

# The Freethinker

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## SCOTTISH HUMANISTS WELCOME THE GO-AHEAD FOR SUNDAY FERRIES

"The Scottish Humanist Council fully supports the decision by Caledonian MacBrayne to operate Sunday ferry services in the Western Isles", declared Council secretary Robin Wood, when it was announced that the company would introduce the service next summer. The decision was taken despite fierce opposition by Protestant churches and the Lord's Day Observance Society. "We abhor the intolerance shown by these religious bigots", said Mr Wood.

The SHC secretary pointed out that the islanders are not all Sabbatharians. Those who were would not be forced to compromise their principles, but the Sunday ferries should be available for those who wish to use them.

Commenting on claims that Sunday sailings were not wanted either by the islanders or tourists, Mr Wood said that if the service proved to be uneconomic it would be withdrawn. Colin Paterson, Caledonian MacBrayne's managing director, emphasised that the service was being introduced in response to public demand. The company is so confident of its success that the Sunday timetables are already at the printers.

Caledonian MacBrayne's decision is a devastating blow to the Sunday observance freaks. The islands of Harris, Lewis and North Uist are just about their last strongholds. Church-going is the only approved activity. "Unnecessary recreation" is forbidden — even the children's swings are padlocked — and anyone obeying a call of nature will find the public toilets closed. Going for a walk is suspect in some Sabbatharian eyes.

Sabbatharians clearly believed they were doing the Lord's work in opposing Sunday ferries. People who regard themselves as agents of the Almighty tend to become fanatical, and Scottish Protestants with a biblical bee up their kilt about Sunday observance

are no exception.

There were threats to blockade the piers in protest against the "horrendous and callous act" perpetrated by Caledonian MacBrayne. One islander said: "The seventh day of the week belongs to the Lord. We are prepared to go to any lengths to defy Caledonian MacBrayne".

Silky smarminess did not quite conceal the hidden menace in one clergyman's voice. "For all our desire to be peace-loving, we can't give any guarantee as to where many of the people might or might not stop in the way of offering resistance".

Colin Paterson believes it is his company's duty to serve all the islanders, "not just the ones who are vociferous". There is evidence of support for Sunday ferries, but people are afraid to speak out. Four women told a Sunday newspaper that they were in favour, but none would give her name. "I'd get an ear-bashing", said one teenager.

Sunday travel is not unknown in the Western Isles. Sunday ferries came to the Isle of Skye twenty years ago. There is a Sunday service to Barra during the summer. Earlier this year British Airways started Sunday flights to Benbecula. There is no evidence that family and community life is breaking down in these areas.

It is on the Protestant islands that Sunday is strictly observed. Problems arise because they try to compel others to live by their interpretation of the fourth commandment. Roman Catholics, who are far less rigid about Sunday observance, are affected. For example, the Western Isles Council, which is Protestant-dominated, has ruled that schools in Catholic areas cannot be used for community events on Sunday. This has caused resentment among Catholic ratepayers who complain that they cannot use facilities which they have paid for, and resent being dictated to by Protestants.

# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## A "TEMPTATION" TO CENSOR

*Index on Censorship*, which normally concentrates on curtailment of freedom in other countries, has published a special issue on threats to liberty in Britain. Professor Ronald Dworkin sets the scene with his article's opening sentence: "Liberty is ill in Britain".

Barrister John Mortimer pinpoints the precise time when the suppression poison that is now corrupting society was administered. He writes: "The pendulum started to swing on the day that Mary Whitehouse, self-appointed watchdog of the nation's morals, stood outside a courtroom in the Old Bailey and prayed for a verdict of Guilty in the *Gay News* trial . . . public opinion in England, which had been moving steadily towards a greater tolerance for minority opinions, did a quick about-turn and started the long march backwards".

Since that day in July 1977 when Judge Alan King-Hamilton, president of the West London Synagogue, imposed heavy penalties on the editor and publishers of *Gay News* for blasphemy, "the long march backwards" has gathered apace. Judge King-Hamilton was to write that while preparing and delivering his summing-up: "I was half-conscious of being guided by some superhuman inspiration". During the last eleven years the Whitehouse cause has been promoted by Government politicians, New Rightists, disgruntled radicals and censorious feminists.

Blasphemy law is confused and uncertain. Consequently it is easy for unscrupulous Christians to threaten writers, artists and publishers with prosecution. This state of affairs is exploited by religious pressure groups who are encouraged by church leaders. In 1976 the then Archbishop of Canterbury reminded Christians — most of whom had probably forgotten — that they still had blasphemy law in their armoury. Mrs Whitehouse took the hint. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, wants blasphemy law not just retained for the benefit of Christianity, but extended to protect all forms of religious superstition.

Mary Whitehouse has been threatening another blasphemy prosecution. This time it is directed against distributors of Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. With characteristic Christian arrogance, she and others of her ilk are endeavouring to impose their wishes on the general public, in effect telling adult audiences that they cannot see a work by one of the world's foremost directors.

Mary Whitehouse is leading a chorus of strident

# AND NOTES

voices ignorantly denouncing *The Last Temptation* as blasphemous. She has been joined in the pious clamour by such legal authorities as born-again Rock musician Alvin Stardust, who was flown to New York to review the film for that Christian family newspaper, *News of the World*. He concluded his piece with a list of its "ten top blasphemies".

Mainstream churchmen have been more circumspect, avoiding terms like "blasphemy" and "blasphemous" in their comments. Cardinal Hume, leader of Britain's Roman Catholics, simply advised Christians not to see the film. His statement evoked a predictable follow-my-leader response from Dr Runcie.

A spokesman for the British Board of Film Classification announced that if a legal adviser said the film was blasphemous, it would not be granted a certificate. "That seems to me a very simple, direct and proper way to do things", declared the magisterial Mrs Whitehouse. But the Board ruled that *The Last Temptation* did not contain "any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ, the Bible or the formularies of the Church of England by law established". Mrs Whitehouse reacted with a clarion call to her letter-writing toadies, urging them to persuade local authorities to ban it in their areas.

Of course the ruction over Scorsese's film has its compensations. The antics of its religious detractors have caused much merriment among freethinkers and libertarians. Poor Mrs Whitehouse has some weird screwballs on her side, particularly in the United States. For example, the mob of howling Jesusites who demonstrated outside a New York cinema were led by a lady named Joyce McKinney. *Joyce who?* Cast your minds back about ten years. Here in Britain, Mormon missionary Joyce McKinney was the central figure in a sex-and-chains scandal. She fled the country to avoid appearing in court charged with kidnapping another missionary, chaining the poor fellow to a bed, and having her wicked way with him.

The film's financial backers are also laughing when they see long queues outside cinemas. They should be properly grateful to the likes of Mary Whitehouse for arousing public interest and generating a vast amount of free publicity for *The Last Temptation*. After the box-office success of *The Life of Brian*, Christian busybodies should have realised that their attempts at censorship are self-defeating. But the barmy blighters never learn, and thanks largely to their attempts to ban it, instead of being confined to specialist cinemas whose audiences

are probably past redemption, *The Last Temptation* is a major attraction on the large and profitable circuits.

It is gratifying that other film-makers have rallied to the defence of Scorsese and artistic freedom. Director Sydney Pollack told a press conference: "At stake here is the essence of a free society". Actor Kirk Douglas touched a raw nerve by suggesting that the hysteria over *The Last Temptation* had been whipped up by the fundamentalists in order to draw public attention from their own "sexual exploits and financial wrongdoing".

Let another veteran film actor, Walter Matthau, have the last word on *The Last Temptation*. "It's got people coming out from under the stones who haven't even seen it. . .

"We've always had those who would burn books and censor people's minds. Many times the religions are in the forefront of closing the minds of the people, as though if they were opened they would see a better way, not just go on faith alone, especially if the faith is showing nothing but sleazy prejudice and bigotry and hatred".

## GOD'S WHITE ELEPHANT

A group of Christians in Colchester, Essex, have just spent £160,000 on the purchase of a water tower. They intend to convert the famous landmark — known locally as Jumbo — into a prayer tower. It was originally intended for reconstruction as offices, but the scheme ran into planning problems.

The Network Trust, which represents a group of churches in the area, claims that while praying together, members had a vision which prompted them to buy the listed building. Possibly they had in mind the example of Oral Roberts, the American televangelist. It will be recalled that last year he ascended a tower and announced that God would "call him home" if he did not raise eight million dollars. The gullible faithful stumped up the required amount.

The Rev Frederick Wright, a Network Trust spokesman, said he was not surprised that the money had been raised to buy Jumbo. He declared: "God told us to get it, and he would not let us down".

Is the Great Property Developer in the sky losing his business marbles? With hundreds of empty and underused churches all over the country, why encourage clients to spend a colossal sum on the acquisition and maintenance of Jumbo? But perhaps this venture is simply another example of people with more money than sense.

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Roman Catholic priests in Clones, Republic of Ireland, have forbidden unmarried couples to sit together in local cinemas. They fear that the darkness may tempt them to commit "acts of immorality".

## SITTING DOWN FOR JESUS

There is still a strong tendency among arrogant religionists and political conformists to regard civic buildings as part-time churches. Council business, it seems, would come to a standstill if proceedings did not commence with prayers to the Christian deity. Atheists, agnostics and assorted unbelievers are expected to respectfully participate in these displays of superstitious mumbo-jumbo.

Of course officials have to lump it if a strong-minded councillor refuses to go along with this nonsense. But it is a different matter when a non-member in the public gallery shows a streak of independence, as one lady — whose husband is a Labour councillor as it happens — discovered last month when she did not stand for prayers at a Council meeting in Havering Town Hall. Susan Cook was upstanding when the Mayor entered, but being

## ISRAEL'S PRIME MURDERER

It has been disclosed that the present Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, was one of those who authorised the murder of Count Folke Bernadotte in 1948. The decision in principle to kill the United Nations mediator was taken at a meeting attended by Shamir in June of that year, and the order given three months later.

Dr Israel Eldad, a former commander of the Stern Gang terrorist group, has revealed the identity of those involved in the killing of Count Bernadotte. His car was ambushed by a four-man hit squad. Yehoshua Cohen, who fired the shots, had also trained the two gunmen who assassinated British Minister of State, Lord Moyne, four years previously.

Count Bernadotte was marked for death by Stern Gang fanatics after he published a plan advocating the internationalisation of Jerusalem and reducing the area of the Israeli State.

Prime Minister Shamir has not denied his part in the murder of Count Bernadotte. The victim was related to the Swedish Royal Family, and Sweden has demanded that the case be re-opened. But any UN inquiry is likely to be opposed by the Americans in the interests of their Israeli catspaw.

We regret late delivery of the September and October issues. Suspension of the postal services, however brief or localised, causes difficulties. On this occasion, the ham-fisted and provocative tactics adopted by Post Office management transformed a one-day stoppage into the first national strike by postal workers for seventeen years. Readers will understand that this added considerably to the usual problems and expense of producing and distributing a monthly magazine.

non-religious, remained seated during prayers. A minor dignitary, who carries the mace on such occasions, ordered her to stand up or leave the council chamber.

Arthur Latham, leader of the Labour group on Havering Council, protested to the Mayor. He pointed out that while members of the public have a right to be present at Council meetings, they are there as observers and therefore not obliged to join in prayers.

Councillor Dennis Cook said that his wife was not pleased about being publicly embarrassed. He commented: "Everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, and if they don't want to say prayers they shouldn't have to".

Next time the Havering Council mace bearer orders anyone to stand for prayers, he should be told where to put his symbol of office.

## Freethinker Fund

The confusion and inconvenience caused by the postal workers' strike meant that the increase in postage charges from 12 September attracted little attention. But it is yet another blow to publications like *The Freethinker*, most of whose readers receive their copies by mail.

Despite this latest increase, the annual postal subscriptions remain unchanged for two reasons. First, it would simply not be worth the effort involved to amend all the records. Secondly, we are confident that readers will rally around to help the paper meet the extra postage costs, together with the additional expenses incurred through last month's strike.

We express warm thanks to all those who contribute to the Fund. The latest list of donors is given below.

T. Liddle, J. McPhee and D. Pickett, £1 each; M. C. Ansell, S. M. Burgess, M. D. Carter, W. J. Grant, C. Jones, P. J. Kerr, L. Lewis and F. O'Connor, £2 each; E. McCann, £2.65; Anonymous. P. T. Bell, K. Byrom, D. A. Langdown and M. W. Smith, £3 each; J. Patterson, £3.50; F. Munniksm. £4.40; C. F. Ablethorpe, W. Aikenhead, D. Aldridge, D. J. George, A. T. Lambert, J. A. B. Spence, V. Sangharashita and D. N. Towers, £5 each; G. A. Airey, S. Beer, P. Somers and A. Willans, £10 each; P. L. Willig, £12; S. W. Butterworth, £15; R. Gerber and P. L. Lancaster, £20 each.

Total for August: £321.55.

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# Conversion to Credulity

DAVID SHAW

The Very Rev Antony Bridge, Dean of Guildford, said in a recent Encounter (Independent Television) programme that he was once a convinced atheist. He is but one of many Christians who claim adherence to atheism before they "saw the light". How much credence should be given to their claims?

In one sense every Christian and indeed every religious believer was once an atheist because an atheist is anybody who does not believe in a god. And because we must know about something before we can believe in it, every baby is an atheist. Nobody is born believing in a god; belief has to be indoctrinated into people. They can be atheists merely because no one has ever told them about any god; such non-believers would be as ignorant about atheism as about religion, even though they were atheists. But although rejecting belief in a deity, they would be very different from rationalists, materialists and humanists who had been subjected to religious propaganda but nevertheless consider the idea of a deity to be false and absurd. But nobody will learn about that difference between atheists from programmes like *Encounter*.

The Dean of Guildford's claim implied that he had studied atheism and was certain that his enthusiasm for it was justified. That double insinuation is the point of every reference on radio or television to the atheist turned Christian, because the more enthusiastic a person was about atheism, the greater the victory for Christianity when he becomes a turncoat. No one is more welcome than the convert who confesses to being a wicked sinner before becoming a Christian; for according to the Jesus adulterers, atheism is the most wicked sin of all.

Christians love to boast about their number who were once, allegedly, convinced atheists. They are Christianity's star exhibits. One suspects that "the saved" talk a lot more about atheism now that they are Christians than when they were atheists. Apparently they all kept very quiet about their atheism until they became Christians.

A crucial factor with those Christians who pontificate on radio and television programmes is how knowledgeable they are about the subject. Anybody can claim to have been an atheist, but not everyone can demonstrate an understanding of the extensive atheist case against Christianity. How many of those Christ-worshippers who brag about forsaking atheism ever knew anything about it? It would be interesting to know if they read books like George Smith's *Atheism: The Case Against God*, or Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, or Robert G. Ingersoll's *Rome or Reason?*, or Mark Twain's *Letters From the Earth*, or Bertrand Russell's *Why*

*I am Not a Christian*, or indeed any of the not-allowed-to-be-mentioned-on-the-air masterpieces that expose the sham of Christianity. It would also be interesting to hear a former unbeliever turned Christian explain which serious weakness in the atheist case persuaded him to become not only a Christian but a clergyman as well.

Every alleged "convinced atheist" now a clergyman is outnumbered by thousands of Christians who become unbelievers despite being religiously indoctrinated at school, having Christian propaganda beamed at them every day by radio and television, and hearing it proclaimed by State-employed chaplains in hospitals and the armed forces, etc. Christians who control those organisations that should be entirely secular bodies, such as the BBC and IBA, misuse millions of pounds every year attempting to stop people from ditching Christianity. Nevertheless the churches are largely ignored by the great majority of UK citizens.

The credulous recruit to Christianity must abandon reason because it is incompatible with religious faith. Spurning Christianity in favour of atheism is a process of reasoning and learning that is a genuine example of "seeing the light". But such converts are seldom allowed to talk about either Christianity or atheism on the air.

When Christianity was a power in the land, people were fined for not going to church. That injustice is no longer allowed. But television licence-buying unbelievers have to pay for hundreds of hours of Christian propaganda they do not want.

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Ukrainians in Bradford have been told by the Post Office that they cannot have a postmark worded "Millenium of Christianity in the Ukraine, 988-1988". Their application was described as "potentially contentious". Because of controversy caused by the "Jesus is Alive" postmark, Post Office authorities have indicated that slogans with a religious or denominational emphases will not be accepted.

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Over a thousand clergy and laypeople are prepared to break away from the Church of England if women are ordained priests. A traditionalist group known as Ecclesia has been compiling a list of opponents to women priests, and plan to organise a series of regional meetings followed by a national congress. The Rev Leslie Whiting, of Willesden, north London, declared: "If the need arises for a continuing Church of England, these groups are ready as embryo parishes or congregations. There is nothing that will stop us going ahead, except the Church rejecting women priests".

# The Fraud of Turin

BARBARA SMOKER

When, at the end of August, the news was leaked that the "Shroud" of Turin had been scientifically proved to be less than seven hundred years old, many of its devotees refused to accept this verdict unless and until it was actually announced by the Vatican. The control fragments had, they said, been confused with the true ones; besides, there are still mysteries in it, they said, for no medieval forger could possibly have been clever enough to achieve such an accurate image; then, the carbon content of the atoms would, they said, naturally have been affected by the burst of radiation to be expected in a resurrection from the dead; alternatively, they said, God might have wrought a miracle thirteen centuries later; and in any case, they said, what really matters is the emotional effect that the mysterious image of a suffering man has on those who see it.

From the outset, the "Shroud" industry had little to gain and everything to lose by having a scientific date put on the relic. Had it transpired that the flax from which the linen was made had grown during the Roman occupation of Palestine, it would not have proved that the relic was genuine, for doubters could still postulate a medieval forger who was sufficiently perfectionist to obtain an ancient piece of cloth; while the more likely finding, that the flax had grown many centuries after the alleged lifetime of Jesus, would inevitably weaken the shroud theory, even if some persistent believers managed to find ingenious ways around the scientific evidence.

However, the late deposed King Umberto II of Italy, who had owned the alleged shroud, was in favour of its being carbon-dated — which suggests that he believed in its authenticity. But the cathedral authorities in Turin, who were its *de facto* guardians, apparently had less faith in it, for they refused to allow such tests to be carried out, even when the improving techniques reduced to quite small fragments the pieces of cloth that would have to be destroyed in the process. Their reluctance was rational enough, as the relic was the cathedral's greatest asset, bringing in a considerable revenue from gullible pilgrims. Umberto, however, outwitted the Archbishop of Turin by bequeathing the relic to the Pope, whom he understood to be in favour of carbon-dating — and whose wishes the Archbishop could not override as easily as those of a mere deposed king.

John Paul II thus became the owner of the Turin relic on Umberto's death (on 18 March, 1983), and last year gave his consent for a series of C-14 (carbon-dating) tests to be carried out on the relic. As their timing was, we were told, intended to be a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Pope's accession, it seems that he genuinely believed the tests might produce a "good" result.

The announcement of the carbon-dating results

was originally to have been made on Good Friday this year, but negotiations with Turin caused delays, after which the number of separate tests was cut down from seven to three, and one of the two methods that were to have been used was cut out entirely. Eventually, however, the Vatican chose three laboratories — in Oxford, Zurich and Arizona — to do the tests, which were to be carried out in the early summer, the results being passed to the British Museum for identification and co-ordination.

Until that stage, they were supposed to be "blind" tests, the samples being identified only by secret numbers; but since the unusual weave of the twill linen of the Turin relic was well known from the literature, it would be easy enough for the technicians to pick it out, or at least to eliminate some of the samples. So the three laboratories were additionally placed under pledges of secrecy.

The Zurich and Arizona tests were completed in July, the results being made known to a few trusted believers only — though some of those few (including David Sox, on "Sunday" on Radio 4) began trying, all too obviously, to prepare the faithful for a disappointing result. Meanwhile, the Oxford technicians had lagged behind schedule, explaining that they had other jobs to do first — this one obviously not being regarded as anything special. Then, on completing its tests, Oxford apparently leaked the result to the Catholic Professor Richard Luckett in Cambridge, who, it seems, leaked it to the London *Evening Standard* — though Oxford's Professor Hall later denied both the leak itself and the date said to have been leaked.

The *Evening Standard* naturally made the most of its scoop on 26 August, devoting not only a main front-page slot to the story but also finding space for a comment on it in its Diary and for a feature article by Luckett. The national and overseas papers were left to follow on with the news the next day, some even citing the London *Standard* as their source.

Three weeks later the *Sunday Times* devoted almost a full page to the story as though the findings were unexpected.

The timing of the leak was acutely embarrassing for the Pope, as he was paying an official visit to Turin the following week. Indeed, it was no doubt with this visit in mind that he had arranged that at that time the results would be known to him but not generally known — thus enabling him to make a sensational announcement himself there and then in the event of a "good" result, but otherwise to hold back until his visit was over.

Turin's intermediary in contact with the testing laboratories, Professor Luigi Gonella, did what he could to retrieve the situation by hastily

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announcing that one of the three laboratories had received no genuine sample at all — and suggesting that that laboratory was the Oxford one. It was not a very credible ruse, but at least it would postpone an admission of the truth until after the Turin papal visit.

Four weeks later Gonella admits to being “disappointed”. He said: “It is like having a portrait in your attic that turns out not to be of your grandfather — but you don’t love him the less”.

On the day of the leak, 26 August, the Diary feature in the *Standard* quoted the immediate wriggling reaction of Catholic Group-Captain Leonard Cheshire:

“If you accept the idea of the Resurrection, you are already in the realms of something which science cannot understand. It is on the frontier of time and eternity. How do the scientists know that the Resurrection did not induce a change in the Shroud, imparting it with a false age?”

The following morning, the *Daily Mail* published a full article by him under the banner heading “Why I still believe in the Turin Shroud”. One of his reasons is that the anatomical details of the image are so “exact that no 14th-century artist could have got them right”. In fact, however, the professional makers of Christian relics at that time were so experienced and meticulous in the art that it is hardly surprising if the maker of this relic was clever enough to mystify pundits of the 20th century wanting to be mystified.

Cheshire also relates how, in the year 944, the ancient Mandyllion of Edessa (bearing an image of the face of Jesus) is taken to Constantinople, where “the cloth is unfolded; the image is not just a face, it is a whole body”. This scenario first appeared in 1978, in *The Turin Shroud* by the historian Ian Wilson — put forward there not as historical fact, founded on evidence, but merely as a possibility, thought up by himself. Now, ten years later, this unlikely speculation has become history!

Finally, Cheshire writes “It will *always* remain a matter of personal opinion whether to believe in the shroud or not. . . I, personally, find my belief in it unshaken, and helpful”. To a rationalist, of course, it would be a matter of evidence, not opinion; and being “helpful” does not make something true.

Professor Richard Luckett, in his article in the *Standard*, takes a slightly more sophisticated line than the Group-Captain, pointing out that the formal position of the Catholic Church has always been that the relic “is a ‘representation’, an object that might well prompt profitable prayer and meditation but is not the true shroud of Our Lord” — adding that, despite the medieval date, “it still remains an extremely mysterious, if not a mystical, object” and

that “here we do in fact have the real image of a man who was tortured and crucified”. In other, plainer, words, it is a clever fake — as freethinkers have never doubted.

It is true that, for the first five hundred years of the relic’s six-hundred-year existence, the Church authorities recognised it as a forgery; but they have been only too ready in the present century to go along with the popular surge of acceptance of the relic.

As early as 1389, the French bishop in whose diocese the “shroud” had been discovered denounced it as a fake, and later he reported to Pope Clement VII that the artist had since confessed to having made it and to trying to pass it off as the genuine article. Shroud enthusiasts have always known this — which makes their recent faith in the authenticity of the relic all the more perverse and difficult to understand.

It is significant, however, that whereas, in centuries past, such credulity would have been limited almost entirely to Catholics, in the past few decades it has been Protestants who seem to have been the more easily gulled by miraculous relics and “paranormal powers” — perhaps because of the invocation of science, ironically enough, on behalf of these “signs and wonders”. Uri Geller, spiritualist mediums, popular writers like von Daniken — all make a good living by using gullible scientists to uphold their sensational claims, on spurious scientific evidence, while Catholics (inoculated against alien superstitions) tend to be under-represented among those taken in by them.

It was actually the progress during the late nineteenth century in the science of photography that, by disclosing the Turin relic’s startling negative image, first led to the revival of popular belief in the shroud, upheld by the argument that no medieval forger would have bothered with the negative image since he could not have foreseen the invention of photography that would reveal it. In the past few years, exponents of a whole range of scientific expertise, employing every possible piece of technological hardware, have got in on the act, and vied with one another in the sensationalism of their findings and interpretations.

In the 1970s, one “expert” not only managed to discern the imprint of a coin over one of the shroud man’s eyes but even identified the emperor depicted on it — needless to say, one who reigned early in the first century. When no paint could be detected on the cloth, that proved it was not made by human hands; then, when traces of paint were found, that must have been used later, simply to touch up the image. This is the sort of conclusion to be expected when researchers are self-selected for their readiness to believe in miracles.

The fashion for any particular alleged relic of

Christ comes and goes. Less than fifty years ago, the "Holy Coat of Treves" (allegedly "the seamless garment" for which the Roman soldiers cast lots at the Crucifixion) was far better known and more widely accepted than the "Shroud of Turin" — which, indeed, was still described unequivocally at that time in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* as a forgery — but nowadays one hardly ever hears of the seamless coat outside Trier, where it is still preserved in the cathedral.

The "Holy Coat" entry in *Harmsworth's Universal Encyclopaedia* of 1920-22 (which, incidentally, has no entry on the Turin Shroud at all) states that an 1891 photograph of the "Coat" had revealed a negative impression of the supposed face of Jesus — probably a technique developed by medieval relic-manufacturers so as to lend a mysterious aspect to such sacred images. Yet in his book *The Evidence of the Shroud* (1986), Ian Wilson stated that the famous negative image revealed by an 1898 photograph of the Turin relic is unique. He went to great lengths in his researches to "prove" the authenticity of the Turin relic, yet either knew nothing about a similar image on the relic in Trier or else chose to ignore it.

Many statements made in the past few years by academics, including scientists, about the Turin relic have been incredibly credulous. One American statistician actually asserted that the odds on the "man of the shroud" not being Jesus are "one chance in 82,944,000". How he reached this precise figure is not revealed, but in any case it is beside the point. The suggestion has never been put forward, except as an Aunt Sally to be knocked down, that the image might be that of another man — a man who not only looked just like the medieval concept of Jesus but who showed signs of having likewise suffered scourging, crowning with thorns, nails through the wrists and feet, and a sword through the side. There has always been a consensus that the image on the cloth is that of the gospel hero; the only disagreement has been, how the image got there.

By the time this article appears in mid-October, the Vatican will have announced the findings of the carbon-dating laboratories — hiding its disappointment by stressing that the Church had never proclaimed the shroud to be more than a devotional "representation" of the passion of Christ. At the same time, many of those like Leonard Cheshire who have fervently believed it to be the genuine shroud of their "saviour", miraculously impregnated with his image and miraculously preserved over two millenia, will continue to do so. After all, what is mere science when confronted with faith? Indeed, science is the traditional enemy.

Believers are glad to invoke scientific facts to back up their beliefs; but if the facts let them down, it is the mark of the true believer to jettison the facts, not the faith.

## G. W. Foote—

I suffer something of a weakness for those bright, sturdy little cloth bound volumes which emanated from 28 Stonecutter Street, London, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but I think that my favourite is G. W. Foote's *Prisoner for Blasphemy*, published by his Progressive Publishing Company in 1886.

Quite apart from comprising a fascinating story the book tells us much about Foote, his motives, and the ordeals he had to suffer for the cause he believed in. A number of commentators have noted that much of Foote's life remains a mystery and many regret that his biography has yet to be published. Nevertheless, in *Prisoner for Blasphemy* we have an extended autobiographical piece dealing with what is perhaps the most important phase of Foote's life.

The book divides into three parts. First, there is Foote's account of the establishment of *The Free-thinker* and the reasons for its particular style and approach<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, there is a detailed treatment of the trials themselves, the legal manoeuvrings and their results<sup>2</sup>. Thirdly, Foote details his experiences in prison and the conditions he suffered. It is the last of these aspects on which this article will concentrate. The others being adequately documented elsewhere.

The omens for the future could hardly have been good when Foote was first fitted with his prison clothes. On complaining that he could not fasten the biggest coat available around his chest, he was informed by the Deputy-Governor, "Come, Mr Foote, don't be so particular; the clothes don't quite fit you now, but they will". As Foote points out — he was right. Foote's diet comprised meagre quantities of brown bread, thin gruel, potatoes, pea-soup (which he abhorred) and suet. To add to this there was three ounces of beef and three-quarters of an ounce of bacon each week. Foote enjoys himself writing about the challenge of trying to locate three-quarters of an ounce of bacon on a plate.

Foote described his cell's dimensions as being about ten feet by six, and it was about nine feet high. There was a small window of opaque glass, a tiny flap table, a small stool and the bed. The walls were white-washed and the floor black and shiny as the result of the application of blacklead. Ventilation was poor and designed with a system of gratings that prevented prisoners from seeing anything outside their cell. The books available to him for the first three months of his sentence comprised a Bible (which he spent much time reading), a Prayer Book and a Hymn Book. Later he was able to persuade the authorities to relax their restrictions and was allowed limited access to a wider selection of books.

To me, one of Foote's most surprising revelations was the use of the plank bed in the prisons of the time. These were the idea of Sir Richard Cross

# Prisoner for Blasphemy

ROBERT FORDER

(presented in the text-books as a reforming Home Secretary) and comprised three eight-inch planks raised a couple of inches off the floor. At its head was a raised portion of flat wood which acted as a pillow. No mattress was provided. For the first month of their sentence prisoners spent the whole night lying on this (sleep was virtually impossible), for the second month three nights a week, and for the third one night a week. "I have seen robust men in Holloway, by means of the plank bed and other superfluous tortures of the prison system brought to the very edge of the grave".

For the first part of his sentence Foote spent 23 hours a day in his cell, the remaining hour being taken up with prison exercise. The normal pattern was for prisoners to walk in single file in circles. A rule of silence was imposed but Foote remarks that this led to prisoners mastering the art of speaking without moving their lips at a volume which just reached their nearest neighbour.

Foote attended prison services regularly. He explains that this provided some relief from the prison monotony but he clearly enjoyed the experience and the prison chaplain, Parson Plaford, becomes a particular butt for his humour and the subject for a whole chapter of the book.

Over forty sermons fell from Parson Plaford's lips into my critical ears, and I never detected a grain of sense in any of them. Nor could I gather that he had read any other book than the Bible. Even that he appeared to have read villainously, for he seemed ignorant of its contents, and he told us many things that are not in it. He placed a pen in the fingers of the man's hand which disturbed Belshazzar's feast, and he gave us many similar additions to holy writ. Yet he was singularly devoid of imagination. He took everything in the Bible literally, even the story of the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles in the shape of cloven tongues of fire. "They were like this", he said, making an angle with the knuckles of his forefinger on the top of his bald head, and looking at us with a pathetic air of sincerity. It was the most ludicrous spectacle I had ever witnessed.

Elsewhere Foote notes that most of the prison's inmates were familiar with the most popular hymns and hypothesises that nine out of ten had been Sunday-school children. He concludes that scepticism had not led them to gaol, and religion had not kept them out of it.

Prisoners' contact with friends and relatives was strictly controlled. Unless a special order was made from the Home Office this meant that friends or relatives could visit once every three months. Visitors included his wife, Annie Besant, Edward Aveling (who edited *The Freethinker* during Foote's imprisonment) and J. M. Wheeler. These contacts can hardly have been rewarding. Visitors were

received in prison cages where only faces were visible through a narrow slit. Interviews were limited to half-an-hour and a prison warden was stationed between prisoner and visitor to prevent "improper conversation". One visitor at the time of the April 1883 trial was Charles Bradlaugh, who brought the unwelcome news that Joseph Wheeler had suffered the first of his nervous breakdowns. Wheeler was a particular friend of Foote's and he took the news badly. Bradlaugh's handling of the situation is presented as insensitive, and it is worth noting that Foote's eulogies to Bradlaugh all post-date Bradlaugh's death and there is an element of rivalry between them before this.

One other aspect of Foote's personality becomes clear when reading the book. Rather surprisingly, for a man whose audiences and following were primarily working class, he emerges as a snob. When writing on the subject of prison baths he notes that some prisoners are brought up in dirt and love it. Elsewhere we find him objecting to bad language and referring to "abominations of human speech". More generally it is clear throughout the book that while he is willing to accept imprisonment as a price worth paying for his principles he resents being associated with "the common criminal classes" and quite clearly regards himself as a different type of prisoner.

Foote's release came on 25 February, 1884. He claims that attempts were made to have him out of the prison doors an hour or so before the planned time to undermine the greeting by thousands that awaited him. Foote stalled to avoid such disappointment, was met by Bradlaugh, Besant, Mrs Foote and countless others and was escorted to a public breakfast at the Hall of Science. Various addresses followed and the presentation of an illuminated address and purse of gold. The final words were left to Foote:

I thank you for your greeting. I am not played out. I am thinner. The doctor told me I have lost two stone, and I believe it. But after all I do not think that the ship's timbers are much injured. The rogues ran me aground, but they never made me haul down the flag. Now I am floated again I mean to let the old flag stream out on the wind as of yore. I mean to join the rest of our fleet in fighting the pirates and slavers on the high seas of thought.

And of course, that is exactly what he did.

## Notes

- 1 See Jim Herrick's "Vision and Realism: a Hundred Years of *The Freethinker*".
- 2 See in particular J. R. Spencer's article "Putting the Foote Down — *The Freethinker* Trial 100 Years Ago". In *The Freethinker*, December, 1982.

# PAMPHLET

**SWITCHING CHANNELS: THE DEBATE OVER THE FUTURE OF BROADCASTING**, by Tom O'Malley. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 9 Poland Street, London, W1V 3DG, £2

This small pamphlet "reviews the changes taking place in broadcasting . . . explains why (they) are occurring, what their effects are and how best to intervene to help create a broadcasting system which serves the citizen rather than the interests of powerful, unaccountable multinational companies".

The Tory government and the large corporations put pressure for privatisation because both the BBC and ITV can become more profitable as new technologies of cable and satellite make international broadcasting easier and, with wider audiences, cheaper. An example of the effects of expansion on profits can be seen in, for example, Murdoch's News Corporation. Owing two-thirds of Australia's newspaper sales, papers in Hong Kong, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Chicago Boston and Texas (as well as 20th Century Fox); TV stations in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, Dallas, Houston and Boston; as well as the *Sunday Times*, *The Times*, the *Sun*, *News of the World*, *Today* and the TV Sky Channel, along with printing works, newsagents and booksellers, it is fast becoming a total monopoly in certain areas so that, as an article in the *Guardian* detailed, Murdoch's profits had doubled within the first quarter of the current trading year.

During 1984-85 Murdoch, with others including the *Daily Mirror*, launched and kept up a ruthless and systematic attack on the BBC to undermine public confidence and create a climate in which Mrs Thatcher could dismantle both the BBC and ITV, both of which are publicly accountable under the BBC Charter and the 1981 Broadcasting Act. Both are supposed to be free of influence by Government or by advertisers so as to protect their independence.

The other arm of attack was the advertising industry, notably Saatchi and Saatchi who had run the Tory election campaigns in 1979 and '83. Market Research "surveys" were held and uniformly produced results to show that the public wanted the BBC to make money by advertising. More independent surveys contradicted these "findings".

Since 1980 Right-wing opinions have flourished. The Adam Smith Institute, founded to promote Right-wing ideas, published its "Omega Report, Communications", in 1984. It wanted the BBC broken down into "independent and separately financed stations"; the IBA replaced by a body like the Federal Communications Commission in the USA, which merely allocates frequencies to avoid confusion; more liberal licensing laws, voluntary labour and freedom from "restrictive trade union

# FREETHINKER

and IBA practices". Similar arguments, along with abuse of the BBC were put by Paul Johnson, a noted Right-wing Catholic in *The Spectator*.

Between 1982 and '87 the Tory backbench kept up a continuous fire of criticism of the BBC, alleging Left-wing bias — as in its coverage of the Falklands War, the linking of some Tory MPs with fascist groups and "The Monocled Mutineer" drama series. The Government tried to get "Real Lives" banned but had to climb down. In 1986 Norman Tebbit alleged anti-Government bias in reportage of the American bombing of Libya; in 1987 the BBC was forced to cancel the programme about the Zircon spy satellite despite mounting condemnation of the Government's handling of the affair. In the same year its own 'D' Notice committee cleared "My Country Right or Wrong", but the Government forced the BBC to withdraw it.

Mrs Thatcher appointed *all* current BBC governors, so it is hardly surprising that they have failed to resist Government pressure — especially after the appointment of Marmaduke Hussey as Chairman from the Board of *The Times*, itself already associated with Murdoch's campaign to blacken the BBC. Milne was sacked within months of Hussey's appointment.

The Peacock Committee, set up by Leon Brittain in 1985, was packed with those who were part of the attack on public service broadcasting — Samuel Brittain (Leon's brother), Peter Jay, Peter Reynolds. Chairman of Rank Hovis which had given £20,000 to Tory Party funds, Judith Chalmers "an enthusiastic canvasser for the Conservatives" (*Sunday Times*), Anthony Quinton (Tory Peer), Alistair Hetherington and Professor of Media Studies at Stirling. There were no trade Union representatives. It was Alistair Hetherington who blew the gaff on the conduct of the committee by revealing that it had been called to voice what the Government wanted. Peacock himself wrote most of the Report and Brittain and Hetherington filled in the rest.

In fact the Report failed in its objective because the bulk of the evidence submitted contradicted the government case. It proposed that viewers should pay according to how much they watched, an idea that would penalise poorer viewers by restricting their access to a full range of programmes.

The effect of the Report on the BBC, with Milne, Wenham and Protheroe removed, was to hamper independent journalism and programme making. Local radio has undergone cuts; marketing criteria rather than quality now press on accountants; the BBC has been urged to restrict its output to "Arts Council" type programmes. The BBC Charter is due

# REVIEW

## New Fiction: the Christian Bible

NIGEL BRUCE

1988 has been designated Year of the Bible with a view to increasing public awareness of its message. Nigel Bruce reviews the Good Book as a completely new work, as indeed it will be to those who come across it for the first time.

George Younger, when asked recently to comment on the TV film, *Tumbledown*, re-enacting scenes from the Falklands war, said that it was best seen as fiction. The publishers of the Christian Bible do not commit themselves on whether they want to see the book as fiction, or as claiming historical truth. Like *Tumbledown*, it seems to be a mixture of history and imagination.

It may well be that the publishers see it as the "book of the film", although in this case it is the book of several films, including a number of tedious Hollywood epics. To be able to produce it at such a reasonable price, they must either anticipate very large sales or else the edition must be subsidised by unnamed vested interests. Given the length of the book, and its general lack of topical interest, the prospect of large sales seems rather remote.

The cover blurb tells us that the book brings us good news, but it is not immediately clear what this means. Faith and hope feature among the key themes, together with vague promises of rewards in heaven and grim threats of punishment in hell. There is no discussion of whether faith and hope are well grounded, or of whether heaven and hell do or do not exist.

We are told that the message is one of peace, which would certainly be good news. But in the later volume, described as the New Testament, the messenger of peace is brutally crucified; the earlier volume, described as the Old Testament, reports the successful military campaigns of a warlike tribe in the service of a warlike god.

The inordinate length of this book will undoubtedly deter a number of readers. The publishers say that the New Testament, which is the pearl of the oyster, could not stand on its own, but the justification for this appears to be on the conviction that in some mysterious way the events of the New Testament fulfil the romantic prophecies of the Old. It is clear that in some places the texts of the New Testament have been edited in order to reflect passages in the Old Testament and artificially to strengthen the links between the two.

The first half of the New Testament is the dramatised life story of a celibate Jewish preacher told by several different authors, none of whom knew him personally, but who adopt pseudonyms in order to

for renewal by 1996. Unless public opinion is alerted to the campaign to dismantle public service broadcasting, the chances of its survival are thin.

Up to the end of 1987 only a quarter of a million households had been connected to cable — the Cable and Broadcasting Act had been passed in 1984 — but the Cable Authority, under that Act, has no obligation to provide public service broadcasting, so already market forces are well in operation. Similarly with Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS) where Murdoch owns twenty per cent of the franchise, public accountability has been rejected here too by the Government. The pressure to judge success by ratings rather than by quality is thus increased on the BBC. In Italy and the USA, where policies like those of Mrs Thatcher's are already in operation, the lack of quality is the outstanding characteristic of the bulk of broadcasting.

What is to be done? The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom makes clear in this pamphlet that "increasing market forces and reducing public control are the cornerstone of Government thinking" and therefore recommends, as a counter, that: (1) the license fee be retained to fund the media; (2) a Media Enterprise Board be set up to fund and support independent and community initiatives in the media, through a levy on all media advertising; (3) legislation should be enacted to prevent powerful owners cornering print, TV, cable and satellite publishing, and to limit cross-ownership of TV, radio and newspaper interests; (4) both the Charter and 1981 Broadcasting Act should be rewritten to make both the BBC and ITV more publicly accountable, e.g. that Boards of Governors should be democratically elected; that access to broadcasting media by communities should be made easier, and that equal opportunities for men and women of all backgrounds should be strengthened; (5) British Telecom should be publicly owned alongside radio, cable and satellite services to ensure fairness and high standards.

The arguments of the pamphlet have been set out as fully as space permits in a review. We all have our various gripes about TV and radio and about the quality and frequency of the programmes that most get under our skins, but the fact remains that a system so potentially powerful for good or evil must demand the full attention of its viewers and listeners if it is not to fall into the hands of those who want to exercise their greed at the expense of us all or, more sinisterly, to shape our political future in undemocratic directions.

MICHAEL DUANE

suggest to the unwary that they did. The idea of allowing four different authors to relate the story in their own way is an interesting one that presents a challenge to the reader; but it does tend to emphasise the fictional at the expense of the historical. The life-stories are followed by a long chapter describing the eventful period after the death of the preacher and by a series of rambling letters urging their readers to have faith and hope, claiming that the preacher was actually the Son of God and that one day he will return to judge us all. This would be a frightening prospect if there were good reasons for believing it, but fortunately there are not.

This book contains too much horror and violence to make good bedside reading, although the publishers recommend it as such. It may, however, be a useful addition to your library because it is a rich source of quotations. Most of the good quotations come from the first half of the New Testament, so for this purpose a better buy would be *The Four Gospels* in the Penguin Classics series.

## The Lord of Irony

DAVID BERMAN

That Edward Gibbon is a hero of freethought is indisputable. Even Sir Leslie Stephen, not noted for his generosity to eighteenth-century infidels, testifies to his heroic accomplishment: "Gibbon struck . . . by far the heaviest blow which it [Christianity] had yet received from any single hand".<sup>1</sup> It is also indisputable that the blow was struck in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and that it involved naturalising the origins and rise of Christianity.

Yet there is also disagreement. For Lord Byron, Gibbon had

. . . shaped his weapon with an edge severe,  
Sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer;  
The lord of irony. . . (Childe Harold III.cvii)

For Leslie Stephen, however, irony constrained and shackled him: "Gibbon's argument is indeed trammelled by the necessity imposed upon him of substituting covert sneers for distinct assertion. . ." (p. 381). Yet according to J. M. Robertson, "everybody saw what Gibbon was driving at. . ."; he was "the openly ironical historian. . .", "wearing the light armour of irony".<sup>2</sup> Where both scholars seem to agree is in depreciating Gibbon's irony.

My sympathies here are with Byron as against Stephen and Robertson, whose moralistic attitude to truth-speaking interfered, in my opinion, with their own scholarly objectivity. Robertson's concern to minimise the extent of Gibbon's irony is evident in his long essay on Gibbon, reprinted in *Pioneer Humanists* (1907): "Had he been free to state his case straightforwardly and seriously, his more

favourable estimates [of Christianity] might have stood free of the suspicion of irony that now attaches to every laudatory passage in the two chapters" (p. 319). Yet this assertion seems in conflict with Robertson's claim (quoted above) that "Everyone saw what Gibbon was driving at", that he was "openly ironical". No, Gibbon's irony is neither superficial nor dispensable; nor can his irreligious message be easily detached from its ironic medium.

Conversely, those who fail to distinguish what Gibbon literally says from what he insinuates, or says ironically, are liable to read too much into his words. Stephen does this, I think, in his gloss on Gibbon's account of his youthful conversion to Roman Catholicism:

The study of Middleton forced upon him the dilemma that either miraculous powers must have continued in the Church for the first four or five centuries, during which the leading doctrines of Popery had clearly been introduced, or that they had never existed.  
(p. 378, my italics)

Yet Gibbon's posthumous *Memoirs* offers no evidence, as far as I can see, that the young Gibbon drew the latter inference. Middleton's "elegance of style and Freedom of argument", he writes, were "repelled by a shield of prejudice . . . I still revered the . . . saints. . . ;

nor could he destroy my implicit belief, that the gift of miraculous powers was continued in the church, during the first four or five centuries of christianity."

I can see no reason to doubt Gibbon's sincerity here; neither can I see any reason to believe that during this critical phase he seriously considered even the possibility that there were no miracles. It is worth pointing this out, I feel, if only because the same sin of commission is committed by Patricia Craddock in her recent *Young Edward Gibbon* (1982):

For young Gibbon, Middleton's attack on primitive miracles proved far more than it was meant to prove: either all miracles are false, or all were true, and it had the paradoxical effect of convincing the young reader not of the falsity of miracles, but of the truth of the Church confirmed by them. (p. 50, my italics)

Stephen and Craddock have, I take it, projected irony into Gibbon's autobiographical account, because they have anachronistically read it in the light of his truly insinuating and formidable argument against miracles in the *Decline and Fall*. The argument deserves to be quoted at length:

. . . since every friend to revelation is persuaded of the reality, and every reasonable man is convinced of the cessation, of miraculous powers, it is evident that there must have been some period in which they were either suddenly or gradually withdrawn from the Christian church. Whatever era is chosen for that purpose, the death of the apostles, the conversion of the Roman empire, or the extinction of the Arian

heresy, the insensibility of the Christians who lived at that time will equally afford a just matter of surprise. . . . The recent experience of genuine miracles should have instructed the Christian world in the ways of Providence, and habituated their eye (if we may use a very inadequate expression) to the style of the divine artist. Should the most skilful painter of modern Italy presume to decorate his feeble imitations with the name of Raphael or of Correggio, the insolent fraud would be soon discovered, and indignantly rejected.

(1848 ed, vol 2, pp. 102-3)

Gibbon's ironic argument may be reformulated as follows: (1) The Christian miracles must have ceased at some time. (2) Yet if there was a period of genuine miracles, then it should have given the lie to the

bogus miracles of the next period. (3) But since the early Christians did not make this distinction, it follows that there was no initial period of miracles; hence all putative Christian miracles were "feeble imitations" of the "divine artist".

## NOTES

1. *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1962 reprint), p. 380.
2. *Gibbon on Christianity*. Thinker's Library, No 11, (1936), pp. xx-xxi.
3. *Miscellaneous Works of Gibbon* (1814), vol 1, p. 61. For a later reference to Middleton's critique of miracles, see vol 5, p. 463.

# The Catholic Christening

LESLIE SCRASE

We had never been to a Catholic christening before. At five feet one-and-a-half inches Wendy wanted to be close enough to see well. As a mere guest I wanted to hide at the back. So we compromised and sat half-way forward or half-way back, depending on your point of view.

Father Bumble appeared looking very nice in his white cassock. He walked down the aisle more or less to where we were sitting and in his best Irish said to all and sundry: "Would yous all move forward for I'm not going to shout".

He returned to the front of the church and nobody else moved.

"Well", he said, "with so many of yous there isn't really room at the front".

He took a little wander and had a brainwave: "I'll use the microphone".

Then into the mike: "I said, 'I'll use the microphone'. Perhaps" (aside) . . . "Perhaps (into the mike) I'll move the microphone a little closer".

There was a moment or two of confusion as he got himself into a tangle with the cable and was extricated by a number of willing members of the congregation.

"We are here today to christen two little children. This one is . . . er . . . by the way which is Mr Rudge?"

Mr Rudge exposed himself.

"Splendid. Now. This little child is Helen — Helen Rudge. And this little child is David — David er . . . David er . . . Bohun. So first of all we'd like to bid them welcome wouldn't we. Er . . . 'Welcome'.

"Now I tink we are ready to begin. This little bit of the service has to do with original sin".

But we original sinners were not paying attention so we let it pass without so much as a "Good heavens you don't still believe that stuff do you?"

And so in due course we came to another little bit of the service.

"Now this little bit has to do with the oil of

chrism. No. Not the oil of chrism. That comes later. This is the oil of . . . er . . . of . . . er . . . something else".

And this brought us in due course to the godparents.

"Now the parents will bring up their little children in the Catholic faith and the Church will help them. And so we have good Catholic godparents to represent the Church and to help the parents".

A wife hauled her good Catholic godparent off the pillar on which he had been leaning to a position beside herself.

"Do you renounce the devil and all his works? We do. No. You say that, I don't. Do you renounce the devil and all his works?"

Was there a faint murmur in the pause that followed? Father Bumble seemed satisfied and added his own "We do" for good measure. Once he had dealt with the godparents we came to the christening proper and to a little homily:

"The child is baptised with water as Jesus was baptised with water. So the child is united with Jesus by the water and Jesus is united with God his heavenly father and Jesus is his son and because we are united with Jesus we are united with God as well. (Well, not 'as well': that's theologically unsound.) But we are God's sons through baptism and this union is through the Spirit because the Spirit came down on Jesus at his baptism and so he comes to the little children who are baptised sons of God — and daughters of course — and the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father so the Father is united through the Spirit and we are united with the Father and the Son through the Spirit. Of course these little children don't understand any of this. In fact the whole thing is meaningless without faith and that is why we have confirmation but — well — now let's christen them with the water".

So the children were duly christened and made no complaint. But then Father Bumble was a pleasant

sort of man — too bad that he would never be a father.

"There. That's done and we can all go . . . oh . . . I nearly forgot. We come now to the oil of chrism. You'll notice that the first few letters of chrism are the same as the first few letters of Christ. Yes? Well. We mark the children with the oil of chrism".

But apparently we do not explain the significance of the letters being the same — or Father Bumble didn't anyway. Instead he brought the proceedings to an end by saying: "Now let's have a little prayer. Let's ask the saints to pray for us and especially our favourite saints: David and John? Peter? Yes Peter — and Matthew and, and Paul. Any advance on Paul?"

No. I do him an injustice. He didn't say "any advance on". It just began to seem like that as the names came rattling out. And then, for the second time in this service, he became aware of a terrible omission.

"Oh yes, of course, and Helen and er, er, and Mary and, and, *all* the saints. By the way usually at these little services I begin by saying that with so many children present there is bound to be a bit of noise but nobody need worry. I forgot to say it today. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all".

He started to walk away and then turned: "But it didn't matter did it. None of the children made much noise today".

And with that it was all over and we came away. I had been rather comforted by the admission that "in fact the whole thing is meaningless without faith". Or did he say "fate"? It certainly sounded like "fate".

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**The SDP conference at Torquay rejected a motion, proposed by one of the party's vice-presidents, calling for the deregulation of Sunday trading. Delegates voted in favour of an amendment declaring that Sunday should be a day for "rest, family life and worship".**

### **THE FREETHINKER**

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## **Masonic Crooks Expelled**

The United Grand Lodge has expelled seven Freemasons who were found guilty by the courts of serious crimes. Between them they had been convicted of arson, corruption, obtaining property by deception and sexual offences against teenage boys. One of them had absconded with Lodge funds.

Several other convicted criminals now face expulsion from the movement whose members are "men concerned with moral and spiritual values". They were sent to prison for their involvement in a £3 million bullion robbery carried out in 1980. One of them had been appointed worshipful master of a north London lodge. Members included eight police officers — one of them a detective chief inspector — from the Metropolitan Police robbery squad. The name of the lodge's worshipful master appeared on Scotland Yard's list of "top hundred" armed robbers.

The masonic Grand Secretary declared that rules for discipline in the movement had always been there. But the number of expulsions in recent months exceeded the total for the previous 28 years.

## **Family Life in Germany**

Dr John Hamilton, medical director of Broadmoor special hospital, told the annual conference of the British Association for the Advancement of Science that the strict discipline imposed by German parents was a factor in the extermination of millions of Jews and others during the second world war.

He said that in the early decades of the century, Germans were encouraged to exercise total authority over children from their earliest years. The ideal children were "well-behaved, undemanding, grateful and, above all, meek. . .

"They were trained to be obedient so successfully and at such an early age, that the training never lost its effectiveness. To the end of their lives they carried out the orders they were given without question.

"When someone like Hitler claimed, just like father, to know exactly what was good, right, and necessary for everyone, it is not surprising that so many people who were longing for someone to tell them what to do, welcomed him with open arms".

### **ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY**

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# LETTERS

## IN NEED OF PROTECTION

Elsie Karbacz's self-righteous attack (Letters, September) on my article (August) is amazing, considering that she admits to knowing nothing about the subject under discussion and is suspicious of anyone who does. She would be well advised to research the issue and update herself on recent developments in medical science, of which she missed the whole point. Schizophrenia, from which I believe my husband suffered, has been diagnosed as a genetic problem.

Of course anyone has the right to think and act as he or she pleases (within the law). But for the schizophrenic, free thinking, acting and decision making are, as I understand it, sadly impaired by malfunction of the brain and central nervous system. Protection is therefore neither "insulting" nor "paternalistic"; it is quite simply humane, and the protector should be the specialist medical consultant.

The boy J.C.M. I referred to in my article has since tried to commit suicide.

If Elsie Karbacz wishes to quote Voltaire, how about "Men who believe absurdities will commit atrocities"?

IRENE FEARN

## FOREWARNED

In reply to Elsie Karbacz, I would say that we do not advocate the stake or the rope for dictatorial high priests of cults. However, it should be acknowledged that young people — indeed most people — are unaware that mind-control techniques can convince one of the "truth" of just about anything. Teenagers should be warned of this in the general sense, so that they can exercise their critical faculties when confronted by those intent on exploiting the easily deluded.

VIVIENE GIBSON

Bishop John Magee has revealed that the Vatican lied when it announced that he discovered Pope John I dead in bed. In an interview, published in the Catholic monthly, 30 Days, Bishop Magee, who was John Paul I's private secretary, said the Pope's body was found by a nun, Sister Vincenza, who is now dead. The then Secretary of State, Cardinal Villot, ordered that the untrue version of events be issued. The circumstances of John Paul I's death ten years ago prompted considerable speculation, including claims that he was murdered.

Before jumping from the eleventh floor of a building in central London, 26-year-old William Robbins balanced on a railing for over an hour chanting "God give me strength". An inquest heard that he told a policeman: "If I die today I will rise up and be the second Christ".

Roman Catholic leaders have urged the faithful to boycott Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The Labour controlled Glasgow District Council has gone the whole hog and banned it from local cinemas.

# EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** Annual Dinner at Langfords Hotel, Third Avenue, Hove, Saturday, 19 November, 6.30 pm for 7 pm. Tickets £9.50. Bookings: Joan Wimble, Flat 5, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, Sussex, telephone Brighton 733215.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 6 November, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Richard Brown: South Africa Today.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group.** Programme for Forum meetings for 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 041-942 0129.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Monday, 7 November, 7.30 pm. Colin Sampbell: Humanism — the Next 25 Years.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 27 October, 7.45 pm. Ken Sillitoe: God and Ideology.

**London Student Sceptics.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on alternate Mondays at 7.30 pm, commencing 17 October. Details: Mike Howgate, telephone 01-882 2606.

**National Secular Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Saturday, 12 November, 2.15 pm. Annual General Meeting. Members only. Admission by current membership card.

**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, 9 November, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Philip Seagar: Care in the Community.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 17 October, 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.

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

Newspaper reports are always required by **The Freethinker**. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, **The Freethinker**, 14 Coundon Road, Coventry, West Midlands, CV1 4AW.

# Joan Miller: a Great Actress and Freethinker

The actress Joan Miller, who died at her Oxfordshire home on 31 August, was an outstanding talent in the post-war British theatre. But, as one obituary writer declared, the fact that she "never achieved the eminence to which her talents entitled her is one of the astonishments of the 20th-century theatre".

Two factors militated against Joan Miller's career in the theatre. First, for more than half her lifetime she suffered a painful illness, which, in later years, made stage work impossible. Secondly, while at the height of her powers she incurred the displeasure of Hugh Beaumont, the malevolent head of H. M. Tennant Ltd, a company which controlled much of the commercial theatre in the 'forties and 'fifties.

After winning the Best Actress Award at the 1934 Dominion Drama Festival, Joan Miller left her native Canada. She made her first London appearance at His Majesty's Theatre, walking on and understudying Lady Tree as Mistress Quickly in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. This was followed by many appearances on the small screen in the early days of television. During the war years, she played over three hundred radio parts.

It was after the war that Joan Miller really came into her own, giving memorable performances in plays by Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw. This was still the era of stage censorship, when plays were subject to the whims of the Lord Chamberlain. More adventurous performers and directors like Peter Cotes — to whom Joan Miller was married for forty years — were compelled to transform their theatres into clubs in order to present controversial works. It was in such clubs that she made a powerful impact in plays like *Pick-up Girl* (granted a licence after being seen by Queen Mary), *The Children's Hour* and *A Pin to*

*See the Peepshow*.

There was much praise for Joan Miller's portrayal of the Queen in *Cymbeline* at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1957. During the same season, in a company that included Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud, she played Portia in *Julius Caesar* and Constance in *King John*. Her last London appearance was in the Rodney Ackland adaptation of Hugh Walpole's *The Old Ladies*, at the Westminster Theatre.

Liberal minded and socially conscious, Joan Miller supported many good causes. For some years she was a vice-president of the animal welfare organisation, Beauty Without Cruelty. Like her husband — a regular contributor to *The Freethinker* — she was a resolute defender of "the best of causes". From her pen came a warm message of congratulation to the National Secular Society on the occasion of its centenary (1966). She signed a statement against blasphemy law which was published a few months after the *Gay News* blasphemy trial. Together with Richard Ainley and Harold Pinter, she gave a public reading of David Tribe's *Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare* to mark the quarter-centenary of Shakespeare's birth.

Offstage, the distinguished actress was the most companionable of people. Although never completely well — indeed usually in pain and discomfort — she always extended a gracious welcome to visitors. An immensely interesting conversationalist, she was also, unlike many lesser lights in her profession, a ready listener and unfailingly responsive to the concerns of others.

Cremation took place privately. There will be a memorial meeting in London.

## Programme Makers in Battle to Defend Television Standards

With Prince Charles adding his voice to that of Mary Whitehouse and most of the religious press in demanding bland and uncontroversial television, a group of programme makers have launched a new organisation known as the Campaign for Quality Television. Headed by Stuart Prebble, editor of *World in Action* (Granada), and drawn from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, they are concerned over a fall in standards which will result if the present system is replaced by a deregulated one.

In an open letter to the Prime Minister, the programme makers remind Mrs Thatcher that she described British Television as "really rather special". Giving their reasons for concern about the Government's proposals for the future of the system, they express fear that these will lead to more tele-

vision channels but a narrowing of real choice of programmes for viewers; a serious reduction in the ability of British television to produce high quality drama, arts, documentaries, current affairs, religious and children's programmes; a fall in wider programme standards and a significant increase in the amount of low quality imported programmes; the demise of centres of television excellence outside London.

Signatories to the letter include Roger Bolton, head of Network Factual Programmes (Thames), Karen Brown, editor of *Dispatches* (Channel 4), Sue Cook, presenter of *Crimewatch* (BBC), Paul Hamaan, producer of *Fourteen Days in May* (BBC) and John Willis, Controller, Factual Programmes (Channel 4).