

# The Freethinker

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## NATION'S SCHOOLS FACE INCREASED RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION

"The new Education Reform Act has strengthened the legal stranglehold of religion on education to a degree that puts the parliamentary clock back to 1870", declared Barbara Smoker in her presidential address to the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society, at Conway Hall, London. She also spoke about the major setbacks suffered by secularism in other recent legislation and current Government plans, but saw a ray of hope in their implementation difficulties.

Miss Smoker said the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act were themselves objectionable, making the provision of religious teaching and a daily act of collective worship compulsory in maintained schools.

"But at least no particular religion or particular deity was specified", she added.

"In the past few decades, the tendency in our county schools has been to broaden religious education and the daily worship by removing the undue emphasis on Christianity and by including not only a range of other religions but occasionally also the alternative to all religions — non-belief — and often concentrating more on social issues than on doctrine.

Now that the predominance of Christianity has been written into our education law, most educationists and teachers are concerned about how they are to implement it. Their concern, however, is one ray of hope for reason.

"Since few teachers are willing to squeeze out comparative religion in favour of Christianity, it is likely that they will interpret 'mainly' as meaning a bare 51 per cent, and will otherwise sabotage the intentions of the fanatics in Parliament who captured this Act for their own sectarian purposes, aided and abetted by the spinelessness of most of their colleagues.

"The statutory provision for separate RE lessons and separate assemblies for children from Muslim or Sikh or other non-Christian backgrounds was introduced as a concession, but in fact it only makes the situation worse: separate sectarian lessons and assemblies would be most divisive. The original intention behind the collective religious assembly was to inculcate a sense of social cohesion; separate assemblies for each cultural and religious community can only have the opposite effect.

"Let us hope that most head-teachers will now inform parents that they have a statutory right to 'opt out' their children from both RE and the act of worship, and will make adequate provision for any children opted out. We might also suggest that they hand to every child a simple opting-out form that would merely require a parental signature.

"Ironically enough, in the USA, where religious teaching and worship are not only not compulsory but are actually barred by the Constitution from non-denominational schools, the people are many times more committed to religious belief and practice than in this country, in spite of (or because of?) our compulsory school religion".

Barbara Smoker spoke of her experience a few days previously when she addressed about 150 sixth-formers in a debate with an evangelical pastor on the existence of God.

"Before the debate opened, a vote was taken from the students as to whether they believed in God; roughly one-third did, one-third did not, and one-third 'didn't know'. And that was after eleven years of compulsory religious teaching, during which the atheist view had never been presented in the school!

"After my allotted eight minutes for the atheist case, followed by eight minutes of my opponent and

(continued inside back page)

# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## SECTS MANIA

Those secularists and freethinkers who were probably the first and certainly the most outspoken critics of harmful religious sects which came to Britain in the 1960s and '70s were frequently accused of being intolerant and alarmist. (More recently the racist slur has been added, as the president of the National Secular Society discovered last year when she opposed public funding of a segregated school run by the ultra-orthodox Jewish Hassidic sect.) Groups like the Divine Light Mission, Children of God and the Moonies were generally dismissed as misguided followers of some religious eccentric who thought he was the Messiah. It was even claimed that involvement with such outfits was beneficial to inadequate and deprived members of society.

Occasionally a scandal would hit the headlines with reports of studies being discontinued, careers abandoned and families deserted by mesmerised converts. Through exploitation of their deluded followers by using them as beggars and unpaid labour, plus the advantage of being registered as a religious charity, charlatans developed small groups into multi-million pound business empires.

Gradually there was a public realisation that far from being harmless cranks presided over by benevolent and caring father figures, the sects' primary aim was fostering religious fanaticism, blind obedience and total dependency. Some of them also went in for Right-wing politics and bogus science.

But it was worldwide publicity, following the gruesome ritual of mass suicide and murder at a religious commune in Guyana in 1978, that alerted millions to the potential for disaster when people replace rational thought with blind faith in the teachings of a religious maniac like the Rev Jim Jones. Over nine hundred men, women and children who died in the People's Temple massacre were remembered last month at ceremonies on the tenth anniversary of the tragedy. Relatives and friends visited a mass grave at Oakland, California, where 409 victims — including 27 members of one family — are buried.

The Rev Jim Jones established his People's Temple at Ukiah, California, later transferring it to San Francisco. He was a magnetic character who attracted the powerful as well as the poor. One of his strongest supporters was the Speaker in the California State Assembly, and the Mayor of San Francisco appointed Jones chairman of the city's housing committee. The clergyman's powerful influence with the State courts signed the death warrants of dozens of children. The legal authorities put them into the custody of the People's Temple.



# AND NOTES

and together with other children whose parents had made Jones their legal guardian, were the first to be given the lethal concoction of grape juice and cyanide.

The People's Temple moved to a jungle area of Guyana in 1977. It was described by Jones as "the Promised Land", but defectors and survivors said it was a prison. Jones conducted extensive brainwashing and spying operations, exercising total control over the lives of everyone in the commune.

The massacre on 18 November 1978 was not a sudden explosion of homicidal mania. For many weeks previously there had been "suicide drills" and news of what was happening in Jonestown, as the commune was known, had reached Washington. In fact one House of Representatives member, Leo Ryan, was so concerned that he decided to investigate. After visiting Jonestown, he and four members of his party were assassinated by a People's Temple hit squad as they prepared to board a plane at Port Kaituma.

Since the Jonestown massacre many serious questions have been raised but they remain unanswered. Allegations about CIA involvement in the People's Temple operation have been made in two court cases. The first was dismissed on technical grounds; on the second occasion the judge would not permit the jury to hear testimony on the subject. All attempts to persuade the United States Government to hold a full investigation have been thwarted. An inquiry held eight years ago by the House Select Committee on Intelligence ruled that there was no evidence to suggest that the CIA "knew anything about the Jonestown tragedy before it occurred or that the agency had any connection with Jim Jones or the People's Temple". Many people find it hard to believe that the CIA was completely ignorant of a situation known to Congressman Ryan and his colleagues.

Washington's determination to prevent a full investigation into the People's Temple and its leader has caused much speculation. It has been suggested that Jonestown was an experimental colony and that Jones was employed by the CIA to monitor mind-control experiments. Some private investigators believe that a large proportion of the victims did not commit suicide but were murdered. Jones died from a gunshot wound, but whether he was killed or committed suicide is, like much of the People's Temple tragedy, still a mystery ten years after the event.

Such speculation will be dismissed as fanatical ravings by the CIA's critics. Maybe so; on the other hand, how many people now believe that President

Kennedy was killed by a shot from a gun fired by Lee Harvey Oswald?

Despite past exposures and tragedies, baleful religious sects continue to thrive. In Britain, Thatcherism has provided them with another source of recruitment. Under cost-cutting schemes and the whittling away of the social services, homes for mentally confused and unstable people are being closed. The residents are "returning to the community", a Government euphemism for turning them into the street where they are easy prey for unscrupulous tricksters peddling the cure-all remedies of hokum religion.

## NOT SEEING IS BELIEVING

Just over three years ago the faithful in Ireland and further afield were all agog over reports that a statue of the Virgin Mary was on the move. Crowds flocked to a grotto outside the County Cork village of Ballinspittle, and as darkness fell each evening there were wishful-thinking "Ohs" and "Ahs" at imagined sightings of movement. But Ballinspittle's fame and prosperity were short-lived. The pilgrims became fewer, and no doubt Church leaders were glad they had resisted any temptation to endorse the visionaries' fanciful claims.

These kind thoughts came to mind while reading an advertisement for "the leading pilgrimage operator", Mancunia Travel Limited, a firm which specialises in transporting the pious in pursuit of the phoney. Operating from London, Manchester and Glasgow, Mancunia Travel Limited offers a tempting programme of tours around the international shrine circuit.

Of course there is a price to be paid for a visit to Poland's national shrine at Czestochowa (£409) or to Guadalupe (£893). By comparison, Medjurgo and Lourdes are a snip at £277 and £180 respectively. Trips to Avilia and Lisieux (£389), Fatima (£382) and the shrines of France (£317) are also arranged.

Unfortunately *Freethinker* readers will be unable to benefit from early booking concessions, as the offer closed on 30 November.

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After a series of setbacks, including imprisonment of leading members for crimes such as murder, conspiracy, forgery and attempting to poison water supplies, American Fascists and white supremacists are reorganising. They are being led by the Rev Richard Butler, head of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. He is organising a conference of racists in April, and one of the main groups involved is called Christian Identity. Churches in the United States enjoy tax advantages, so inevitably public money will be funding the criminal activities of Christian racists.

## JUDGE ON TRIAL

One of this year's unedifying spectacles was that of Britain's Lord Chancellor being ordered to explain himself to the theological Mafia that rules the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Lord Mackay found himself in the role of a naughty schoolboy called to the headmaster's study for smoking behind the bicycle shed. But the Lord Chancellor's misdemeanour was that he had attended a Requiem Mass for Lord Wheatley, who was both a distinguished judge and an old friend.

The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland has been described as a splinter from a splinter, having broken away from the Free Church of Scotland which itself had seceded from the Church of Scotland. Its adherents are, even by Scottish Presbyterian standards, extremely fundamentalist and intolerant. Their chief characteristic is a loathing of all things Roman Catholic.

The "trial" of Lord Mackay and his suspension as an elder for six months has been strongly attacked by the Church of Scotland. The editor of its official journal, *Life and Work*, described the Free Presbyterians' behaviour as "worse than an absurdity. It damages the Reformed Protestant cause it professes to serve".

It is worth noting that until 1974 the office of Lord Chancellor was barred to Roman Catholics, however eminent.

## RELIGIOUS DEATH THREATS

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Satanic Verses*, which failed to win the Booker Prize, has been awarded the 1988 Whitbread Prize for Fiction. But the prize-winning author has been threatened by Islamic fanatics who have declared "holy war" on his book. *Satanic Verses* has been banned in a number of countries, including India, South Africa and Egypt.

Mr Rushdie's invitation to deliver a lecture in South Africa was withdrawn when the *Weekly Mail* newspaper, which was sponsoring his visit, received bomb threats. The invitation was backed by the Congress of South African Writers, a group of radical authors who support the United Democratic Front.

Nadine Gordimer, a patron of the organisation, said: "We have suffered all sorts of harassment and insulting accusations from extremists in the Muslim community". They had no alternative but to advise the *Weekly Mail* to withdraw the invitation as Mr Rushdie's safety could not be guaranteed.

The anti-apartheid *Weekly Mail* has also been banned for four weeks by the South African Government. The title of the cancelled lecture was "Wherever They Burn Books, They Also Burn People".

The anti-Rushdie campaign in Britain has been organised by the inappropriately named Society for the Promotion of Religious Tolerance. Following a number of death threats, the author has been forced to employ a full-time bodyguard at his London home. Bookshops have been threatened with arson if they stock the book, and a reading in Cambridge was cancelled after a bomb warning.

In the novel's dream sequence, Salman Rushdie refers to Mecca as Jahilia, "the Place of Ignorance".

## Freethinker Fund

Someone is going to find a nice little gift in his Christmas stocking. A London man who died in April has left his entire estate (worth £250,000) to Pope John Paul II.

As 1988 draws to a close, we make this year's final appeal for financial support. It would be unrealistic to expect that the papal windfall will be matched. Freethinkers do not believe in miracles, but on this occasion it would be nice to be proved wrong.

Our thanks go to all who have supported the Fund, including the latest list of supporters which is given below.

C. Bennison, M. Crewe, M. D. Hallett, H. Hilton, R. G. Hooper, G. Horner and R. Wilkes, £1 each; P. J. Danning, £1.50; C. Bondi, F. Coubrough, M. P. Darley, R. M. Kashere, M. G. McIver, O. J. Scott, A. Turner, B. C. Whiting and J. Wimble, £2 each; C. A. G. Bearpark and S. Jones, £2.40 each; B. E. Clark, A. Joiner, D. Redhead, W. A. Stuart and K. Williams, £3 each; E. C. Hughes, £4; J. G. Gerrard, £4.60; J. A. Ainsworth, J. Barr, J. R. Bond, B. Clarke, J. Dobbin, M. Duane, J. L. Greenhalgh, E. Henderson, J. Holland, D. Jeckells, J. Laverty, R. T. Savage, M. Schofield, C. J. Simmonds, R. Sinclair and C. M. G. Wilson, £5 each; A. V. Peries, £7.50; J. H. Charles, L. T. Ong, A. J. Rawlings, J. E. Saward and W. Steinhart, £10 each; R. J. Condon, £20; W. Scott, £45.

Total for October: £257.40.

Mrs Lina Karabashi, a young woman who claims that she has been seeing visions of the Virgin Mary, is causing serious problems for the Jordanian Government. Tens of thousands of pilgrims turned up at her house in Amman, arriving in coaches and cars as well as on foot. They included many Muslims who also believe in the virgin birth. Mrs Karabashi sits near a portrait of the Virgin Mary. Her claims are supported by the parish priest. The Government has tried to curb the outbreak of religious fervour by banishing the visionary and her husband to lodgings fifty miles from the capital.



# The Man Who Invented Christmas

KARL HEATH

Was the Nativity tacked onto the Winter Solstice so that Christians might not appear to be killjoys at a festive time? Here are a few details.

Christmas was invented in 1278 AUC. We would call it 525 AD but no-one had ever heard of "Anno Domini" until that time. Indeed, it was not until many centuries later that the custom of dating the Christian era from Christ's alleged birth-year began. It is strange that today there should be a world-wide acceptance of 1988, not only in Christian countries, but among Islamics, Hindus, Buddhists and Marxists. The more so, because all Christian scholars acknowledge the date to be wrong.

Eras are dated from the supposed time of an event. Jews and Byzantines dated their calendars from the creation of the world. Islam dates it from Hegira. The Romans dated their calendar from the legendary foundation of the city by Romulus — AUC ("ab urbe condita"), or in Christian reckoning 753 BC. In 476 AD the Western Roman Empire fell and, soon afterwards, Rome became the centre of an Ostro-Goth Kingdom under Theodoric, enjoying, for a time, relative peace and prosperity. In 525 AD one of its citizens, a theologian and mathematician, Dionysius Exiguus, calculated that Jesus was born in 753 AUC. Christian scholars no longer believe this, partly because of St Matthew's Gospel story of the Flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's "Massacre of the Innocents". King Herod died in 4 BC.

But Dionysius was not content with naming the year; he chose the birthday, 25 December. Even if this choice had been based upon any evidence it would have been three days wrong by the time of Dionysius. In his time, and for a thousand more years, Europe used the Julian calendar, based upon a year of 365 days and six hours. This was nearly fifteen minutes too long, an error not corrected until the Gregorian calendar of the sixteenth century. In any case, the choice of Dionysius was purely arbitrary, if not political. There is a suggestion that in 354 AD some Roman Christians celebrated the Nativity on 25 December, but, if so, they may simply have been following a custom established in Rome from 274 AD when the Emperor Aurelian, anxious to replace Roman polytheism with Sun-worship, declared 25 December to be the Sun's official birthday.

Apart from this, the early Christians, for the first five centuries after Christ, had never heard of Christmas, but this did not prevent them from taking part in the pagan festivities of the season for the simple reason that this was what almost everyone else was doing. There was, however, a minority of

stricter, more austere Christians, who opposed the celebration of what was later to become Christmas. Indeed, after the Reformation, a thousand years after the first celebration of Christmas, similar restrictions were imposed in Scotland and in the New England states of America until the nineteenth century.

The reason why the early Christians never celebrated the birth of Christ for the first five hundred years was that no-one knew, or even pretended to know, the day, month or even the year of that event.

The last two weeks of December, however, had been a time of celebration throughout the Ancient World in the Northern Hemisphere long before Jesus. The Winter Solstice, the shortest day, meant that, thereafter, one could look forward to the Spring, to crops, regeneration and new life. For several days after 17 December the Romans celebrated Saturnalia, hanging greenery such as laurel leaves, lighting candles and exchanging presents. On one day the masters waited upon their slaves, a custom still preserved in the British Army where officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner to the other ranks. The Romans also made New Year resolutions and said "Jupiter bless you" when someone sneezed.

Like Christmas, Saturnalia was a Season of Goodwill. Saturn had been the god of the long-lost Golden Age. The Romans credited their legendary King Numa Pompilius with instituting the festival seven centuries before Christ. He was the successor to Romulus and was regarded as a re-incarnation of Saturn because of the wisdom and benevolence of his reign.

In the third century AD there was great rivalry between Christianity and Mithraism, especially for the allegiance of the Imperial Roman soldiers, upon whose support the Roman Emperors depended. In December, the Mithraic soldiers celebrated the triumph of Good over Evil, and the Christians could not afford to appear killjoys at this joyful time. Early in the fourth century Constantine decided in favour of Christianity as the official religion.

If the early Christians ever thought about the birth of Jesus they would probably have followed the Eastern association of the Nativity with the Feast of Epiphany. In which case they would have chosen 6 January. Epiphany means manifestation, and was associated variously with three events.

First, the manifestation of Christ's divinity. After Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist, God the Father's voice from heaven declares him to be his son.

Second, the manifestation of supernatural power. The first miracle, at the Cana wedding feast, is celebrated on a carved wooden panel in a South



London off-license: "It was a miracle divine which changed the water into wine, God save us from the ways of men who want to change it back again".

Third, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The Adoration of the Magi (the Three Wise Men being the first non-Jews to see Jesus).

It was the third of these, most closely related to the birth of Jesus, which linked the event to 6 January. In "The Cherry Tree Carol" the unborn baby Jesus, speaking from the womb, tells the frightened Joseph:

"The sixth day of Januar my birthday will be,  
When the Stars in the Elements will tremble with  
Glee".

Since the time of Dionysius a great variety of elements, other than the Nativity, have contributed to the Christmas festival. Some early carols were adapted from pagan folk-songs. The Christmas Tree came from mediaeval Germany. Yule and the log came from an Icelandic heathen rite. Holly and mistletoe came from the Druids. The English contributed foods such as the boar's head and the goose. The Americans, whose Thanksgiving turkey replaced the Christmas goose, also contributed Santa Claus, a corruption of St Nicholas, a fourth century Bishop who became the Patron Saint of children, sailors and, later, pawnbrokers. He may have been brought, in the seventeenth century, by the Dutch to their colony of New Amsterdam, later New York. He certainly appears among the Moravians from Bohemia who settled in Pennsylvania in 1740 and reinforced the Nativity tradition by founding towns called Bethlehem and Nazareth. We know that by 1809 Santa Claus was established in New York because Washington Irving, under the pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, published a comic history of New York in which, for the first time, Santa Claus is described as coming down chimneys, though, strangely, smoking a pipe at the same time.

All in all, given the history of the Season's festivities, the Christian claim to a monopoly of "Christmas" is extremely dubious.

**The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that the Republic of Ireland's laws on homosexuality are a violation of individual privacy. The country will have to scrap its 19th-century laws if it is to remain a member of the Council of Europe. It is expected that religious organisations like Family Solidarity will oppose reform. Britain has already been compelled by the European Court to decriminalise homosexuality in Northern Ireland.**

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, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.

## Student Loans, or

With plans well advanced to wreck the National Health Service — which the Conservatives voted against in 1948 — as part of a general attack on the Welfare State, the Government is now proceeding to turn the clock back in the sphere of education. Professor Sang examines proposals for student loans which, if implemented, mean that Higher Education will be available only to those who can pay for it.

As I write, thousands of students are demonstrating against the Government's proposals to introduce student loans. Here in Sussex, they are holding a mock trial of the Minister whom they accuse of "incompetence, short-sightedness and criminal neglect". They will have no difficulty in proving their case, but all their protests are beside the point for they are dealing with a *political* decision taken by a Government which can bulldoze its plans through Parliament. Loans take the financing of Higher Education away from local authorities, reduce Treasury expenditure and, at least in theory, boost the "enterprise culture", all desirable Thatcherite objectives. It is only because the last Minister (Sir Keith Joseph) made such a botch of presenting his proposals that student loans are not already with us. Two years of work by Department of Education and Science officials have now sanitised these proposals, and it is only a matter of time before they are implemented.

Before we look at the White Paper, "Top-up Bonus for Students", let me remind you of the present situation. For the last 25 years qualified students have been given a maintenance grant which is currently £2,050 (£2,425 in London). This is a means-tested award and parents earning over £20,000 per annum are expected to pay the whole grant. Parents earning less than £9,000 (adjusted for mortgage, etc) pay nothing, and those falling between these income levels pay in proportion. In practice only 36 per cent of students get a full grant which is now worth only 63 per cent of the 1962-3 value. Try living today on £2,050. Of course not all parents can meet their nominal commitment, and a third of students get less than full parental support. Not surprisingly, then, half the student population finishes each academic year in debt, on average to the tune of £341. If they cannot get vacation work which will allow them to discharge these debts, they become dependent on social security benefits to survive. Put in other terms, each of our 400,000 University and Polytechnic students costs the Government about £750 per annum, and it is this sum that has to be reduced to lower taxation.

If approved, the loan system will be introduced from 1990. The grant will then be set at £2,230 and will be frozen until, as a consequence of continuing



# Education on the Never-Never

JAMES SANG

inflation, it accounts for just half the total financial support. The parental contribution will be means tested as now (but as average wages increase, more parents will have to pay) and this will continue as the same proportion of the grant. So the parental contribution will also be halved in real terms (by about 2007-8 is a Treasury guess) and that prospect will surely be acceptable to middle-class voters.

The loans will be paid irrespective of parental income at £420 per annum for first and second year students, and at the lower sum of £310 for finalists, who are assumed to go straight into employment (or the dole?) on graduating. The catch, however, is that the loan will be increased in line with inflation so that ultimately students will have to borrow half their maintenance costs. Except for single parents and some others, students will not qualify for social security benefits after 1990, thus giving the Treasury a further saving.

The Government hopes that the banks or building societies will act as their loan agents, but it is not at all obvious how they will profit from this. The repayment arrangements (fixed term, income related, time limited and so on) are also up for discussion. But no doubt the Government will meet the administrative bill, if only to ensure that the principle is accepted and enshrined in, virtually irreversible legislation. No Government, whatever its complexion, is likely to go back to the generosity of the 1960s.

There are at least five reasons for opposing this scheme. The first, of course, is that it is a retrograde step. Higher Education (and ordinary education for that matter) is suffering from the Tories' hatred of education and their attempts to direct study only to practical ends. Loans will undoubtedly orientate students towards courses leading to the best paid careers. This is a bias already built into Higher Education by the past decade's staff cuts, where, for example, 500-year-old Classics Departments have been closed down, and liberal studies, like Philosophy, have been reduced in size and scope. Career prospects, meaning early loan repayment, will influence subject choice.

Secondly, things will not all go the Government's way. Everyone knows we need more mathematicians and physicists if we are to remain a competitive industrial society. But who will teach these subjects in schools when a debt burden will make teaching a career even more unattractive than now. If now is a disaster, loans will produce a catastrophe.

Thirdly, the imminent 25 per cent decline in 18-year-olds means that women, more older people, more members of disadvantaged groups and others who would not usually think of entering Higher Education, must be encouraged to do so. Living in

debt, on the contrary, will be a positive discouragement.

Fourthly, if the Government believes its own market theory, it will realise that employers will have to increase salary differences in favour of graduates: a kind of educational tax to foot the loans bill. One way or another, someone has to pay for the non-productive process of education, and it is not just because of some perverse kind of generosity that the State met the bill in the past. On the contrary, it is because we recognised that society as a whole benefits from having an educated population that we were (and I think still are) prepared to pay for it.

Finally, although the present situation may seem depressingly reactionary, the problem which loans are supposed to reduce will not go away. In the short term, we cannot expect students to passively accept a declining standard of living. (The 1990 grant will be worth only 70 per cent of the 1962-3 one.) But even more important: if we are to match the requirements of the year 2000, we shall need at least twice as many graduates as now. Since loans must frustrate that objective, the Government's plans, like so many others based on crude economics, will inevitably fail.

Surely by the year 2000 we shall be so well off that we can educate everyone to the limit of their potential. We shall not be able to do that on loans!

## Guilty as Charged

Church leaders have been admitting that Christianity has been largely responsible for fostering hatred of the Jewish people. This long delayed recognition of an unpalatable truth was reflected in speeches commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the night when Nazi thugs, at Hitler's personal instigation, went on the rampage against German Jews. Hundreds were injured and killed, their business premises looted and homes wrecked.

The Christian churches' share in responsibility for such outrages was summarised in a background paper on interfaith relations, prepared earlier this year for the Lambeth Conference. It declared: "Anti-Jewish prejudice promulgated by leaders of Church and State has led to persecution, pogrom and finally provided the soil in which the evil weed of Nazism was able to take root and spread its poison".

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**The Rev Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church is planning to set up shop in a Zulu township near Durban. It was invited to do so by employers in the area. A number of Zulus will come to Belfast to train as ministers.**



# Men of Letters

T. F. EVANS

Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), an Irishman, and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), an American, occupied prominent positions in English writing during the first half of the twentieth century. T. F. Evans puts them side by side in Eliot's centenary year, and at a time of considerable interest in both writers, created by the publication of new biographies and volumes of letters.

Before 1988 breathes its last, it may be interesting and possibly valuable to look briefly at two writers who have been drawn to our attention lately. There has been a spate of articles on Bernard Shaw, because there appeared in quick succession the last volume in a monumental edition of his letters and the first volume of what will prove a no less monumental biography. T. S. Eliot contrived with wicked insight to be born exactly a hundred years ago in the very month when the biography of Shaw was published. The first volume of a comparable edition of the poet's letters and a biographical study appeared in the bookshops alongside works devoted to Shaw.

The two writers, who are among the twentieth century's greatest, lived long lives, although Eliot, dying in 1965 in his late seventies, appears a mere stripling beside the near-centenarian Shaw. Certain similarities come to mind at once. First, neither was English by origin. Shaw was born in Dublin and Eliot in St Louis, Missouri. They both spent the greater part of their lives in this country, although Shaw never gave up his Irish citizenship. Eliot became a naturalised Briton in 1927. Both would figure largely in histories of English literature but neither was a "literary man" in the narrowest sense. Their careers in this respect took opposite courses. Shaw began his long years as a writer with much political activity. Towards the end of his life, he had given up active politics and was primarily a writer. With Eliot it was the reverse. He began with his interest mainly in literature but gradually expanded to show a greater concern with social, cultural and even, marginally at least, political questions.

In education, they could not have been more different. Shaw had little formal education beyond rudimentary beginnings. Eliot studied at several distinguished universities. Both, surprisingly, had early experience in commercial work, Shaw in a land agent's office in Dublin, Eliot in Lloyd's Bank in London.

Shaw lived his later years away from London as something of a recluse at Ayot St Lawrence, from which vantage point he was ready to fire off a regular barrage of comment and opinion, whether asked for it or not, on the widest range of subjects from theatre, politics and religion, to medical matters,

education, language reform, broadcast music and Test cricket.

Eliot living in central London and working for the publishers Faber and Faber, appeared paradoxically, to be far less in the thick of controversy than was Shaw. Yet he too was deeply interested in political developments (claiming, as so often happens with men of his particular temperament and outlook, to have no great interest in politics). His later books on not specifically literary themes, such as *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, certainly reveal political concerns.

Shaw always paraded his Irish nationality and used it as a stick, or perhaps a jester's bladder, with which to belabour the mere English. Eliot, much less strident a controversialist, did not make so much of his adopted nationality but gradually became in several senses almost more English than the English themselves. It is specially interesting, therefore, to note in early letters that his great liking was not for this country but for France, to which he felt specially drawn. In his early twenties, he spent a year in Paris studying at the Sorbonne, and in 1914, just after the outbreak of war, he wrote from Oxford to a friend in America:

"On the one hand I like the English very much, and on the other hand I don't think that I should ever feel at home in England, as I do for instance in France. Perhaps I admire the English more in some ways but find the French more congenial".

Both writers supported the Allied cause in the two world wars but, hardly surprising, with different emphases. Eliot never purported to tell the war leaders how to organise their strategy and tactics. Shaw, of course, always knew better than the experts.

It might have been thought that, in the Spanish Civil War, some divergences might appear. In fact, both writers took a similarly detached attitude. Shaw said:

"I as a Communist am generally on the Left; but that does not commit me to support the British Party parliament system, and its continental imitations, of which I have the lowest opinion. At present the Capitalist powers seem to have secured a victory over the General by what they call their non-interference, meaning their very active interference on his side; but it is unlikely that the last word will be with him. Meanwhile I shall not shout about it".

The two writers were classed as "aloof Olympians", a term used by Stanley Weintraub in *The Last Great Cause*, his book about the attitude of intellectuals to the Spanish Civil War. They took a view that, from a different standpoint, was nevertheless very similar. Eliot had expressed support in the early 1930s for



the British Fascist leader, Sir Oswald Mosley. But when asked to support the Franco side in "Christian" Spain, he replied briefly: "I still feel convinced that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities".

The reference to religion gives rise to comparisons between Eliot and Shaw that are perhaps the most fascinating of all. Shaw's religious beliefs are well known, if slightly difficult to sum up in a single word or phrase. He delighted in calling himself an atheist in his early years, sometimes invoking the name of Shelley in defence of this posture. As his career developed, it became clear that his contempt for the dogmas and rituals, the Cross as a symbol of the cruelty which he found at the heart of Christianity, and the indefensible doctrine of the Atonement, remained as intense as ever. But he had softened with regard to those who adopted the Christian ethical creed and lived their lives in accordance with their interpretation of its practical applications. Thus, among the best and most admirable of the characters in his plays are some who take a specifically Christian view of life: Barbara in *Major Barbara*, Lavinia in *Androcles and the Lion* and Joan in *Saint Joan*. He devised his own religion of Creative Evolution. Towards the end he would call himself a freethinker, with certain leanings towards the orthodox, while some of his best friends held strong religious opinions. It is necessary only to refer to the correspondence with the Abbess of Stanbrook to see with what sympathy and understanding Shaw was able to appreciate the spiritual inclinations of others.

Eliot's earliest letters give no indication of any strong religious feeling, but his conversion to Christianity which came formally when he was received into the Church of England in 1927, was not as sudden as some thought it to be. Thus, in the words of his biographer, Peter Ackroyd:

"His conversion was not the dramatic or unexpected reversal of interests which some have claimed it to be, but rather the culmination of a lengthy and consistent process which at least in hindsight seems inevitable".

Eliot, as a poet, had established an early reputation as a modernist and an iconoclast. But while brought up in the American Unitarian tradition, he had always felt a leaning towards the English church of his forebears. It could be that the conversion, when it came, was hastened by the mood of growing distress brought about by the misfortunes of his first marriage. In any event, by the time that his adherence to the Church of England became known, it became also clear from his writings that his attachment was very strong.

It frequently happens that the convert becomes much more closely attached to his new allegiance

than the one who is born into a faith. And it became so with Eliot. He found it possible to integrate his religious concerns with his literary and political leanings. In the preface to a book of essays, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), Eliot announced that his "general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion". In a later collection, *After Strange Gods* (1934), he referred to present-day society as being "worm-eaten with Liberalism". Eliot hardly stopped short of saying that it was impossible for an author to be a good writer unless he had some religion springing from dogma or revelation — but not the Inner Light, "the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity".

It would be most interesting to know what Shaw thought of Eliot — if he thought of him at all. Shaw was essentially a non-conformist and a rebel against authority, whether in Church or State. There is unfortunately hardly any reference to Eliot in either the Shaw biographies or in the letters that have so far appeared.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that Eliot took notice of Shaw. He disliked him intensely. So strong was his distaste for Shaw's opinions and personality as revealed in his work and other manifestations (there is no evidence of their having met) that he abandoned the aloofness with which he always sought to distinguish between the writer and his work in literary criticism. (He made another conspicuous exception in his treatment of the "atheist" Shelley.) Eliot did say, grudgingly, that he admired Shaw's English style (although he was always quick to condemn unbelievers who admired the literature of the Bible) and once he admitted, also with an apparent reluctance, that the twentieth-century colloquialism of the speeches of the knights in his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, when they try to justify their slaughter of Becket, could have owed something (involuntarily, of course) to the Epilogue in Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Yet, for Eliot, it was always a shortcoming on Shaw's part that he was neither born into an established church, as was Joyce — even if it was the Church of Rome — nor willingly entered into one, as he, Eliot, had done.

There are several scathing references to Shaw in Eliot's writings, but perhaps the best, or the worst, is to be found in the text of an address entitled "The Literature of Politics". This was given in 1955 at a Literary Luncheon organised by the London Conservative Union, not perhaps the most discriminating of audiences, whether before or after lunch. It was not a very distinguished address, but Eliot must have surprised his listeners when he told them that they could all "without any prompting" repeat in chorus the names of four "classic" writers who would together show what Conservatism was. It is perhaps as well that there is no record of the eminent guest



having put his fellow lunchers to the test, in chorus or not, and it is very much to be doubted whether more than a small minority would have hit on all four names — Bolingbroke, Burke, Coleridge and Disraeli.

Be that as it may, Eliot went on to skim over the surface of the subject and in his concluding thoughts, he asked how the work of "a mere writer" affected political life. In the course of brief speculation on possible answers, he said the following:

"The immediate influence of — shall we say — Mr Bernard Shaw in the period of his most potent influence, I suppose, at the beginning of this century, must have been more appreciable, and more widely diffused, than that of much finer minds: and one is compelled to admire a man of such verbal agility as not only to conceal from his readers and audiences the shallowness of his own thought, but to persuade them that in admiring his work they were giving evidence of their own intelligence as well. I do not say that Shaw could have succeeded alone, without the more plodding and laborious minds with which he associated himself; but by persuading low-brows that they were high-brows, and that high-brows must be socialists, he contributed greatly to the prestige of socialism. But between the influence of a Bernard Shaw or an H. G. Wells, and the influence of a Coleridge or a Newman, I can conceive no common scale of measurement".

After such a rebuke with the ringing tones of Papal infallibility about it, few admirers of Shaw could do anything but keep their opinions to themselves. Yet, in calmer moments, they might reflect that they could accept the wit of Shaw and his athletic style without necessarily agreeing with all his views on politics and other subjects. Similarly, it is impossible for some of us to be charmed either by the satire and irony of the early Eliot, the grace and delicacy of his later verse, and the studied elegance of his dramatic dialogue, without feeling it essential to genuflect in sympathy with his own particular variety of high-nosed Anglican arrogance.

\* \* \*

#### Books Mentioned

*Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters*, Volume 4, edited by Dan H. Laurence (Max Reinhardt).

*Bernard Shaw: Volume I — The Search for Love* by Michael Hoyroyd (Chatto and Windus).

*The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Volume 1, edited by Valerie Eliot (Faber and Faber).

*Eliot's New Life*, by Lyndall Gordon (Oxford University Press).

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# JOURNAL

INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, Volume 17, Number 8.  
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Place, London N5 1QP, £1.65

The September issue of this journal concentrates on Britain. Contributors include Ronald Dworkin, University Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford and Professor of Law, New York University; John Mortimer, barrister, author and playwright; Mark Bonham Carter, former Vice Chairman of the Governors of the BBC and Brian Wenham, sacked with Milne and Protheroe by Mrs Thatcher's appointee, Marmaduke Hussey; Duncan Campbell, well-known investigative journalist hounded by the police for exposing government malpractices; Lord Jenkins, formerly Labour Home Secretary, now Chancellor of Oxford University; Richard Hoggart, formerly Assistant Director-General of UNESCO and then Warden of Goldsmiths' College, and Stephen Spender, poet, critic and co-founder of Index of Censorship. Professor Dworkin writes:

"Liberty is ill in Britain. Each of the articles in this special issue . . . reports on the state of British freedom in a different area: in the press, in publishing in broadcasting, in universities, in national and local government. The reports are strikingly and depressingly similar: in each case freedom is being curtailed or sacrificed in favour of some other real or supposed advantage: popular moral sensibility or financial tidiness or administrative convenience or the virtues of conventional family life. Censorship is no longer an isolated exception, in which the nation grudgingly gives up some of its liberty, with great regret and a keen sense of loss, in the face of some emergency. . . The sad truth is that the very concept of liberty — the universal, seamless idea at stake in all these separate and diverse controversies — is being challenged and corroded by the Thatcher Government. Her supporters will . . . say . . . it is preposterous to confuse Thatcherism with fascism. That is true: this Government's challenge to freedom has nothing to do with totalitarian despotism."

I quote Dworkin at length because he so neatly summarises the issues discussed in this magazine. I am less convinced by his last sentence. The attitudes that give rise to totalitarian despotism and those behind the enactments of the Thatcher Government have a common basis in the desire to exert unchallenged power; to suppress dissent even to the point of using force of questionable legality to silence those who uncover governmental lies.

"Conviction politics" abuts on despotism because it distrusts the collective judgement and wisdom of the people as a whole. It sees no wrong in deceiving the public because it believes them to be ignorant and alien in values. The separation of those who govern, in wealth, style of life and education, leads



# FREETHINKER REVIEWS

them to treat those not in their inner class as an enemy. Active elements in the population who disagree with governmental policy become "the enemy within". When "conviction politics" is combined with a selection of Ministers who dare not disagree with Mummy for fear of a slap on the wrist or banishment, the tone is set for policies characterised by a ruthless pursuit of wealth, power and control. "Efficiency at all costs" sounds good, but the narrow limits within which "efficiency" is defined makes it a policy of materialism and brutality, especially when the "elected dictatorship" of an unassailable majority in the House of Commons is used to steam-roller even dissident Conservatives and when hordes of backwoodsmen are dragged in on crutches or in wheelchairs to ensure a victory in the Lords.

For centuries the concept of property included the important assumption that it was entrusted to the owner to be treated with respect and care for its use by future generations; there was a steady improvement in husbandry and the natural forces of wind, water, animal and human power were not used to degrade the environment. With the Industrial Revolution came technical changes that altered not only the face of the country but the relationships between men and the environment and between owners and labourers. Work changed from being a necessary activity to supply needs to an activity for the creation of unlimited wealth from machines and their semi-mechanical attendants. Property became something from which monetary value was to be extracted as quickly as possible and damn the consequences. "It's mine. I can do with it what I like" has brought devastation to the environment and the dehumanising of those dependent on others for work. The erosion of human values and dignity inevitably follows from such a concept of property.

Luther denounced usury as ungodly. Usury is the very glue of capitalism. Wilhelm Reich condemned capitalism because, by its attitude to property and people, it created a subservience in workers which leads, inescapably, to the fascist mentality — the attitude to life that needs to be told what to do, how to behave and what to believe. We observe the concentration of the means of communication into fewer and fewer hands which start to throttle the living breath of free discussion. Potentially creative organisations like Trade Unions and independent forms of media have to be destroyed or rendered innocuous. The restriction of freedom is as essential to Thatcherite capitalism as the factory system and automation is to mass-production.

Freedom is like air, food and water to human life. Because no two individuals can ever be identical — they are born different and their differences increase

with age and experience — no imposed system, however benign in intent, will suit us all. If we need to be governed, and many of us are not convinced that we do, then we can be governed only with our consent, an age-old democratic principle.

Mrs Thatcher often invokes "the family". But the happiest families are those where the rules are minimal and agreed; where no major decisions are made without consultation; where the youngest and the weakest are supported without question and where all are encouraged to follow their own bent, with proper regard for the others.

Mrs Thatcher has often used the word "freedom". She has yet to learn that it is not synonymous with "licence".

MICHAEL DUANE

## TELEVISION

### SIGNALS. Channel 4

That always effervescent Scottish comic, Billy Connelly, forever referring to the Male Member as his "Wullie", was the one item missing from this *Signals* programme that might have given it a less parish pump feeling. Good though it was, as far as it went, in Michael Cockerell's television film it failed to "take the gloves off" in a sufficiently robust fashion with that other male member, Lord Rees-Mogg, chairman of the recently formed Broadcasting Standards Council, and buddy of the Blessed St Mary (Whitehouse) herself. This was a survey rather than an investigation, and as such it lacked the punch that folk like Christopher Hitchens and John Pilger — to mention but two investigative telly-journalists who genuinely expose repression and injustice wherever it is found — pack into their filmed reports of the dirty work being committed at so many crossroads. I would like to see, for instance, a judgement passed on the film as a whole by a lawyer of great experience and progressive opinion like John Mortimer, QC, a defender of just, but unpopular causes, no longer at the Old Bailey, but his appearances on radio and television are always welcome events for the light, logic and clear fresh air they bring to the dreariest of discussion programmes. (His demolition of the Thatcherite traveller and philosopher, Laurens van der Post on a recent *Start the Week* programme was a case in point. The ancient ecologist maintained that Mrs Thatcher was a "green" because *she* told him so, and that her first remembered sight of anything was a tree! I wonder what happened to the tree?)



There were some great "give-aways" on the *Signals* programme, like Cecil McGivern's code in the '50s commanding what could be shown and what must be masked. It is hard to believe that Cecil — a civilised man in his private life, the wartime writer of *A Harbour Called Mulberry*, mentor to the likes of such outstanding talents as Nesta Pain and Norman Swallow, among others — could have a hand in such licensed prudery. But it was cited chapter and verse. And there is the present Wodehousian Rees-Mogg's own personal taste. He favours *Allo, Allo*. Nuff said.

We were advised that Channel 4 is free of the IBA censorship code, and this is why such words as "mother fucker" and "balls" were openly discussed. Willy Rees-Mogg and St Mary Whitehouse misunderstand, methinks, the Great British Public. The latter, especially, fond of self-promotion, to judge from her many zany pronouncements that can be rivalled, but never outflanked, by such great "brains" as Edwina Currie and John Selwyn Gummer, subscribed to a common misconception — that St Mary must know something because she's been "appointed". She hasn't, of course, but as a spot of self-advertising it seeks to rival Saatchi and Saatchi. In fact, Mrs W resembles the proverbial Chinese Enquiry Agent who, when asked how much he knew about the future of the Crown Colony, replied "You think I know, but I really know that I know fuck all". In fact some of the commercials shown between parts of this film, made by Holmes Associates for Channel 4, were a sight more raw than anything permitted on our screens for public consumption.

The "dirty" videos called in evidence (upon whose behalf I failed to discover) sounded a dire accompaniment, as one's inalienable rights were slowly but surely seen to be stripped away, and that adult television drama — the greatest single advance of them all, in fact, *The Singing Detective*, by the medium's sole major drama writer, Dennis Potter, was dismissed, not by Rees-Mogg on this occasion, curiously enough — as license automatically slipping into the bog of licentiousness. In fact what can be bought for money — e.g. the advertisers and their agencies — can be shown because Mammon is all and art in their view of our lords and masters is dirty. No wonder that the liberal and sophisticated Hugh Greene told me just a few months before he died, referring to Mrs Whitehouse: "She wanted to see me, but I refused her request because I refused to be her promoter for personal publicity".

The truth of the matter today is what it has been through the ages, especially since the start of the box in the corner which can be switched off at a moment's notice. If the "groping" scenes to which Rees-Mogg objects cannot be divorced from the romantic sequences in such a piece of grand writing as the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, then I am

sorry for your lords and masters and saints! Why should the biggest audience for any entertainment in the world — as television now is — be denied in a democracy what it has a right to see? And why should sex automatically be branded by association with violence?

The prudes — often prepared to let the prurient and meretricious go unnoticed — use the word "dirty" as a smokescreen, but how obscene are they in the state of affairs permitted in this Thatcherite society. How right John Mortimer was when, a few days following this *Signals* programme, he regaled a large Radio 4 audience with the offence caused to all people of decency, sense and sensitivity as they pass the homeless, many of them sleeping in cardboard boxes in the streets of London, once the capital of the British Empire.

"Cor, says the sweep", as Nat Gubbins's immortal creation would have had it in far less sordid times, "it makes yer think".

PETER COTES

## LETTERS

### ELIOT'S GREATNESS

David Tribe's attack on T. S. Eliot's reputation was no doubt intended to provoke — and I shall rise to the bait. Eliot's beliefs were far from humanist, but this should not blind us to his status as a major poet.

True, he was anti-semitic, as has been confirmed by the recent edition of his letters. This is not excusable, but it was common among the establishment in the twenties and thirties. Great artists are not always able to rise above the prejudices of their milieu, and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* could be seen as anti-semitic.

True, as he became a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" his poetry became weaker. And parts of his later plays are prolix and flaccid.

Tribe's more serious charges are that his influence has been multifying, his poems are a ragbag of references, he does not reach to the common reader, and he has been overrated as a poet. None of these charges holds.

He is a difficult poet — but the ordinary reader would not find some of Shakespeare's sonnets or the longer poems of the freethinking Shelley easy to grasp on first reading and without specialised knowledge. I have come across many non-academics upon whom *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* have made a strong impression, without deep study of them. Eliot expressed in *The Waste Land* the disillusion of a generation, and brought to poetry a novel mixture of the mythic and demotic. The *Four Quartets* are great meditations with mystical aspects that can be appreciated even by those with no belief in the transcendent. Nor was he above writing popular verse, for the poems from *Mr Possum's Book of Practical Cats* have formed the basis of one of the most popular musicals of recent years. He cannot be blamed for his second-rate imitators — a fate which many great writers suffer.

Above all, what Tribe omits is Eliot's ability to produce lines or phrases that are memorable, give a frisson by their incantatory power, have an unforgettablely distinctive voice, and linger in the mind for a lifetime.



Robertson's Shakespearian criticism (without agreeing with it). G. W. Foote often read great Christian prose writers like Augustine or Hooker with profit and pleasure. Freethinkers should not fall into the trap of dismissing writers whose views they do not share. I constantly re-read Eliot, as one of the great poets of the century, and those who are led by Tribe's squib to avoid his poetry will miss a profound experience.

JIM HERRICK

### CARNIVOROUS SECULARISTS

In defence of Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society (Robert Barr's letter, November), she is very far from being the only member of the NSS who easily accepts animal abuse. At the last Society dinner I was shocked to see so many people happily devouring broiler chickens — the only sort that caterers supply. These pathetic creatures live out their brief lives deprived of the birthright of every creature — freedom, to end them by the same process that the Society so strongly objects to when performed by orthodox Jews and Muslims, the modern fast-food industry having rediscovered what those old semites knew three thousand years ago, that meat keeps better when drained of blood.

The Society lays itself wide open to the charge that its objection to ritual slaughter is motivated not by a concern for the feelings of animals but by the wish to use any stick to beat the goddites with.

GLYN EMERY

### NATIONALITY, RELIGION AND RACE

Nation states divide human beings, and are responsible for more unnatural deaths than any other agent. They are, also, the greatest promoters of religions, which they make use of to further their ends. It follows that supporters of nation states cannot be expected to oppose religions effectively.

Conservatives, as fervent supporters of the Establishment, are bound to find themselves in trouble with fellow members of the Rationalist Press Association and National Secular Society. Racism, being very much involved with nation and religion, has a certain appeal for Conservatives in general — so it was very foolish of Anthony Flew to associate himself with the likes of Roger Scruton in a symposium dedicated solely to an anti-anti-racist message.

E. W. CROSSWELL

### FLEW AND THE MOONIES

I am not a member of the National Secular Society and no doubt a representative will deal with Nicolas Walter's silly comments about its Distinguished Members (Antony Flew and the RPA, November).

What is significant is that Mr Walter makes no reference to Freethinker criticism of Professor Flew's participation in a conference organised by the Unification Church (Moonies). As he is presumably an atheist, it is reasonable to assume that the Professor did so out of political sympathy. So The Freethinker was entitled to describe him as a "far-Right guru".

R. F. THORPE

## Darwin's Terrier versus Religious Richard

MIKE HOWGATE

Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, was a vehement opponent of the principle of Natural Selection, which he described as being "absolutely incompatible with the word of God". In 1860, the year after Charles Darwin's *The Origins of Species* was published, Wilberforce ("Soapy Sam") and Thomas Henry Huxley ("Darwin's Bulldog") took part in an historic debate on evolution. The British Association for the Advancement of Science re-staged the debate at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, during this year's annual conference. The participants were the present Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Rev Richard Harries, and palaeontologist Dr Beverly Halstead.

while the opposition obviously represent benighted obscurantism and the *ad hoc* hypothesis. However, just for the moment I will try to put aside my inherent prejudices and let the proponents speak for themselves, with only the slightest hint of my own opinions creeping in.

Dr Halstead ("Darwin's Terrier") opened by expressing the view that evolution is incompatible with belief in a personal God, an opinion which his "creationist" adversaries would endorse but for entirely different reasons. Unlike the so-called "scientific" creationists who dismiss evolution because it is in contradiction with a literal interpretation of the Bible, Richard Harries attempted to square the Christian tradition with the findings of science. Beverly Halstead characterised this as the intellectually acceptable face of Christianity. However, he pointed out that by avoiding the more glaring absurdities of the Bible, the good bishop falls into a pantheistic heresy in which God is displaced as controller of the universe to a mere prime cause after which he is manifest only in the laws of nature. Newton, Halstead reminded us, was accused by the Church of blasphemy for proposing a universe which left no room for the direct intervention of the deity. Baron George Cuvier, the founder of Vertebrate Palaeontology — Dr Halstead's own discipline —

It is always difficult to write a report when one is an obvious partisan of one side in the debate. It is even more so when the debate is between a secularist/atheist and someone of a religious persuasion. There is an undeniable tendency to replace reasoned argument with the glib, catch-all phrase; to be sycophantically praiseworthy of one's compatriot and rudely disparaging of the opposition. The opposition can then quite rightly point to the obvious partiality of the writer and call "foul", and what should be a serious discussion degenerates into name calling.

I am obviously on the side of enlightenment, reason and Occam's razor (along with Dr Halstead),



put another nail in God's coffin when he explained the sequence of fossils in the rocks as the result of numerous creations, not just the biblical one. But it was left to Darwin to hammer the lid down.

After publication of *The Origin of Species*, God could only be seen as incompetent or as having an excruciating sense of humour if the argument from design was to be taken seriously. This is not the sort of God Christians would be happy with. (Nor would Dr Halstead for that matter; his hernia operation vividly attests to the fact that the support for the human gut area was designed with a quadruped, rather than a biped, in mind.)

Despite the attempts of Bishop Harries and scientists such as Professor Berry to reconcile the Bible and evolution, three areas stand out where such reconciliation is impossible: Origins, Man and Miracles. The God who made everything to order in seven days has been relegated to the first nanoseconds of the universe and stands there only if the hand wielding Occam's razor is stayed. The Adam of Professor Berry — a neolithic farmer chosen by God to have a soul — leaves unconsidered the problem of his soulless kith and kin, no doubt still at an animal level and unredeemable. On miracles, Professor Berry's contention that they are beyond scientific investigation was challenged by Halstead who insisted that once the claim is made that a miracle had happened, then it comes within the realm of the historical sciences.

Bishop Harries is that peculiar ecclesiastical beast — neither a true Bible-believing Christian nor a respectable agnostic. Thus his arguments always fall between two stools and are riddled with internal contradictions and bald statements of belief. He would rather accept the findings of science than rely on inerrant "biblical revelation". But over-riding both is an implacable subjective faith of the "I know that my redeemer liveth" variety, which astounds common sense with statements inserted into a scientific discourse such as "God enables things to be themselves" and "God a reality of prodigious intelligence". No proof, no argument, just pure, bare-faced assertion. It is as though the arguments of two centuries ago have passed him by.

The first line of attack by Bishop Harries was to castigate the almost universally held view that "the theory of evolution" was opposed by the Church in the 1860s and '70s; this he termed a popular myth, one of the promoters of so-called "myth" being Thomas Henry Huxley. On the other hand, Bishop Wilberforce, Huxley's opponent in the famous debate, was, we were told, quite willing to accept evolution as a hypothesis, his disbelief being accounted for by the lack of hard evidence in favour of the theory at that time. One could almost have been led to believe that the Bishop of Oxford's predecessor was an honest sceptic and searcher after

truth, rather than an unscrupulous and dogmatic defender of the faith. Such is the vogue for revisionist history these days that such views might find credence.

The present Bishop of Oxford, however, distances himself from the likes of Wilberforce and those Victorian scientists who supported and advised him. Gone is confidence in that old stand-by, the argument from design. Bishop Harries was quite explicit — he would have nothing to do with it. But then he added the rider that as we had no proof whether the world was designed or not, then we could not rule out the possibility that it was! His argument was, for those who like to wrestle with such questions, that we have only one universe to observe, and as we can compare this with neither typically designed nor unequivocally undesigned universes, then all we can do is gaze in wonder and remain in doubt. Nice one, Richard!

The argument from design did, however, raise its ugly head, but in a somewhat sophisticated guise. The eye is not the result of God's craftsmanship nor of blind chance (whoever says it is?) but the operation of the "designer" laws of God (read Natural Selection) on blind mutations. So evolution becomes the law-governed operation of natural causes, with the God of Love directing it all in his own inimitable if rather pantheistic style.

Richard Harries went on to comment on some of the problem areas for his "God in evolution". He preferred to see, against the vast majority of observed data, natural selection operating along cooperative, rather than competitive lines, within the species. And he was very troubled by the obvious pain that a lot of animals suffer. But he had nothing original, or indeed coherent, to say on these topics.

The ensuing debate at the Sheldonian Theatre was remarkable for a lack of rancour, probably because, unlike the situation over a hundred years ago, evolution has by now won hands down among informed opinion. However, there were one or two pointers to a possible future as televangelism looms. Several speakers from the floor used the opportunity to proclaim a faith in "Christ Risen", their hostility to evolution as patently obvious as their abysmal ignorance of the subject. But they had the light of battle in their eyes. We have been warned.

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**Paris cinemas showing Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, have been bombed by Roman Catholic fanatics believed to be connected with the Fascist National Front. In one incident a man died from a heart attack and a British woman was injured.**



## "Progressive" Religionists Quarrel Over Award

The Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion is one of the world's most prestigious awards for that sort of thing. Its founder, Sir John Templeton, is a financier who lives in the Bahamas. As a rule, the Prize (this year worth £220,000) is presented by an eminent personage at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace. Past recipients include such champions of progress as Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

But it has not all been sweetness and light among progressive religionists this year. When the 1988 Prize was awarded to a religious leader promoting peace among Muslims, Jews and Christians, Jewish reaction was somewhat frosty. The lucky winner, Dr Inamullah Khan, is secretary of the World Muslim Congress and a man of strong religious faith. But according to Jewish authorities in Britain and elsewhere, he is also well known for his anti-semitic sentiments. For instance, in the past he has praised a Nazi collaborator and expressed his appreciation of an American magazine that supports the Ku-Klux-Klan.

All this caused a mighty furore among the godly, and from his humble abode in the Bahamas Sir John Templeton ordered an investigation. That was last

June. Dr Khan has at last received his award. The presentation ceremony was a low-key affair in Melbourne, Australia, and he accepted the Prize from the humble hand of the Governor of Victoria.

We cannot confirm a report that the 1989 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion will be presented to the Rev Ian Paisley at a ceremony in the Vatican.

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 8 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public meeting.

**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 041-942 0129.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 15 December, 7.45 pm. Saturnalian Party.

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

**National Secular Society.** Annual Dinner, London, Saturday, 15th April, 1989.

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

**South Place Ethical Society.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 a.m.; Forum, 3 pm; Concert, 6.30 pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Extramural Studies, 6.30 pm. Please write or telephone 01-831 7723 for details.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 January, 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm. John B. Thompson: The Human Scale in Education Movement.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 19 December, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Bernard Phillips, 16 Highpool Close, Newton, Swansea, SA3 4TU, telephone 68024.

### Religious Indoctrination

fifteen minutes of questions and discussion, the vote was taken again: non-belief had increased to almost half — at the expense not only of the earlier abstentions but also of the earlier vote for theism. I must admit, however, that some of the credit for this must go to the evangelical style of the pastor. Experiences of that kind give me great hope that the new education law will fail in its proselytising aims".

Barbara Smoker believed it was likely there would be a similar outcome of the proposed statutory changes to the regulations governing broadcasting in Britain.

"These changes will inevitably open the door to the sort of tele-evangelism that is so prevalent, so obnoxious, and so profitable, in the USA. I am hopeful that the greater degree of common sense that generally characterises the English people, and many of the people of other parts of Britain, will prove as impervious to evangelical television commercials as to compulsory school religion.

"Indeed, representatives of the existing religious television programmes in this country are opposing the importation of American-style tele-evangelism on the ground that it is likely to turn viewers away from religious television altogether. If the religious broadcasting departments are so opposed to the imminent influx of tele-evangelism, the prospect cannot be all

# The National Trust Debates Hunting

SARAH LAWSON

"I expect the fur will fly, as it were", I said as I left the house. I was on my way to the annual general meeting of the National Trust. The main item of business on the agenda was a motion to ban the hunting with hounds of foxes, deer and hares on National Trust property. The Council of the National Trust, far from remaining neutral in the discussion, appended a dissenting statement of their own to the proposed resolution which was circulated to members before the meeting. I had already decided to vote for the motion, but wanted to hear the arguments of those who opposed it. I already knew most of the arguments against hunting: it is indefensibly cruel; animals can be controlled or culled by more humane means; hunters damage property and hounds sometimes kill household pets. I am not passionately against blood sports, but they are pretty repellant. I am not sure whether I feel sorrier for the hunted animals or the people who enjoy watching their violent deaths.

Perhaps I should explain that I am a Londoner by adoption, but I grew up in a rural area of the American Midwest. I lived on a farm briefly and once even caught a fox red in tooth and paw in the chicken house. It can't have been a well fox, venturing into a chicken house in broad daylight in August, but in any case it was soon dispatched with a shotgun. Indiana farmers control vermin in this impromptu way, not requiring the efforts of dozens of huntsmen and hounds, nor holding a dance afterwards.

We gathered in Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, and after the usual business of officers and auditors, we got down to the debate on hunting. The proposer and seconder of the motion spoke, then two spokesmen against the resolution, followed by 22 members from the floor, fairly evenly balanced for and against the motion. It was all impeccably parliamentary, except that Dame Jennifer Jenkins, chairman of the National Trust, destroyed any illusion of impartiality by referring to the proposers as "the opposition" before quickly correcting herself.

Probably the strongest argument against the motion was that regardless of personal opinion one should oppose it because it would "make the job of the National Trust more difficult". Hunting is legal, said one Council spokesman, therefore "any movement for its abolition should be addressed to Parliament". "The National Trust", complained another speaker, "is being used as a platform to pursue a cause that lies outside its proper concern". In general, many speakers got sidetracked in waffle about the good work of the National Trust. Some arguments were transparently spurious, like that of one opponent of the motion who fumed: "You should get your priorities right and oppose the shoot-

ing of horses from aeroplanes in Australia and cruel methods in slaughterhouses".

Mr Wilson, a Lake District farmer, told us that foxes kill lambs and that the only sound way of controlling foxes is by hunting them. The morning after the lamb has been killed, the hounds are brought in and take the scent from the carcase; they then catch the culpable fox. But we also heard that eighty per cent of sheep farmers admit there is no direct evidence of foxes killing sheep. Furthermore, added another speaker, seventy per cent of farmers don't regard foxes as dangerous and many even find them useful in keeping down rodents. One argument at variance with the others was that the fox often gets away and lives to be chased another day, therefore hunting does not necessarily lead to the death of the fox. The arguments in favour of hunting were fatally flawed by these kinds of contradictions.

Most of the arguments concerned fox hunting, but a few speakers mentioned deer hunting. Exmoor farmers, we were told, were devoted to their deer hunting and would be extremely upset if they couldn't hunt on Exmoor, which is largely owned by the National Trust. "That's the way Exmoor farmers are and you can't change them". Again and again the point was made that the National Trust should not antagonise local farmers by denying them their time-honoured country pursuits (in more than one sense), except where hunting was forbidden by the terms of the agreement with the donor of the land. But yet, we heard of one case in the Quantocks where the Trust supports a hunt on land given by donors who were anti-hunt. The heirs have been asking the Trust to ban hunting on the land. It was hard to avoid the impression that the Trust was actively in favour of hunting, and not merely a neutral body wishing to avoid friction with local groups.

Each speaker got a round of loud applause, suggesting that the audience was fairly evenly divided on the question. When the vote was taken the resolution was narrowly defeated, but the margin was much wider when the postal votes were added. Still, among 75,000 members of the Trust who voted, nearly 30,000 supported the resolution to ban hunting.

The last time the National Trust considered this question was in 1937, but they won't have to wait another fifty years to hear of it again. "We all know really that hunting is on its last legs", said one speaker, and another added that the country was moving toward legislation against hunting and that the Trust should give a moral lead. The members shrank from corporate morality this time, but the question is not likely to go away.