

# The Freethinker

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## CATHOLIC "SWITCH-FINDER GENERAL" TO HEAD CENSORSHIP COUNCIL

Setting up the Broadcasting Standards Council by the Government has been described as "the first step in the dismantling of the public broadcasting system and its selling off to Mrs Thatcher's friends in the newspaper industry". The charge was made by Wendy Moore, secretary of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. She added: "The Government has shown by its repeated attempts to bully the broadcasters that it wishes to control what the viewer is allowed to see".

Commenting on Sir William Rees-Mogg's appointment as chairman of the new body, the CPBF said he has "an unenviable association with attacks on public service broadcasting, and the BBC in particular". The Government is laying the foundations for the replacement of the BBC's and IBA's regulatory powers "with negative, censorious controls over broadcasting. . .

"The Government is preparing the ground for the wholesale deregulation of British broadcasting and a consequent decline in programme and journalistic standards".

The CPBF argues that only broadcasting bodies that are properly accountable through Parliament, and have clear public service obligations such as those embodied in the 1981 Broadcasting Act, will guarantee high standards and editorial independence.

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts says it is "vehemently opposed to the proposed Broadcasting Council, and especially to the choice of its chairman, Sir William Rees-Mogg".

Recalling that the idea of such a body was mooted during the run-up to the last General Election, NCROPA declares that the issue was virtually ignored during the campaign. Even television programme makers failed to condemn the proposal.

"That such an ominously authoritarian measure should be introduced by a Government which proclaims as the cornerstone of its whole philosophy 'freedom of individual choice' and the 'freedom of the market-place', is an act, not only of crass stupidity, but of gross hypocrisy".

During the House of Commons debate, Ivan Lawrence (Conservative, Burton), said: "None of this would have been necessary if the broadcasting authorities had exercised the necessary level of control over the unacceptable amount of television violence and sex this society has been treated to".

Roy Hattersley, Shadow Home Secretary, said that the programmes the Government objected to had nothing to do with sex and violence, but with its own political inconvenience. The new Council was "the thin end of a highly authoritarian wedge".

Richard Shepherd (Conservative, Aldridge-Brownhills) warned that Sir William Rees-Mogg's request for prior censorship of programmes should be treated with caution, as it would undermine the role of the BBC and the IBA.

"It is a little curious", he added, "that some years after having given up censorship of the London theatre by the Lord Chamberlain's office, we are entering into a similar sort of sphere for the broadcasting authorities".

Mrs Mary Whitehouse, doyen of the censorship lobby, has good cause to regard Sir William as "an excellent appointment". In his student days he was president of Oxford University Conservative Association. Later he was twice a Conservative parliamentary candidate. As editor of *The Times* he had, in the words of former Arts Minister, Lord Gowrie, "made it easier for Mrs Thatcher to do the things she wanted to do". One critic described him as "a good Catholic, a fact which must have some effect on the Broadcasting Standards Council".

# The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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# NEWS

## WESLEY'S "CONVERSION"

All over the country there have been Methodist jollifications to commemorate the 250th anniversary of what they call John Wesley's "conversion". The Oxford Dictionary defines conversion as "the act of converting, or fact of being converted to a religion ... (specifically) to Christianity". To use the word when describing an experience of a man who had previously lived a life of excruciatingly boring religiosity, including thirteen years as an Anglican clergyman, is an abuse of the language. As for the actual "conversion" at a religious meeting in an Aldersgate Street hall, near St Paul's Cathedral, Wesley recalled that while listening to Luther's preface to Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* he felt his heart "strangely warmed". Much the same feeling can be experienced when listening to a Beethoven symphony or sampling a particularly good Scotch.

John Wesley and his hymn-writing brother Charles were the sons of the Rev Samuel Wesley, a typical "Church and King" man of his time. Their childhood at Epworth Rectory, in Lincolnshire, was a grim affair. Mrs Wesley, a ferociously pious High Churchwoman, later wrote: "Our children were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord's Prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bedtime constantly; to which, as they grew bigger, were added a short prayer for their parents, and some collects, a short catechism, and some portion of Scripture. . . They were very early made to distinguish the Sabbath from other days".

At Oxford, the Wesley brothers were moving spirits in a group of fundamentalists irreverently referred to as "the holy club". John did not inherit the rectorship of Epworth on his father's death in 1735, and went to America. It was not a happy period in his life and within three years he was back in London.

Wesley's long career as an open-air preacher may well have begun at the Tyburn gallows where he preached to the mob. He recorded in detail his ministrations to the condemned at a multiple execution in November 1738. Hymns, prayers, exhortation, then off to dinner. . . But not a word condemning the barbaric judicial strangulations.

Indeed the early Methodists' reputation as reformers is wildly exaggerated. They preached repentance, not reform. Wesley was one of the very few leaders who opposed slavery, while his missionaries in the American colonies bought and sold slaves as they did stock and crops. The most ardent of them, George Whitefield, owned 75 slaves, and thoughtfully bequeathed his human property to the

# AND NOTES

high priestess of the evangelical movement, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. When Wesley spoke against slavery, Whitefield referred him to the Bible for justification of the institution.

The Methodists, with their impassioned preaching, fervent prayer and tuneful hymns, contrasted favourably with the stiff-necked, ritualistic and repressive Established Church. Not that life was a barrel of laughs for committed followers of Wesley. They had to abstain from "reading plays, romances or books of humour . . . or talking in a gay, diverted manner". The preachers were instructed to converse sparingly with the opposite sex, particularly young women. There were no stronger defenders of the joyless Sabbatarianism that gripped eighteenth and nineteenth-century England than the Methodists. Wesley hated the stage, and on one occasion protested against a proposed new theatre in Bristol because "most of the present stage entertainments sap the foundations of religion". Whitefield denounced theatres as "strongholds of the devil" and no doubt endorsed the opinion of one Low Church clergyman who declared that "everyone who entered a playhouse was, with the players, equally certain of damnation".

The early nineteenth-century reform movement got short shrift from the Wesleys. In 1819 a conference of Methodist ministers adopted an Address condemning the reformers as "unreasonable and wicked men". Members were reminded that they "belong to a Religious Society which has, from the beginning, explicitly recognised as essential part of Christian duty to 'fear God and honour the King', to submit to the magistrates for conscience sake, and not to speak evil of dignities". They did not join in the general condemnation of the Peterloo Massacre, but expelled a local preacher for signing the Manchester Declaration against the magistrates. Others were expelled merely for supporting "democratic sentiments" or belonging to the Chartist movement.

While urging the ragged and starving to personal piety and "reformation of manners", Wesleyan preachers discouraged all attempts at parliamentary reform. They warned their congregations not to attend Reform meetings. Cobbett may not have been the most unbiased of commentators, but there is ample evidence to back his charge that "they are continually telling the people that they ought to thank God for the blessings they enjoy: that they ought to thank the Lord, not for a bellyful and a warm back, but for that abundant grace of which they are the bearers, and for which they charge them only one penny per week each".

Sydney Smith reflected the view of the educated classes when he declared that Wesley and his missionaries "preached with great energy to weak people, who first stared, then listened, then believed, then felt the inward feeling of grace, and became as foolish as their teachers could possibly wish them to be".

Until recent times Anglicans adopted a sniffy attitude towards their Methodist poor relations. But there is a distinct whiff of ecumenism about the current celebrations, the highlight of which was a service in St Paul's Cathedral attended by the Queen. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Hume, added a whiff of incense by praying at Wesley's tomb. But all the pomp and preaching and processing cannot conceal the fact that British Methodism, like most branches of Christianity, is declining in numbers and influence. Ironically, the Christian faith is now preached with Wesley-style passion mainly by the descendants of people whose enslavement was sanctioned by holy writ.

## ALTON'S BILL MISCARRIES

The failure of David Alton's Abortion (Amendment) Bill to get a Third Reading in the House of Commons was a devastating blow to the anti-abortion crusaders. After sniping at the 1967 Abortion Act for over twenty years, they confidently expected the Roman Catholic MP to deliver the *coup de gras*. During the run-up to the Commons debate they were unsparing in financial outlay and the perpetration of dirty tricks. The Roman Catholic Church's newspapers and pressure groups pulled out all the stops; celibate priests and nuns were actively involved in the campaign and even schoolchildren were herded along to pro-Alton demonstrations. There was an all-night prayer vigil before the final debate; those who listened in the Commons public gallery included two Catholic nuns who secured admission tickets through the good offices of the Rev Ian Paisley.

David Alton spoke of "moral victory" in defeat, attempting to gain public sympathy over what he described as "procedural mugging" and "unfair tactics" by his opponents. This charge prompted a group of pro-1967 Act stalwarts to issue a statement regretting "the uncritical acceptance of David Alton's account of what happened". Signatories to the statement included Dilys Cossey (Family Planning Association), Diane Munday (British Pregnancy Advisory Service), Sharon Spiers (Tories for the Abortion Act) and Dr Wendy Savage (Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion).

They declared: "As long ago as 12 February, David Alton was rehearsing his phrase 'procedural mugging' as part of the black propaganda he has been

putting around in construction of an advance smoke-screen to hide what he must have suspected could be the failure of his Bill. . .

"The Leader of the House, John Wakeham, made a crystal clear statement that extra time would be allowed only if 'unfair tactics' were deployed. In the event, despite an impassioned plea by David Alton as his time ran out, Mr Wakeman refused extra time — showing that it was his and the Government's view that no 'unfair tactics' had been used".

It was Mr Alton's champions who demonstrated that they have little to learn about "unfair tactics". The most disgraceful example of their misleading propaganda since *Babies for Burning* was that of colour photographs of a thumb-sucking, eighteen-week-old "baby in the womb". In fact the foetus was the product of a miscarriage that was arranged in a glass bowl by a photographer.

Another of the anti-abortionists' dubious tactics was the dissemination of untrue allegations about private abortion clinics. John Smeaton, general secretary of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, has frequently asserted that "88 per cent of all late abortions are performed privately for profit". Commenting that Mr Smeaton does not appear to oppose private medicine in general, Diane Munday proceeded to demolish his allegation.

She declared: "This statement ignores not only that abortion fees in non-NHS clinics are tightly controlled by the Department of Health and Social Security, but the fact that a proportion of those operations are carried out by non-profitmaking charities.

"For example, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service owns and runs one of seven clinics allowed by the DHSS to provide late abortions. The fees charged for late abortions are heavily subsidised by the charity's other work, and are around half the fee that the NHS is authorised to charge foreign patients for similar treatment. Certainly no profit there!"

David Alton's allegation that eleven doctors are earning £2 million a year performing sixty per cent of late abortions in Britain was described by the BPAS chairman, Professor Lafitte, as a "mischievous and dangerous slander". But the anti-abortion extremists are not concerned with facts, and their misleading claims often turn up in Early Day motions in the House of Commons. "That's how the mythology grows", says Diane Munday. "The origins get lost in the myths of time".

David Alton, like others who have introduced similar Bills in recent years, was a victim of his own propaganda and of his supporters' zealotry. A large proportion of them — mainly Roman Catholics but also a substantial number of fundamentalist Protestants — are opposed to abortion in all circumstances. Many regard contraception as "intrinsically evil",

religious fanaticism and illogicality blinding them to the fact that lack of contraceptive precautions often results in an abortion. But then people who believe that human life is created by a figment of their imagination are unlikely to respond to rational argument.

## SUNDAY OBSERVERS

From Jubilee House, Cambridge, the Keep Sunday Special Campaign has again warned the nation that "there are plans afoot to make another attempt to bring in a law permitting Sunday trading". Small shopkeepers, pensioners, city residents, elderly parents and families — to name but a few — will all suffer if such a calamity should come to pass. Nay, worse! A vast number of churchgoers "will not have the freedom to put their faith first".

Much the same arguments were advanced by Sabbatarians against Sunday excursions, newspapers, museum opening, cinemas, park concerts, football, funerals and harvesting in wartime. As for those who will not have the freedom to put their faith first: their faith must be a fragile thing if it cannot compete with the temptations of the supermarket. It should be remembered that Roman Catholics, by far the biggest proportion of churchgoers in the community, often process from the pew to the Church-owned club to partake of something stronger than communion wine. But the KSSC turns Nelson's eye to a form of Sunday trading that is profitable to the Church.

In its latest statement, the KSSC refers to the "surprising defeat" of the 1986 Shops Bill. This was brought about when Unionist MPs from Northern Ireland suspended their boycott of Parliament to vote against a reforming measure that would not have affected their region. Prayers and supplications to the Almighty did not save them from subsequent defeat in a battle in their own back yard to prevent the Sunday opening of public houses.

"Our Christian principles require us to denounce the introduction of such evils as Sabbath desecration", thundered the Rev Alex Murdo Macleod, minister of Kinloch Free Church and chairman of that esteemed body, the Lord's Day Observance Society, on the Isle of Lewis. He was reacting to a report of sinful goings-on at the Claitair Hotel, Stornaway. John Lowe, a former world darts champion, played a few games with local residents on — horror! — Sunday.

"We endeavour as best we can to treat the stranger in our midst with kindness", said Mr Macleod. But it must be difficult to show kindness when the stranger is an Englishman who defiles the precious day. If the battle-cry from the Jubilee House bunker is "Keep Sunday Special", that of the Holy Willies in the Western Isles is "Keep Sunday Sombre".

## A NUN SO BLIND

Speaking on the eve of a major United Nations report, Prince Philip issued a stern warning about the dangers of unchecked population growth. He was confirming what had already been said many times by others, but being a member of the Royal Family his views are treated with respect by the press, whereas birth control organisations are sneeringly dismissed as "the family planning industry".

World population is predicted to increase from the present five billion to fourteen billion by the middle of the next century. So the Prince cannot be justly accused of scaremongering for saying: "It has become all too apparent that the physical and biological systems that make life possible on this planet are being progressively degraded and thrown off balance by the increasing human population and its ever-increasing demands for natural resources".

Prince Philip's sensible comments were made just after non-Mother Teresa had visited Britain with her "This Happy Breeding" show. Like her Church's other celibate megastar, Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa is much given to the dramatic gesture, like addressing a meeting in Oxford on her bended knees. And after the usual anti-contraception spiel at a London press conference, she held out her hands to the television cameras. "If anyone doesn't want a child, give it to me", she appealed. "I will always find a family, a beautiful family, to adopt a child".

However, Mother Teresa would not offer a child for adoption to a couple that practised contraception, for they "had done something not to have a child". This was a bit much for some of her admirers, including a *Catholic Herald* correspondent who wrote: "There are many loving couples, Catholics among them, who choose to practise contraception for their own good reasons, for example in the sad case of hereditary disease".

Mother Teresa's baneful influence is cynically promoted by the international media, causing despair among those who are alert to the dangers of which Prince Philip spoke. Few would question her sincerity. But compassion should be tempered by realism, not fuddled by gross sentiment and wishful thinking. At the end of the day, Mother Teresa is a victim of the religious superstition that causes so much of the misery she ineffectually strives to eliminate.

**A small town in southern Italy is split because Don Ferdinando, the local priest, has banned Antonella Tieso from portraying the Virgin Mary in their annual procession. She played the part twice before, but she is now in an interesting condition and was so when she got married five months ago. When Antonella's supporters reminded the priest that the Virgin Mary was pregnant, he replied: "That was the doing of the Holy Spirit, not some local lad".**

## SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Roman Catholic Church leaders in Glasgow are up in arms over the enrolment of more than forty Protestant children at a Catholic school. Parents of the pupils who had previously attended St David's Primary School, scheduled for closure this month, have exercised a right to register their children at the nearest school, which is St Mungo's RC Primary.

Church authorities are alarmed over a move they regard as the first step towards integration. Their representative on the Strathclyde Region education committee, Fr Michael Lynch, said that open enrolment would erode the identity of a Catholic school.

"Catholic schools were built for Catholic people", he added. "We foresee staffing problems during religious education classes".

Connie Creighton, secretary of the Parent-Teacher Association, rejected a suggestion that the St David's children should attend a school outside the area. "The safety of our children is far more important to us than religion", she said.

"Children of all denominations attend the same nursery schools, and later they go to the same colleges.

"Frequently they get married to each other as in my case.

"The only time in life that people are segregated these days is when they are between five and sixteen".

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# The Myth of the Universal God: a Study in Geocentric Parochialism

KARL HEATH

"When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him?"

*The Eighth Psalm*

Two and a half millennia ago the ancient psalmist who wrote the words above clearly appreciated a problem ignored by theologians to the present time. I do not refer to fundamentalist televangelists, the latter-day "shakers", "ranters" and "holy rollers" who milk millions of dollars from their American audience. Their ignorance of cosmology is so profound that they are quite unaware of the problem. I am more concerned with modern "progressive" clergy who ought to know better. How can Bishop David Jenkins, for example, explain to himself why he conducts ritual prayers to the God of the Galaxies? For centuries the words of the Lord's Prayer have continued in one ceaseless rigmarole. For centuries, at any second, someone has been telling God where he lives — "which art in heaven". The only rational explanation must surely be that it makes the suppliants feel better. It can hardly be described as communication since it is a monologue, and, if there were indeed a divine recipient he would long ago have been driven mad by repetition — like Chinese water torture. At the very least he would have been convinced that his worshippers were insane.

The fact is that all the clergy from fundamentalists to "progressives" still worship a tribal god, even if the concept of tribe is extended to the whole human species. What difference in principle is there between Canaanite Baals, the Philistine Dagon, the God of Israel and an anthropomorphic deity of a species of short-lived bipeds self-labelled *homo sapiens* with conceit and self-righteously claiming to be God's Chosen People?

Primitive man probably developed religion as an explanation of why things moved, the movement of things which had not been pushed, pulled or thrown. Rabbits, birds and people were thought to be "moved by the spirit", hence animism, "anima" (soul) animating things. This led, through dreams, to the spirits of the dead, ancestor worship and the notion of survival after death. Early religion also had a technological aspect, spells, incantations and dances aimed at controlling nature. There followed the tribal gods, at first not denying "false gods" but regarding them as rivals. Twentieth-century religion had not advanced from tribalism when, in the 1914-18 war, British and German combatants invoked the

same god to bless their guns and suffer schizophrenia by supporting both sides.

Religion is an expression of social and historical conditions. Hence the emergence of the city-state gave rise to city-gods like Pallas Athene, although it is unlikely that sophisticated Greeks regarded these as anything more than civic regalia. In Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* the Roman centurion cannot understand why his Christian captive, Lavinia, whom he loves, refuses to save her life by burning a pinch of incense on a Roman altar; a question, to him, not of faith, but an act of civic courtesy when visiting someone else's city.

Why the god of an obscure Middle Eastern tribe should have become the god of a world religion is more a matter of historical explanation than of faith. First, unlike his rivals with their graven images, Jehovah was invisible. Instead of an idol, his invisible presence was carried around in a box — "The Ark of the Covenant". On one occasion he did let Moses see his bottom (Exodus, ch 33, verses 18-23), but, in general, his invisibility permitted his universality. To this, at the opposite extreme, the Christians added the daring concept of God, not in wood or iron or gold, but in the flesh, in human form, in a dramatic tale of sacrifice, atonement, redemption and resurrection. Another significant element was the Jewish belief in a Messiah becoming a Saviour for the early Christians whose numbers included the oppressed masses. History again can explain how politicians like Augustine and Jerome could translate the simple message of Jesus into an instrument for the rich and powerful.

But how could religion extend beyond the earth's surface into the cosmos? This was not difficult as long as pre-Copernican geocentrism prevailed. A drawing in Dante's *Divine Comedy* aptly illustrates how easily theology could be matched with the science of the day. The earth is at the centre, much bigger than all the rest of the universe. It is surrounded by concentric spheres by which the Moon, the Sun and the five visible Planets revolve around the Earth. Outermost is the sphere of the Fixed Stars, except for another sphere, the *Primum Mobile* (First Mover), a driving wheel which operates the whole system. That is the science side, but the same diagram embodies the theology, a cut-out on the earth's surface shows Hell inside, entered by a tube. The same tube, for the more fortunate, extends upwards from the earth's surface. There is a halfway stop called Purgatory where the occupants of the lift are examined to see if their sins are venial enough for expiation. If not, the unfortunate travellers return to the lift and descend to the base-

ment. The blessed continue upwards to the Earthly Paradise. There is also the Empyrean Paradise, God's Paradise, just outside the whole system. It is easy to see that, as long as the geocentric world picture prevailed, there was a certain logic in postulating a Creator whose attention is focused on the centre of his own creation. Science, as it was then, in Aristotelian chains, could be neatly dovetailed with religion. But no more!

Today we know that our sun is a common G-type star, one of millions in our galaxy alone; and that our galaxy, the Milky Way, even though 150,000 light years in diameter (our sun is eight light minutes away from earth), is still only one of millions. Even if we confine our attention to the little corner of our own solar system, the scale is one which the theologians seem not to comprehend. Ninety-nine per cent of the mass of our solar system is in the sun. The planetary specks which circle it are so relatively small that it is impossible to construct a visible scale model. The planets would be too small to see or too far away to see. If Mercury is represented as a small marble it would be fifty yards from a sun represented by a globe four and a half feet in diameter. On this scale Jupiter would be six inches in diameter, but half a mile away. Pluto, another marble, would, on average, be three and a half miles away, sometimes nearer because its eccentric orbit periodically intersects that of Neptune. In short, the planets are specks of dust far from the sun. The Earth, another marble, would be 130 yards away.

Some years ago I conducted joint classes at the Coventry Polytechnic with the Roman Catholic chaplain, a well-educated and intelligent priest. Nevertheless, whenever I wanted to discuss cosmology he would try to change the subject to faith in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps a Creator who could create on earth intricate food-chains of carnivores designed to kill some creatures and be eaten by others, who could create disease germs and genetic defects, could also create galaxies, pulsars, quasars and black holes. But there are problems. Are there other sinful creatures in outer space in need of redemption? Has God been sending his sons all over space to be crucified? The science fiction writer, James Blish, in *A Case of Conscience* relates the mental turmoil of a Roman Catholic priest on a space exploration ship. A planet is discovered inhabited by gentle and highly intelligent reptiles who are without sin and, consequently, without religion. Is the planet a snare devised by Satan? The priest, who has the power to determine the planet's fate, is inclined to order its destruction because of the threat which its sinless inhabitants pose to organised religion.

It is astonishing that in the twentieth century religion should remain psychologically geocentric, parochial and tribal. Its outlook is as limited as that

of the old lady who had never left the village of her birth. When introduced to someone "from abroad" she exclaimed: "Oh, are you from abroad? My nephew's abroad. Have you met him?"

The same narrow ignorance supports astrology. In the ancient world, with the earth apparently at the centre and everything else going around it, astrology made some sort of sense. The sun clearly influenced the seasons and the moon influenced the tides. Why, then, should not the visible planets influence the earth as they thread their way through the pattern of fixed stars, whose constellations were seen as flat groupings on the surface of a spherical canopy? But what was reasonable in ancient geocentric times is no longer reasonable today. The sun does not move through the signs of the Zodiac; the earth moves and we see the sun against a varying background through the year. Patrick Moore and others have tried in vain to explain this simple fact to the astrologers, by pointing out that our view from the moving platform of earth is "line of sight". Visitors to the caverns of the Trümmelbach Falls at Lauterbrunnen, in Switzerland, may have noticed that a rock formation near one cascade resembles the profile of Mussolini. But move a yard to one side and its appearance changes completely. Travel some light years from our solar system and our familiar constellations, Pisces, Virgo and the rest, would vanish, to be replaced by other patterns. To construct, out of "line of sight" appearances, an elaborate system in which forces, totally unexplained and unmeasured by the astrologers, impinge upon hapless infants at the time of their birth (why not their conception?), requires an intellect of Reagan magnitude to comprehend.

To return to Bishop Jenkins: how does he reconcile a tribal god with modern cosmology? He is too honest to fob us off with "mysterious ways and wonders to perform". J. B. S. Haldane said that not only will we never learn what the universe is like: we can never even imagine it. Fred Hoyle said fishes have been swimming off Yarmouth for hundreds of years and still don't know that Yarmouth is there. The universe is our Yarmouth and we are the fish.

This being so, to claim to know anything, not about the universe, but its creator, is idle and impertinent posturing. If we are to divide humility and arrogance between scientists and theologians we need only compare patient enquiry with dogmatic assertion.

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**Members of a Protestant group, Walsingham Witness, abused and insulted fellow-Christians taking part in a procession at the Norfolk shrine last month. Protesters waved placards and bibles at pilgrims who included two Anglican bishops.**

# "The Hero of Every Brothel in Britain"

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

Last month, Andrew Whitehead described how some freethinkers played a pioneering role in the birth control movement. But there was another side to the coin. In this article, he focusses on the faction within freethought that was resolutely opposed to the advocacy of contraception.

No issue divided Victorian freethought more bitterly than Charles Bradlaugh's promotion of birth control. Christian propagandists saw it simply as confirmation that atheism bred immorality and obscenity. But plenty of secularists also regarded contraception with revulsion, and were embarrassed by the association in the public mind between freethought and family limitation.

Of all the calumnies heaped on Bradlaugh's head, the most intemperate were in a biography of him by Charles R. Mackay which appeared in 1888. The author was not a Christian zealot, but one of a group of "young Turks" associated with Stewart Ross and the *Secular Review*. The book, deemed to be libellous and withdrawn from sale, alleged that Bradlaugh was financially and intellectually corrupt. But its strongest denunciations were reserved for Charles Bradlaugh's and Annie Besant's championing of *The Fruits of Philosophy*, the Knowlton pamphlet on birth control, in the celebrated legal case of 1877.

"An army of ragged hawkers was let loose to thrust the 'Fruits' before the attention of young men and women", Mackay spluttered, "and public decency was affronted at every step". Charles Bradlaugh "was suddenly exalted into a hero, by the occupants of every brothel". The verdict on Annie Besant was even more damning:

That a cultured woman should cast away the instincts of her sex, and distribute a book with the object of making every woman a prostitute, was something that the most impudent harlot failed to grasp.

The "Leeds orgies" of 1878, when a secular hall in Leeds was apparently used for transvestism, was cited as "the legitimate outcome of the 'morality' taught by Mr Charles Bradlaugh and Mrs Annie Besant."

This dubious biography devoted special praise to an even more dubious literary enterprise, a satirical pamphlet entitled *Malthusian Quackery* which contained, in Mackay's opinion, the "most terrible exposure by an intellectual athlete which has perhaps ever been hurled at the sexual religion of Mr Bradlaugh". This insubstantial indictment appeared in 1884 under the *nom de guerre* of Herr von Schlagschurke. Its authorship has been ascribed both to William Maccall, a journalist and one-time Unitarian minister for many years on the fringes of

the freethought movement, and to Martin Boon, who had once been a prominent secularist and ultra-radical and was husband of the Eleanor Boon who had been such an ardent advocate of family limitation. Maccall and Boon were colleagues of long standing, and it's likely that the pamphlet was the fruit of their collaboration.

The first part of the pamphlet imagined its author, a German traveller, approaching London and beholding "Brassy Cheek" (Bradlaugh) and "Breezy Bouncer" (Besant) cavorting naked in the dung. Not satisfied at deriding two of the leaders of freethought as "the dunghill dancers", the authors also poked fun at G. J. Holyoake, even though he had distanced himself from Bradlaugh's stand on the Knowlton pamphlet:

Presently, a dirty man, called, as I ascertained, Caddy Holdthepoke, dressed like a Merry Andrew, came up to me, and thrusting in my face a bag which had once been clean, but which was now a good deal soiled, from having fallen into the dunghills aforesaid, and on which was inscribed in nearly illegible letters the words *Free Thought*, asked me to give something for the benefit of the noble martyrs, as he pompously designated the Dunghill Dancers. I cursed and swore like a German trooper.

And the moral drawn from the affair was "that no people are so gullible as those who are so continually babbling about the tricks of priests, none so credulous as those who make a parade of incredulity."

The second section was less given to rhetorical flights of fancy, and made explicit the social and sexual conservatism which lay behind the authors' ferocious opposition to birth control:

Moral purity cannot exist, moral perfection is not attainable, without the chastity of woman and the sacredness of marriage. The relations of the sexes are the holiest of all relations, and the home should be viewed as the temple where the divinest virtues are adorned, all the sweetest charities, the noblest chivalries are cherished.

Into these homes "sanctified by Love and Duty" had entered "a swinish pollution"—what the satirists termed "Stercutian Priapism". Stercutus was a classical deity said to have invented manuring, while Priapus, the god of procreation, gave his name to a euphemism for an erection. The pamphleteers decried the pose adopted by the "Stercutian Priapists" as friends of the poor and benefactors of the human race. "Do even their most credulous, most fanatical followers," they bellowed, "believe that they are influenced by anything but the love of gold and of notoriety, and by the morbid appetite to excite morbid appetites in bad and bestial bosoms?"

Lurking behind many of the insinuations about the



immorality of Bradlaugh and Besant was the suggestion, probably unwarranted, that their friendship was more than platonic. The other persistent smears were that both enriched themselves by their promotion of particular methods of contraception, and that they deliberately sought to encourage casual sex. On top of this was increasing resentment of Bradlaugh's dominance of freethought.

The final part of *Malthusian Quackery*, a bizarre and distasteful few pages, imagined its author dreaming in a drunken stupor of a search for the Holy Praeputium—the Latin word for foreskin. (The anti-semitism was not untypical of the authors, who had published an article in their journal entitled "The Jews, the curse of England and the world".) "Brassy Cheek" joined in this imaginary quest for the holy relic, believing that it might "aid him in some of his comprehensive designs as the founder of a new religion, in which he himself was to take the place of Jesus Christ", with Annie Besant cast as the Virgin Mary.

Successful in their mission, "Brassy Cheek" and "Breezy Bouncer" made the Holy Praeputium the centre-piece of their "Creed of the Cesspool". The pamphlet concluded with a description of the initiation ceremony for this "holy brotherhood", a passage which made play of Annie Besant's advocacy of a vaginal douche of a solution of alum and zinc compounds administered by syringe as a method of contraception:

All the members, male and female, of the brotherhood were to squirt him for an hour with the nastiest most unmentionable liquids. Next, Breezy Bouncer was to put on him a crown of syringes . . . and Brassy Cheek was to place a syringe as big as a walking stick, like a sceptre, in his hand. Thereupon the neophyte was, seventy times seven, to bang with his nose ring the holy casket containing the Holy Praeputium, and, grunting like a swine, to anathematise Christianity for gladdening and sweetening the tenderest human relations, and for consecrating marriage.

So undignified was this attack that it served simply to isolate its authors from the rest of radicalism. An otherwise sympathetic obituary of Maccall a few years later regretted that "his chivalrous friendship for a fool and mountebank, combined with his own hot-headed hostility to Malthusian principles, caused him to write a series of personal attacks so shocking and so unjust that his best friends could find no word of extenuation".

As for Boon, presumably the "mountebank" referred to, he complained loudly that freethought and progressive outlets were boycotting his various publishing endeavours. He made his way out to South Africa, his second passage there, where he died in an obscurity not altogether unmerited. Eleanor Boon, with her call for the "prudential check as a guard against large families and pauperism", was a much more pertinent voice than the obsessive rantings of her husband.

## LETTERS

### RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS

I warmly support the National Secular Society's condemnation of a Labour Party proposal that the State should finance separate religious schools (The Free-thinker, May).

If Christians (Anglican, Roman and other Catholic, or Protestant non-conformist), Hebraists, Muslims (of any type), Sikhs, Hindus or Rastafarians wish to run special schools without a penny of State finance, then they should be free to do so. Moreover, such schools should not be recognised as providing adequate education unless approved by HM Inspectors.

Of course all denominations should be treated equally. State funding should be withdrawn from Anglican, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools. The money so saved can be used to pay decent salaries to teachers of secular subjects. This would be clearly equitable as between denominations. There would be no excuse for the outrageous proposals put forward by the Labour Party.

Our State schools should provide a good secular education between Monday morning and noon on Friday. Parents who are anxious so to do can deliver their children to the tender mercies of religious teachers from noon on Friday until Sunday evening for religious instruction at the parents' expense.

That would be a real reform of education.

(PROFESSOR) E. J. LE FEVRE

### THE FRUITS OF PARTITION

You say that "the isolation and serious problems the Ulster Protestants now face are largely of their own making" (Editorial, May). It is hard to see how you could arrive at that conclusion from an examination of the facts, rather than Irish Republican propaganda.

The Ulster Unionists had imposed upon them a separate Parliament which they neither asked for nor wanted. Sir Edward Carson, in a speech on the Government of Ireland Bill at Westminster on 31 March 1920, said: "I would rather see Ulster brought every day closer and closer to this country, with her great Labour population which has the right to advance hand in hand with the great Labour population in this country. We have been too long dragged down by other influences in Ireland . . . if this Bill passes, the only part of Ireland which will have a Parliament is the part that never asked for it".

On 20 May 1920, at Westminster, he said: "It has been said over and over again 'You want to oppress the Catholic minority; you want to get a Protestant ascendancy over there'. We have never asked to govern any Catholic. We are perfectly satisfied that all of them, Protestant and Catholic, should be governed from this Parliament, and we have always said that it was the fact that this Parliament was aloof entirely from these religious distinctions which was the strongest foundation for the government of Ulster. Therefore, not only have we never asked for an opportunity of dealing in a hostile way with the minority, but we have sought from the beginning to end of this controversy to be left alone and go hand in hand with Great Britain as one nation with Great Britain".

Devolved Government led to a degree of misrule, which is inevitable when one party has a permanent

(continued on page 94)

# BOOKS

**A HISTORY OF ATHEISM IN BRITAIN: FROM HOBBS TO RUSSELL**, by David Berman. Croom Helm, £30

Until the twentieth century, public avowal of atheism was professional suicide in Academe. In the early decades of this century, as David Berman points out in a recent history of British atheism, "G. E. Moore, John Ellis McTaggart and Bertrand Russell are the first three academic atheists of note". Then, for many years, very little was written about atheism as such. Stalinism and McCarthyism may have had something to do with this silence, but I suspect that both academic and non-academic freethinkers and religionists wondered if there were anything new to say. More recently the subject has gained a new lease of life through the work of Antony Flew, James Thrower, John Robinson, more explicit "Christian atheists" (most of these writers presumably deemed outside the scope of this volume) and, of course, Dr Berman himself, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Trinity College, University of Dublin.

In the book reviewed Berman ranges over three centuries of freethought history, with potted biographies of the leading figures, and relates it to general history. For example, "Restoration atheism" came under a cloud following divine judgement in the Great Plague and Great Fire, while "Jacobin atheism" suffered similarly after the Reign of Terror and Napoleonic Wars. In the course of this exposition most of the traditional arguments for theism are canvassed and dismissed, but Berman is really writing an intellectual thriller with an individual dialectic. This is outlined in his Preface. "I try to answer these questions: What are the psychological and social forces that have prevented the emergence of atheism in nearly all people at nearly all times? Why has atheism arisen so late, so erratically, and so feebly?"

Let me at once declare that he has succeeded brilliantly in his appointed task. There are only a few places where I disagree with or question his statements, as follows.

I wonder what were Berman's reasons for stating that Shelley's "belief principle" (ie, our beliefs are involuntary and thus not morally culpable) did not derive from Godwin's determinism; that Shaftesbury might have been a deist or pantheist whereas writers with similar views were called crypto-atheists; that he had never met theologians who believed that God created moral laws but did not enforce them by otherworldly sanctions, when — from the time of the Sadducees — disbelief in immortality has been a recognisable, if tenuous, strand in Judeo-Christianity; that d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770) is "the first avowedly atheistic work", when atheism was well-known in ancient Greece and Elizabethan

# FREETHINKER

England and such works might have been destroyed by Christian monks or Royal spies; that Holyoake's "secularism" was "derived from Comte" instead of, as is generally believed, G. H. Lewes or W. H. Ashurst. At any rate, it is incorrect to say that Holyoake was "largely responsible for uniting the various secular societies scattered over Britain". This achievement was Bradlaugh's; Holyoake's was the transformation of ailing Owenite societies into secular ones.

There is another place where I would question — or perhaps particularise — Berman's interpretation. This is his statement that the "vile practices" of which Rochester repented in his death-bed conversion to Christianity amounted to "practical atheism". Though biographical details and literary attributions are disputed, I have little doubt Rochester was referring to sodomy. Until 1885 in Britain it was the only sexual crime (and a capital offence till 1861). It was also regarded as a "detestable and abominable vice" not so much through being thought morally and physically "dirty" but "against nature". Though deemed so deplorable that it was apparently shunned by the lower animals, it was nonetheless feared that, if undeterred, it would spread like a pandemic threatening procreation. Rochester was in the not uncommon situation of renouncing sexual activities he was no longer capable of, and as an aristocrat — though dutifully producing an heir himself — was conscious of anything that might imperil the continuity of titles and estates.

Of course one doesn't have to be an atheist to be a sodomite (and *vice-versa*), but admittedly it helps; since God is the traditional author of the natural law. In fact there are similarities in society's attitudes to both phenomena. They are deemed contrary to the laws of nature and of man. At times their possibility has been totally avoided or even denied. When acknowledged, "theoretical" and "practical" manifestations are carefully distinguished. They have been, in turn, punished as a vice/crime, "treated" as a mental illness and tolerated (just) as an alternative life-style.

Readers should be warned that the book is demanding and a working knowledge of philosophy desirable. Perhaps it should be called *A History of Atheisms*, for I noted "demy", theoretical, practical, unthinking, real, speculative, exoteric, esoteric (crypto), materialistic, pantheistic and idealistic versions in its pages. These were set beside a variety of theisms: negative, anthropological, rational, fideistic, thinking, unthinking and a useful organic breakdown. This was (1) theoretical: (a) natural, (b) revealed; (2) practical: (a) moral, (b) religious

# REVIEWS

(devotional). Too often in religious debate it is assumed that a theist believes both (1)(a) and (1)(b) and is thereby motivated to both (2)(a) and (2)(b). Atheists have generally been concerned to refute the inevitability of this nexus and to avoid the automatic application of a similar breakdown to themselves. How they set about doing this could, I feel, have been made clearer by the use of diagrams with bold and dotted arrows.

At the risk of further complicating the text, a similar breakdown could have been extended to deism and agnosticism. Further, deism could have been subdivided into belief in (i) a creator; (ii) an activator; (iii) a sustainer. These classifications might have helped to remove some of the apparent inconsistencies in the freethinkers considered, particularly if an opening statement of the sort outlined below were given. Such a statement might also list the main philosophical arguments for a belief in God: dynamic (unmoved Mover); cosmological (First Cause); ontological (necessary being); perfectionist; teleological (design); moral. Later it could be shown which of these arguments particular atheists addressed.

Atheists do not deny, much less defy, God. Instead, they do not accept, or actively refute, theism. This is belief in God with the traditional attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, love, justice, creativity and — above all — providence. A theological agnostic is generally someone struggling with early theistic beliefs and going to church every second Sunday. It is an unstable psychological state which is resolved by return to theism, escape to atheism, or mental illness. Many atheists call themselves philosophical agnostics. By this they mean they cannot answer the two basic questions of the universe: why is there something instead of nothing, and why does the something take the form(s) it does? Some atheists also refute deism and pantheism on logical grounds. These terms came into currency about 1700 as theism grew shakier, one postulating a God who set everything in motion then retired from the scene, the other a God who is coextensive and coeternal with his creation. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, most atheists and most theists ignored such Gods as not worth believing in.

A final point. Berman takes me to task for omitting McTaggart, "the most outstanding British atheist", from *100 Years of Freethought*. I confess to no great intimacy with his atheistic arguments. As described in this book they do not impress me — especially the one depending on the unreality of time. There is a further point. Should Stalin, Mussolini and some of the popes be regarded as

freethinkers because they were probably atheists? And what should we say of a professional philosopher who believed in immortality, the non-existence of matter, mysticism and the Church of England in the twentieth century?

DAVID TRIBE

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SEAN O'CASEY, *A LIFE*, by Garry O'Connor. Hodder & Stoughton, £17.95

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Nowadays there appear to be just two types of theatrical biography: those that sensationalise their subject or, in direct contrast, those that almost explode in puffery — the type that when he (or she) is living it is thought merely decent to be effusive and fulsome, serving as something between a PR handout from a publisher or the secretary of a fan club for film and television stars of pop talents. The former all too easily scrape the barrel for dirt that isn't there; and the motive of the latter, mostly the work of hacks or "ghosts" — depending upon whether it is biography or autobiography — is even more hypocritical when it follows the attitude that under no circumstances should the dead be spoken of in anything but the kindest light.

It was recently pointed out that religious superstition played a large part in a certain type of biography, highlighting the good and whitewashing the bad. Rarely has there been in recent years a biography of note somewhere between the two extremes of painting haloes on the one side, and warts and all when dishing the dirt on the other. Such thoughts occurred to me when reading Garry O'Connor's *Sean O'Casey, a Life*. Would this latest portrait of the great dramatic genius be more hagiography or of the hatchet job variety, I wondered? After all, a sufficient time had elapsed since O'Casey's death in September 1964 to view this controversial figure and his turbulent life from afar; suiting it especially to the age in which we live and the type of merchandising that is part and parcel of the literary society prevalent in the Thatcherite market place, where greed is the spur, rather than the "fame" that Howard Spring wrote about in his novel of the '30s. Of course if there's fame to go with the greed, then so much the better. . .

I need not have worried. For in the considerable literature of O'Casey, this book by Garry O'Connor stands firmly and squarely ahead of the others. In this definitive work, published around the time when a new book on Thomas Paine arrives also, Free-thought is on display in the public prints once again — along with Yeats, Lennox, J. B. Fagan, Lady Gregory, Bernard Shaw and all that magnificent Irish theatre school of players who flit across these pages without there being at any time a suspicion of name-dropping. They who pass by, or are touched on specifically, all have a reason for their presence in

the wonderfully vivid and evocative tale of O'Casey's life. And what a life to be sure! And what a legacy for the world's stage to inherit.

It has already been pointed out that this is not only a theatrical biography, although it is especially interesting to actors and actresses as well as playgoers. The subject of Mr O'Connor's narrative of Sean O'Casey's life (1880-1964) is one of comic genius, laughter and tears, triumphs and failures, quarrels and reconciliations. It will come to rank with the very best theatrical biographies of the century concerned with the artist's struggle against the odds, and is fit to rank with Richard Ellman's masterly *Oscar Wilde* for its scholarship, research, style and understanding of a subject that has never been easy to capture in print — except when he was writing about himself.

Friend and enemy of many a famous name in English and Irish society, O'Casey could count on only two friendships outside his family circle; those of Lady Gregory (a playwright herself and founder of the Abbey Theatre where Sean's great trilogy, *Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, was first performed) and Harold Macmillan, publisher and Conservative Prime Minister, who came to regard Sean, despite his communism, as "a saint". It was Macmillan who remained loyal to Sean, the man and the artist, and not the least agreeable feature of this full-scale biography are the accounts of that friendship. Shaw served as a cheer-leader too, although Mrs Shaw's protection of GBS made the relationship between them less durable than might otherwise have been the case.

There are wonderfully telling excerpts from Sean's autobiographical works and quotations from his earliest poems and essays, including *The Soul of Man*, *I Wanna Woman* and such pieces as he shed between writing the great plays. Many of his classic characters become so closely identified with his own background that it is not always obvious whether it is his family, friends, or perhaps characters created from his imagination who are talking. Such classic stage "creatures" as Boyle, Joxer, The Paycock and Juno herself (amongst many others whose sayings are oft-quoted and skilfully integrated in Mr O'Connor's text) have become familiar human beings in the lives of theatregoers since we were first introduced to them (many over sixty years ago). So involved was this playwright's character, as seen through his creativity in producing the myriad of folk who people the pages, that we are constantly being transported into O'Casey's world of "make-believe" every bit as fantastic as the fantasy world of Barrie when he was writing about Peter Pan. But if Sean *never* grew up, and in that respect alone resembled Barrie's "hero", his gloriously irresponsible conduct when he came of age, making him constantly at odds with all

around him, has failed to diminish his stature down the years as one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century.

Certainly O'Casey's work in the world theatre will be forever celebrated, and in introducing us to the Great Magician through this mammoth biography we are shown an O'Casey that few of us suspected. His character as a man — as contrasted with his work as a writer for the playhouse — has never been properly explored. The work he gave us, the parts for actors he wrote, the laughter and song for nations, are all part of the present tribute. And if he had never written anything other than his classic life story in six volumes, dealing with a life that was partly fact and, as Garry O'Connor at last shows, was a good part fancy, he would have qualified for a seat amongst the Immortals.

Packed with information and meticulously documented, there are excellent illustrations and detailed chronologies, notes on abbreviations and sources that all go to make it a book for students as well as for ordinary readers. Best of all, the subject has been treated by his biographer as both artist and poet, as well as militant Freethinker and divine playwright. That to my mind is the way in which he ought to be approached.

PETER COTES

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**DESIRE AND DENIAL: SEXUALITY AND VOCATION,**  
by Gordon Thomas. Grafton Books, £4.95

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The glossy black cover and gold-embossed lettering on this chunky volume tell you before you open it that it aspires to the genus, "Blockbuster".

World sales of the author's two dozen previous books have exceeded 34 million, and several have been made into successful motion pictures. This one is evidently designed to join them, as it is written in a style already half-way to (or from?) the script of a television mini-series.

Based on real life characters, it is a highly fictionalised account of the ways in which five individual Catholics: priests and religious, male and female, straight and gay, succeed or fail in coming to terms with their Church's requirement of celibacy as an essential ingredient of their vocations.

Gordon Thomas writes from within the American Liberal Catholic tradition, and as such is critical of the present Pontiff's very rigid stance on matters of sexual and religious discipline. At many points he shows how cruel and dehumanising are the effects of the Church's teaching on those who enter its service. But the author is basically sympathetic to what most people would regard as the main tenets of Catholicism. I would have preferred to read the much more devastating critique that could have been produced

(continued on back page)

# Preface to *The Bible Handbook*

G. W. FOOTE

G. W. Foote's and W. P. Ball's *The Bible Handbook* was first published in 1888. A hundred years and a dozen editions later, this onslaught against biblical contradictions, atrocities and dubious history, is still a popular book of reference.

The Bible is a volume of miscellaneous character. It was written by many authors, some of whose names are known and others unknown. It contains poetry, history, legends, myths, philosophy, ethics, prophecy, parable and superstition. Good and bad, beautiful and ugly, savage and tender, are wonderfully mixed up in its pages. It is also a very large book, and therefore it is easily read in an uncritical spirit. There is not even an Index to help the reader, although the deficiency is to some extent supplied by Concordances. But who, except a student in search of a half-hammered passage, or a parson picking out texts for a sermon, ever thinks of working in those dreary mines? Hence the necessity for this Bible Handbook, which is chiefly designed for Freethinkers, but should also be of service to inquiring Christians.

The object of this compilation is certainly not orthodox, and the general body of Christians will doubtless object to its methods. They will probably deny the fairness of pulling the Bible to pieces in this fashion. But the apologists of the Christian Scriptures are constantly occupied in belauding them, and there is no necessity to duplicate their performance; on the contrary, there is room for something of an opposite description, and this is what is here produced. Not the best, but the worst things in the Bible are selected; its self-contradictions, its absurdities, its immoralities, its indecencies, and its brutalities. Unquestionably it would be grossly unfair to disembowel an ordinary book in this way. One would not so treat Shakespeare, or any other great classic, either of modern times or of antiquity. But the Bible is not an ordinary book. It is stamped as God's Word by Act of Parliament; it is forced into the hands of children in our private and public schools; it is used as a kind of fetish for swearing upon in our Courts of Law and our Houses of Legislation. People have been robbed of their children in its name, or excluded from public positions to which they were elected by their fellow-citizens. Men are still liable, at law, to imprisonment for bringing it into "disbelief and contempt". Surely, then, a book which makes, or has made for it, such extraordinary pretensions should be subjected to extraordinary tests. We may admit a mirror to be a good one, although we observe some blemishes; but we are entitled to point out its flaws when it is declared to be perfect.

When the Bible takes its place beside the other Sacred Books of the East, it will call for no exposure. But that time is far distant, in spite of the great advances of what is called the Higher Criticism; and in the meantime it is a requisite, even if a thankless, task to accentuate the false, foolish, and wicked features of the Bible, as an antidote to the reckless adulation of its bigoted devotees and mercenary flatterers.

It is only common courtesy to mention our predecessors in this field. We have derived some help from *The Scripturian's Creed*, by J. Davies, which was first printed in 1807, and reprinted in 1822, by Richard Carlile. Henry Hetherington also published a voluminous work on the discrepancies of the Bible, by an anonymous writer who must have had uncommon patience and uncommon leisure. Half the Bible is flung pell-mell over its pages, and text and comment are jumbled together. Far more workmanlike and useful was the *Few Self-Contradictions of the Bible*, published and possibly compiled by Thomas Scott, of Ramsgate. This was sold at a shilling, and only circulated through the post. Robert Cooper's *Holy Scriptures Analysed* was long in use, but it must have been in default of a better. It seems a very hasty compilation done in the scanty leisure of a busy life. Twelve pages are devoted to Contradictions, but many of them were only discrepancies of expression, while a number of striking contradictions in fact were omitted.

The compilation of our Bible Handbook involved a great expenditure of time and trouble. Most of the drudgery was done by Mr Ball, who went through the Bible again and again, with more than the patience of Job. For the sake of accuracy the texts were cut out of "Holy Writ" with a penknife. This necessitated the merciless mutilation of several Bibles; a deed which, in orthodox eyes, will be probably not the least of our offences.

The labour bestowed on this volume must give it some merit. Still, we are prepared to find it has imperfections. Such as it is, however, we send it forth, hoping it will assist Freethinkers, suggest fresh thoughts to inquiring Christians, and startle others out of their superstitious sleep. To the Freethinker, especially, it should prove very useful. Should he, as is very probable, get into discussion with a Christian, he has only to open our Handbook, and in five minutes he will be able to advance more arguments against the Bible than his opponent will be able to answer in a lifetime.

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*The Bible Handbook*, price £5 plus 35p postage, from G. W. Foote & Co Ltd, 702 Holloway Road, London, N19 3NL.

# His Mills Grind in a Mysterious Way

ERIC STOCKTON

It all started with the York Minster fire. Just before that mishap, the Bishop of Durham had questioned, in public, the literal truth of certain staples of the Christian faith. I refer to the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. He did not attack these directly. He merely sought to realign the nice balance between a literalism that is hard to accept and a symbolism that is hard to understand.

Such utterances as those of the Bishop — a gentle academic, not a hard-faced man who looked as though he had done well out of the 39 Articles — had been heard before. They were met by a well-rehearsed furore. The Anglican Church, like so many British institutions, is often an arena in which believers who don't think very much do mock battle with thinkers who don't believe very much. The old guard fear that without barely intelligible dogma the Church would crumble; the blue-eyed boys fear that with barely intelligible dogma the Church will crumble.

Both parties feared contrary opinion. Neither showed much faith in God's power to heal divisions, if He is given the chance. To the rest of us, it was a point of unassailable unimportance whether a story is symbolic, or merely tall, if that story cannot be shown to be of use in guiding us through the minefield of life. Anyhow, the nuances of the dispute were soon drowned by the strident claims of the fundamentalists — those rednecks on the wild frontier of belief — that the fire was a Divine Response to the Bishop's dangerous thoughts.

The wily old fellows of the Church try to avoid trouble. Ineed you can never become a wily old fellow if you are not skilled in the art. The blue-eyed boys gave us the reassuring thought that God Does Not Work That Way. In any case, who had been hurt by the fire? The roof had needed repair and the rebuilding could be the occasion for an all-out offensive against woodworm and dry rot. Cynics observed that blessings often come in fancy dress. God must have owed Messers Rentokil a favour. What's more, the level of unemployment among Yorkshire builders is distressingly high. A God of Creation, it was said, can surely be a God of Job Creation. So things settled down.

Life went on. Other disasters unfolded, as well as all of other events. A tower block, belonging to a rate-capped local authority, collapsed. The local Tory agent — it was in a marginal seat — was killed by this collapse. Several lives were lost when a Western Isles lifeboat came to grief while going to the aid of some Sunday yachtsmen.

The fundamentalists had a ball trying to sort out that lot. But, reassuring things do happen. Life is not

just a bed of nails. An event occurred that soothed the jangled nerves of the warring faithful, an incident that showed the durability of the eternal verities in a troubled world. A pretty little nun came first in the Miss World Competition and she, immediately, returned to her convent taking most of her fellow competitors with her.

Then, for a while, things went smoothly. The news was all dog-bites-man stuff. But not for long . . . A well-known insurance company crashed. It had borne the brunt of the York Minster claim, the tower block tragedy and the lifeboat disaster. Even the promoters of the Miss World Competition claimed, under an "all-risks" clause, a huge sum on account of loss of exploitation of the lovely girls.

The company was in a mess. It was not saved, even by its investments in South Africa.

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## Letters

majority and the population is divided on sectarian lines. If the Unionists had demanded devolved Government it would be fair to blame them for the consequences of it. But the fact is that it was forced upon them by Westminster. It is hard to understand how Westminster could have behaved so stupidly in 1920. It is appalling that she has learned nothing since, and is engaged again, through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, in another attempt to impose a sectarian devolved Government on Northern Ireland.

The same MORI opinion poll which found that only 27 per cent of the interviewees in Britain want Northern Ireland as part of the UK also found that only 19 per cent think Northern Ireland should be forced into union with the Irish Republic. Eighty five per cent of the MORI sample of 2,000 people were from England and the bulk of those were in Southern England. I suspect that there are many Southern English people who, if given the opportunity, would vote to expel from the UK not only Northern Ireland, but Scotland, Wales and most of Northern England as well.

PAUL ROWLANDSON

## THE REALITY OF NAZISM

I note with interest the further letter from R. J. M. Tolhurst (May). The whole purport of his previous letter (March) was that Hitler came into power legally and constitutionally, which is quite untrue. His "red herring" of citing governments elected on a minority vote was an irrelevant diversion from reality. He attempts to posit a positive conclusion from negative premises. The Constitution had already been violated before the voting took place on 23 March 1933. The Communist Party had been suppressed and most of its members of the Reichstag had been arrested, together with a number of Social Democratic members. Nazi Storm Troopers were in command of the streets during the election, beating up and killing opponents and attacking all opposition election meetings. In spite of the reign of terror some Social Democrats had the courage to attend the Assembly and vote against the

Bill giving Hitler dictatorial powers. Storm Troopers, with pistols in their belts, stood in the Chamber between the rows of the members' benches. To Hitler and the Nazi Party the words "legal" and "illegal" were mere verbalisms.

The Putsch of 1923 was open insurrection. Hitler was initially indicted with high treason but with the support of the Junker Class it soon declined into a farce and he was given a token prison sentence with all comforts. Hitler attributed his defeat in no small part to his inability to win over the leaders of the army and police. Anyhow the defeat revolutionised Hitler's tactics. He now grasped the meaning and opportunities of the political game, the tactical dodges, the sham compromises and manoeuvres for which one played for time. The fact that States are recognised and ambassadors are installed therein is no guarantee of their credibility as civilised States.

I have not assessed the relative merits or demerits of the laws of the Federal Republic of Germany, but I am mindful of the fact that Nazism has not been laid to rest within its borders. Seventy per cent of all teachers, judges, lawyers and police officers remained at, or soon returned to, their posts to provide "administrative continuity". They had been the makers and implementers of the Nazi laws and they now slavishly implemented the new laws handed down by the victorious Allies. Nazi "credibility" had no redeeming virtues; its outpourings were those of a gangster mentality. The "menace of Bolshevism" was great fuel for Hitler. *Mein Kampf* shrieked out with it. One does not elect to dispute what is very self-evident. Both Churchill and Chamberlain were "inspired" by the same cry. Paradoxically the same "menace" with its Red Army "tore the guts out of the German Army" (Churchill's words). Mr Tolhurst's Reichstag, phantom or non-phantom, ceased to exist after 23 March, 1933.

JOHN H. CHARLES

## AWARENESS AFTER DEATH

While I am glad to see that Stephen Moreton (Letters, May), agrees with me that those who have had "out of body" experiences were unconscious at the time (Barbara Smoker claimed they were semi-conscious), his own explanation that "unconscious people may sometimes retain some degree of awareness of their surroundings", does not account for those cases, described by Ian Wilson in his book, in which patients could see and hear events around them after they had been pronounced clinically dead. Captain Edmund Wilbourne, for example, actually saw a nurse preparing his body for the mortuary, and still has his signed death certificate!

Mr Moreton gives many examples of how the body can affect the mind which no-one can deny. But of course the mind also controls the body with every physical act we make. When we are nervous or excited, our hands shake, we break into a sweat, our hearts beat faster and so on. People have even been known to worry themselves literally to death. A few Christians are apparently able to produce the stigmata of their Master on their hands and feet, while some yogis can detach themselves from their bodies to the extent that they cannot feel pain inflicted upon them.

There is also a powerful logical argument against the view that the mind is completely dependent upon the body. If our thoughts are determined at any given moment by the electrical, chemical and physical activity in our brains, they cannot be free. And if they are not free, we can never arrive at the truth of any subject, since truth is reached by an impartial con-

sideration of the evidence for and against. Thus, Mr Moreton's opinion that the mind is always dependent on the brain cannot be true, since, according to his own materialist philosophy, it merely reflects the condition of his brain at the moment he reaches that (or indeed, any other), conclusion. In short, it is self-refuting.

JOHN L. BROOM

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton, Sunday, 3 July, 4.30 pm. Tea Party followed by Annual General Meeting.

**British Association for the Advancement of Science.** The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, Friday, 9 September, 2 pm. Debate: The Religious Implications of the Theory of Evolution. Speakers: the Rt Rev Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, and Dr Beverly Halstead. Information obtainable from the BAAS, Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 1AB.

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

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.** 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 Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-842 0129.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 5 July, 8 pm. P. McCaul: The Jury That Went to Jail (William Penn and William Mead).

**Humanist Holidays.** Summer holidays at Shanklin, Isle of Wight, 3-17 September. Details obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 39175.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 30 June, 7.45 pm. Discussion: Access to the Media.

**National Secular Society.** Annual outing, Sunday, 11 September.

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

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 July, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Linda Prior: The Work of Sutton Voluntary Services Bureau.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 20 June, 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 044 128 3631.

## False Economies Hit Family Planning

The Family Planning Association, Brook Advisory Services and Labour's Shadow Health Minister have protested against Government policy which is eroding the family planning services. In London alone, Bloomsbury Health Authority's decision to reduce funding of the Tottenham Court Road Brook Centre by £41,000 will reduce the services by almost a half. Sally Price, BAC acting general secretary, has described this latest cut as "disastrous, both economically and in terms of human misery. I can understand the predicament of the Health Authority who, faced with Government cuts, see reducing family planning services as a way of saving money. Logically the cost-benefits of providing contraception require an increase in funding, not a reduction."

Brook Centres are a favourite target of sex-obsessed puritans. But they have been recognised by successive governments for their ability to reach the young, offering them factual information about contraception. Every year thousands of young people visit Brook Centres in London and the provinces seeking contraceptive advice. Brook also offers them a variety of related services, including pregnancy testing and counselling.

Sally Price declared: "Young people continue to seek the services we offer, and no doubt we would all be very concerned if they chose otherwise instead. We should not be turning them away".

Alastair Service, general secretary of the Family Planning Association, described the axing of family planning clinics as "foolhardy". He has written to all Regional and District Health Authorities calling on them to halt the present erosion of NHS family planning clinic services. He has also urged Community Health Councils to be vigilant in monitoring any cutback proposals for local NHS clinics.

The FPA general secretary explained that although clinics are more cost-effective, DHAs are tempted to cut back on them and transfer patients to the local GP services in order to make savings on District budgets.

"It is difficult to keep track of these proposed or actual clinic cutbacks since they take many forms, not just the closing of clinic buildings", he added.

"Often the clinics remain, but the number of convenient sessions for patients is drastically reduced or geographical restrictions are placed on who can attend.

"Sometimes doctors, nurses or administrators are not replaced. Sometimes patients are transferred to GPs after their first clinic visit, which involves double costs".

Mr Service said: "With public support and professional awareness of the issues, unwise cutbacks of these essential services can be prevented".

In an introduction to a circular on family planning

services, Harriet Harman, the Labour Shadow Health Minister, declared that the document would have been issued by the DHSS if Government Ministers had a genuine interest in women's and children's health care. Although the spacing of babies contributes to health and family welfare, the "Shadow" circular was published "against a background of cuts in family planning services".

Commenting on Health Minister Edwina Currie's refusal to acknowledge that cuts are being made, the circular refers to the large number of unplanned pregnancies, many of which result in abortion.

"There is still an unacceptably high level of unplanned and regretted pregnancies and tremendous regional variations. . .

"The high level of unplanned pregnancies amongst younger women is of particular concern. The highest abortion rate is still amongst women aged between 16 and 19 years".

The circular asserts that an unplanned pregnancy "has profound consequences for the woman and her family. It may end in an abortion. Or it might go to term, often with adverse consequences for the woman, the child that is born, and any other children that the woman might have".

Reducing expenditure on family planning services does not make economic sense. "There is clear evidence that unplanned and regretted pregnancies generate substantially greater than average public sector expenditure on certain health and social services. Thus in purely financial terms, the benefits of family planning services per avoided unplanned conception substantially exceed the cost of family planning services".

The Labour circular maintains that District Health Authorities should not cut back on family planning clinics and services as a way of saving money. It describes as "not sustainable" the argument that if clinic services are cut, women can transfer to GP services.

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### *Desire and Denial*

by someone with deep inside knowledge who had rejected the basic beliefs.

As it stands, I found the book over-written, and I was irritated that the author, while justly criticising some aspects of Catholicism, still accepted uncritically many of its absurdities.

I wonder who its chief readers will be? I can imagine it appealing to nuns on long-haul flights. Its tedious length will almost certainly defeat most other potential readers. So if the scenario grabs you, why not wait until it turns up, as it undoubtedly will, on the television screen.

DANIEL O'HARA