Alexander Scherbatov, has remained in Vienna. Both appeared in a television programme about Freud and, on seeing it screened, Sophie resolves to return to Vienna, to revisit Freud's consulting room, now a museum, and to see Alexander. The film is the story of their meeting. They talk desultorily, edgily, but nakedly, recalling adolescence with its feistiness and angst, adult uncertainty, guilt and loss. Sophie and Alexander's private histories are inseparable from the major events which have occurred this century in central and eastern Europe. As Paul Scofield (Alexander) has said: “The real star of this film is history”.

The sequences in Alexander's memento-cluttered flat (“my dungeon, my lair”) and the gardens and streets of Vienna are intercut with newsreel and archive footage of the times Sophie and Alexander are remembering. There are also acted flashbacks, showing the young Sophie and Alexander living their lives and in consultations with Freud (Frank Finlay's voice, coming from just offscreen).

The intercutting is seamless. The film has a shapely elegance which quite belies its tiny budget of £400,000 — roughly a quarter of the usual budget for a feature on this scale. Alexander's “refuge” is a masterpiece of cramped, dusty opulence, but it is almost too calculatedly beautiful, with its autumnal colours and ornate patterned carpets.

The acted flashbacks err still further into the territory of the instant image, where *triste*, rather bleached station platforms and hotel lobbies, painstakingly composed and shot, signify a vanished age of leisured decadence and where a tasteful, almost-explicit love scene deodorises sex. Apart from the

felicitous casting of Clare Higgins, totally convincing as the young Sophie, the flashback acting has a dreamy balletic quality that has little to do with truth.

While Brody and his Art Director, Caroline Amies, bring artistry and artifice to recreating the past, Maria Schell and Paul Scofield give something of themselves to reliving it. Maria Schell has the strained, angry stoicism of a lone survivor, while

Paul Scofield's Scherbatov is ill at ease with Sophie and, in his reduced circumstances, a man who luxuriates stagily in self-disgust and paranoia.

It is an unforgettable and humbling experience to see these two great artists giving of their talents and sensibilities — sensibilities formed not only by their private histories but by the cruel public events through which both lived and matured.

VERA LUSTIG

## W. W. Collins (1853-1923)

HARRY H. PEARCE\* and NIGEL H. SINNOTT

Many British freethinkers emigrated during the second half of the 19th century, becoming voluntary or full-time "missionaries" for the cause particularly in Australia and New Zealand. W. W. Collins, an experienced lecturer for the National Secular Society, was entrusted with the organisation of the movement in New South Wales. He arrived in Australia in 1885 and soon established himself as an effective propagandist.

Freethought leaders of the nineteenth century tended to have colourful and courageous minds but rather drab tastes in dress. W. W. Collins was different: he had wavy hair and dashing good looks; in his youth he sported a luxuriant moustache, a spotted bow tie and carefully chosen clothes. He was a polished and fluent speaker with a genial manner and a ready wit.

William Whitehouse Collins was born in England at Harborne, Staffordshire, on 4 September 1853. He was a grandson of John Collins, the Chartist who was sentenced to a year's imprisonment for carrying a Chartist manuscript to the printers.

The grandson was educated at Mason College, Birmingham. He became a Sunday school teacher and leader of a Bible class. He also studied for the Baptist ministry, but became dissatisfied with mere formal belief and wanted better reasons for holding it. He studied science and philosophy and eventually lost belief in all forms of supernaturalism, including Christianity.

In about 1878 Collins joined the National Secular Society which Charles Bradlaugh had founded in 1866. It was an exciting period of British freethought, involving Bradlaugh's struggle to take his Parliamentary seat and the trial of G. W. Foote for blasphemy. Nearly 33 years after the event, Collins recalled with emotion the morning in 1883 when he and Joseph Symes had walked together to Holloway Gaol, London, where Foote was imprisoned:

Standing in front of the archway, under which Mr Foote had passed, to hear a heavy door close behind

him, we faced each other in silence. Our thoughts were on the other side of that heavy door. Spontaneously the words came from the lips of each of us, "How I wish I could exchange places with him for a few months". . . Was it conceivable that even the bigots themselves could have imagined their momentary triumph over such a man as Mr Foote would, in the slightest degree, lessen his determination to wage ceaseless war on the creed from which their blind and brutal passion drew its sustenance? (*Examiner*, New Zealand, January 1916.)

In August 1884 Collins qualified as an appointed lecturer for the National Secular Society and as such travelled throughout Britain, often covering up to 3,000 miles a month and delivering 200 lectures a year, with many debates as well.

In 1883 the Melbourne members of the Australasian Secular Association had sought Bradlaugh's assistance in obtaining a lecturer for them. Joseph Symes arrived in Melbourne in 1884 and his enormous success in Australia encouraged the freethinkers of Sydney to ask Bradlaugh for someone to organise the movement there. Collins was chosen and before his departure he was given banquets by secularists in Liverpool, Manchester, Leicester and Birmingham. At the Hall of Science, London, the National Secular Society presented him with a framed address signed by Bradlaugh (as President) and Robert Forder (Secretary). It expressed the Society's "deep sense of the character and ability displayed in your advocacy of Freethought", and trusted that "in the new sphere you are about to enter, you will sustain and heighten the reputation you have so gallantly won".

Collins sailed in the SS *Potosi* on 29 October 1885. After a short stay in Melbourne, where he gave some lectures, he went on to Sydney to take up his appointment as official lecturer to the Liberal Association of New South Wales (no connexion with the modern Liberal Party of Australia).

Collins was twice married and had two sons, Claud and Spencer, one by each marriage. In Sydney he married his second wife, Alice Annie Skinner, the daughter of J. E. Skinner, president of the

Liberal Association of NSW and of the Sydney Progressive Lyceum. Skinner published a *Secularist's Guide* (1888?), with which he was assisted by Collins and Wallace Nelson (another freethought lecturer who came to Australia after Collins).

Collins started and edited his own periodical, the *Freethinker and New South Wales Reformer*, which ran for 23 issues from 11 April to 23 September 1886. Collins then became joint editor for a while of Joseph Symes's Melbourne paper, the *Liberator*, which announced that Symes and Collins would also exchange lecture platforms.

In 1888, following police harassment of Sydney booksellers dealing in birth-control literature, Collins decided to challenge the law by lecturing and selling Annie Besant's pamphlet, *The Law of Population*, first published in Britain when Bradlaugh and Besant had been prosecuted (1877) for republishing Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*. Collins was summoned, convicted, and fined £5 with costs. He appealed to the New South Wales Supreme Court and in a lengthy judgment the three judges allowed his appeal by two to one. Judge Windeyer, in particular, rejected the view that birth control was either unnatural or immoral and ruled that women had a right to contraceptive information. "The Windeyer judgment", says Dr Frank M. C. Forster, "remains a classic example of liberal thought. It was published widely, both in full and abridged forms, and its influence was such that it can be considered the most significant Australian contribution to the world history of birth control".

Elated by his success Collins again tried his hand at journalism in Sydney. In February 1889 he launched *Freedom* (partly to publicise his trial), but it only lasted until February 1890. Collins was travelling and lecturing all over Australia and announced that he did not have time to conduct the paper.

On 26 January 1890 Collins laid the foundation stone of the Freethought Hall, Sydney. That year he also went on a lecturing tour of Tasmania and from Hobart he went to Dunedin, New Zealand. Here he gave a series of lectures, then toured New Zealand and eventually settled in Christchurch where he made his home.

While in Christchurch Collins became secretary of the Canterbury Freethought Association and later of the New Zealand Rationalist Association. He entered the New Zealand House of Representatives as a Liberal and served for two Parliaments, 1893-96 and 1899-1902. He also found time for journalism: from February 1894 to January 1895 he published and edited the *Tribune*, which was mainly devoted to political and social affairs. In April 1907 he issued the first number of the *Examiner*, a monthly devoted exclusively to freethought and kindred matters. It was conducted with a high level of

scholarship and lasted until the May-June 1917 issue when it ceased because of difficulties caused by the First World War and Collins's ill health.

Collins's other publications were mainly pamphlets and articles which were published in England, Australia and New Zealand. They include *Geology and the Bible* (1885), *Law and God* (1885), *A Search for a Soul, and what I found on the way* (1889?), *The Church of Rome the Enemy of Science* (1890), *The Bible in Schools Question* (1914), *The Question of the Hour: did Jesus ever exist?* (1914?) and "The Real Crucifixion" (*Ross's Monthly*, 1919).

At the end of 1918 Collins left Christchurch to live in Australia again. He returned to Sydney in time to attend the First Australian (Interstate) Rationalist Conference on 4 January 1919, and later that year was elected President of the Rationalist Association of New South Wales. He had also been made an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association (London) and had been a vice-president of the National Secular Society since 1885.

W. W. Collins died in Sydney of a cerebral haemorrhage on 12 April 1923. "There are no limits", he wrote in 1916, "to the Empire of Free-thought". His loyalty to the freethought cause had lasted 45 years and he had promoted it with diligence and distinction throughout three nations.

\*Died 20 December 1984

## LETTERS

### NAUGHTY FREETHINKER

A committed rationalist and member of the National Secular Society, I am shamed by your advocacy of the "naughty" Christmas cards issued by a Rickmansworth firm. "Silly, juvenile and vulgar" would be a more apt description of them.

Propaganda waged at such a thumb-to-nose, street-urchin level does not advance our cause. The strength of that cause lies in tolerance and reasoned argument — argument calculated to persuade and convert — not in gratuitous insult.

A. JOINER

### THE ANARCHIST AND THE DUKE

I have greatly enjoyed Andrew Whitehead's fascinating articles on early freethinkers (September-December 1985), and am sorry the series has come to an end.

I was particularly interested in the essay on Guy A. Aldred, having been a subscriber for many years to his hard-hitting periodical *The Word* (surprisingly not mentioned by Mr Whitehead), which was published every week by the Strickland Press, Glasgow, for almost 30 years, its heyday being during the Second World War. One of its most frequent contributors was the 12th Duke of Bedford (father of the present incumbent), whom Aldred had met at an anti-war rally in Glasgow in 1939. There is no truth, I believe, in the rumour that the Duke subsidised *The Word* from his great wealth (he certainly had no influence over its contents), but the close friendship between an anar-

chist atheist and a Christian member of the British aristocracy who, apart from his pacifism, held very Right-wing political opinions, was undoubtedly an extraordinary one. Aldred's three-volume autobiography, *No Traitor's Gait*, which had already been serialised in *The Word*, was published in 1963, the year of his death.

I heard Aldred address a meeting of the Glasgow Secular Society in the early fifties, and remember I was not too favourably impressed by his dogmatic aggressive manner. But that he was a man of great personal courage and integrity there can be no doubt.

JOHN L. BROOM

### CAUTIOUS PROTESTANTS

You display a shocking ignorance regarding Ulster's affairs in a January editorial (*Pray Silence*).

The polarisation of society there was not brought about by "three Protestant clergymen". Up until the 19th century, the Ulster Presbyterians were learned, progressive, radical and non-sectarian. However, the Presbyterian-led rebellion of 1798 was hi-jacked by backward Catholics in the south, and turned into a blood-bath of anti-Protestant genocide. It has been the same story ever since. No wonder the Ulster Protestants exercise caution over the prospect of being

annexed by the theocratic, backward, bog republic of Eire.

Civil rights in Northern Ireland have always been much more advanced than in Eire. The Protestant population of Eire has slumped from 10 per cent to 2 per cent since independence. The Catholic religion is recognised in the Eire constitution. Divorce is illegal. Abortion is illegal. Contraception is (only recently) semi-legal. Why should Ulster people surrender their civil rights?

Contrary to your assertions, the people of the geographic island of Ireland are not all one people. Just like Hispaniola, New Guinea, Borneo, north America, Iberia and Scandinavia, separate peoples desire separate governments. The people of Eire and (most of) the people of Northern Ireland are as alike as chalk and cheese. Maybe the boundary was not drawn accurately. OK. Redraw it.

I agree it is too bad that Ulster loyalists lean so heavily on political representation from religious cranks like Paisley, Robinson, Smith, etc. But what free-thinkers have stepped forward to speak out for Ulster's survival? Your own editorial is enough to turn any dedicated Ulster loyalist towards superstition rather than away from it.

DAVID McCALDEN

Director, Ulster-American Heritage Foundation

## OBITUARY

### Mr L. Burnet

Lindsay Burnet has died in hospital at Pembury, Kent. He was 80. His long association with the humanist movement was reflected by the representative gathering for the secular committal ceremony at Golders Green Crematorium, London, on 9 January.

Mr Burnet was president of the Humanist Housing Association which he and his wife Mora, who predeceased him by less than a year, were chiefly responsible for initiating in 1954. The Association's policy was to provide secure, sheltered accommodation for people of limited means. Lindsay Burnet's wide experience in this field contributed much to the success of the project.

The Humanist Housing Association was launched with a loan of £75 from the Ethical Union. Today it owns 870 flats on 25 sites.

Lindsay Burnet served as HHA honorary secretary (1955-68), chairman (1968-71), full-time secretary and director (1971-73) and president (1985). He was a committee member for 30 years except for the period when he was employed by the Association.

In addition to his devoted service to the HHA, Mr Burnet was actively involved in the affairs of the Ethical Union (as assistant secretary) and of local humanist organisations. A slightly austere appearance belied his real character. He was in fact a cheerful and optimistic man whose ambitions for the humanist movement were always blended with realism and sound judgement.

### Mrs M. Macdonald

Molly Macdonald, who was well known to members of Glasgow Humanist Society, has died after a long illness. There was a secular committal ceremony at Linn Crematorium, Glasgow.

### Dr D. Murray

David Murray, who has died aged 80, had a long career in academic and public life.

After winning a scholarship at the age of 18, he studied biochemistry under Sir Gowland Hopkins at Cambridge. After obtaining his degree, he continued studies and research at Pembroke College.

In 1937 David Murray obtained a grant to work under Professor P. A. Buxton at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Their work was concerned with insect control which was vital in the fight against malaria and other tropical diseases.

Ten years later he was appointed lecturer at the Zoology Department in Imperial College, London. He played an active role in the College's cultural activities and on his retirement in 1967 endowed a prize for research in insect physiology.

David Murray was an active member of the Labour Party for many years. He was elected to Hammersmith Borough Council in 1963 and served for over 20 years. One colleague described him as "a conscientious, dependable Councillor who attended meetings without fail". He served on the borough's Finance, General Purposes, Health, Social Services, Planning, Schools, Recreation and Public Works committees. He was a member of Hammersmith History Society and contributed to a book on

the history of the borough.

Some years ago he developed Parkinson's disease and on the advice of relatives and friends moved into a residential home.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Mortlake Crematorium, London.

**Alan Porter, who claimed that he was a spiritualist and faith healer, has been jailed for life for the murder of his girl friend's baby. The child's mother, Sheena McLaughlan, claimed that her "spirit guide", a Tibetan monk in yellow robes, told her that the baby had to die. Glasgow High Court was told that the killing took place on the banks of Loch Lomond. In a statement Porter declared that he saw McLaughlan trying to strangle the baby. He told the police: "I took the baby from her and strangled her with my own hands to put her out of her suffering".**

#### Public Meeting

### IS RELIGIOUS SLAUGHTER INHUMANE?

Speakers include

**JOHN DOUGLAS**

(Royal Society for the Prevention  
of Cruelty to Animals)

Conway Hall,

Red Lion Square, London WC1

Monday, 17 March, 7.15 pm

Organised by the National Secular Society,  
702 Holloway Road, London N19,  
telephone 01-272 1266

National Secular Society

### ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include

**JO RICHARDSON, MP,**

**CHRIS MOREY**

**T. F. EVANS**

**The Coburg Hotel,**

Bayswater Road, London W2

(Bayswater and Queensway  
Underground Stations)

Saturday, 5 April

6.30 pm for 7 pm

*Vegetarians catered for*

*Tickets £10.50 each*

National Secular Society,  
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL  
(telephone 01-272 1266)

## EVENTS

**Belfast Humanist Group.** York Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast. Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month at 8 pm.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Beryl Williams: Solzhenitsyn's View of Russia.

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

**Exhibition: The Human Story.** The Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London, until 23 February.

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

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** 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, 4 March, 8 pm. W. F. Barnes: Youth and Community Work.

**Humanist Holidays.** Easter at Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. Details from Sam Beer, 58 Weir Road, London SW12 0NA, telephone 01-673 6234.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 27 February, 7.45 pm. Denis Cobelli: Are You a Humanist?

**Scottish Humanist Council.** Annual Conference, The Cowane Centre, Stirling, Saturday, 12 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Details from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, telephone 0563-26710.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sunday, 2 March, 11 am. Joseph Rotblat: The Nuclear Arms Race.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 March, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. George Mepham: The United Nations Decade for Women.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 17 February, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public Meeting.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 01-828 3631.

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Programme of meetings obtainable from Bob Thorpe, 19 Shirley Drive, Worthing, telephone 62846.

# Embryo Research Against Church Teachings and Principles, says Cardinal Hume

The Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, introduced by Ken Hargreaves, MP (Conservative, Hyndburn), failed to get a Second Reading in the House of Commons on 25 January.

Opponents of the Bill, which would seriously restrict medical research, effectively killed it off for the present session of Parliament. It now goes to the back of the queue of private members' bills and is unlikely to be revived before the summer recess.

The Roman Catholic Church and assorted religious pressure groups conducted a vigorous campaign in support of Mr Hargreaves. His bill was essentially the same as the one introduced by Enoch Powell last year which was also blocked by opponents.

Three days before the Commons debate the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Basil Hume, informed the Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults (Mencap) that he was withdrawing his patronage. He requested that his name be withdrawn from the charity's publications, a move which, according to a spokesman, would cost thousands of pounds if done immediately.

Cardinal Hume declared that his action was in protest against Mencap's support for embryo experimentation. This was expressed in a statement issued last December confirming support for research related to the prevention of handicap in accordance with the recommendations of the Warnock Committee.

Cardinal Hume said in a letter to Mencap general secretary Brian Rix: "This statement supporting research on human embryos is totally unacceptable

on moral grounds to Catholics, since it is incompatible with the moral teachings and principles of our Church.

"Because of this I have no alternative but to withdraw forthwith my patronage from Mencap. . .

"I approve of the admirable work the society does on behalf of the mentally handicapped but must dissociate myself completely from the public attitudes now adopted by the society which fail to respect the sanctity and integrity of innocent human life".

Mr Rix expressed his regret over Cardinal Hume's decision. He added: "We are particularly concerned to read of the overt pressure brought to bear on the Cardinal by Christopher Whitehouse, the so-called militant moral majority campaigner, because it seems unfortunate that pressure could be construed to have affected the cardinal's decision".

Christopher Whitehouse is a research worker for the Right-wing Conservative MPs, Ann and Nicholas Winteron. He said that everyone who is opposed to embryo experiments will be delighted with Cardinal Hume's public stand, "to make clear the Catholic Church's firm position on these matters".

## Christian Missionaries Active in Jewish Areas

"Aggressive evangelism" and "underhand tactics" by Christian proselytisers are threatening good relations between the communities, according to one leader of Britain's 400,000 Jews. The worst offenders are the American-financed Jews for Jesus movement which sends scores of missionaries to Britain every year. They are closely associated with a British organisation, Christian Witness to Israel.

The Jesuites operate mainly in areas of north London with large Jewish populations. They have been accused of harassing the sick and elderly, and of exerting strong pressure on Jewish students. They teach that a Jew can become "complete" by accepting Christianity.

The Council of Christians and Jews recently set up a committee to investigate these missionary activities. A number of church leaders have endorsed a statement condemning the conversion tactics employed by such groups. The Rev Walter Barker, director of Churches Ministry Among Jews, said it was understandable that the Jewish community feels threatened by such tactics. He drew attention to the long history of persecution which Jews have suffered at the hands of the Christian church.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi will continue as patrons of Mencap.

### *Campaign Against Sunday Trading*

"Visiting stately homes has become as popular as going to church, and it is as absurd to restrict shops at the former as at the latter.

"Changing structures of family life mean that the picture of Mum and Dad sitting around the Sunday roast is becoming a figment of the imagination. . .

"What was once a symbol of religious and social conformity is now in our increasingly pluralist society little more than a myth".

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