

# The Freethinker

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## VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA: MAJORITY SUPPORT FOR LAW REFORM

"If a person has rationally decided that death is preferable to continued existence, it should no longer be a crime for a doctor to help such a person to die", Jean Davies told the annual conference of the British Humanist Association which was held at Warwick University, 21-23 July. Mrs Davies, chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, said national opinion polls revealed that a large majority, 72 per cent in 1985 and 75 per cent in May 1989, supported this view.

"The interviewers asked for respondents' religious beliefs, and it will probably come as no surprise that the highest proportion in favour had no religious beliefs, while the Catholics, though still over 50 per cent in favour, had the lowest proportion.

"On the other hand, many members of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society are Christians. Two vice-presidents are senior members of the Church of England and the Methodist Church respectively."

Mrs Davies raised the question how, in a democracy, the views of 25 per cent continue to prevail.

"One answer is that if we had government by opinion poll, capital punishment would immediately be reintroduced. But without wanting such a knee-jerk response, one can still try to identify the reasons for the lack of progress in achieving this change that 75 per cent of the population would welcome".

Jean Davies said that some people believe death can never be preferable to life.

"But the condition to which some people are reduced hardly constitutes living", she added. "Given the choice, they would not continue, merely waiting for death.

"Our files contain innumerable letters from people describing their own or their relatives' conditions, so pitiable that the reaction of most readers is horror".

The speaker said that in her experience the only

argument against helping such sufferers to a peaceful end comes from those who believe that human beings do not have the right to end life.

"Most of these will say that since 1961 it has not been a crime to take one's own life, so let the sufferers commit suicide. This ignores the fact that most of them are long past the point of being physically capable of such independent action. Few have access to suitable drugs, and only doctors and pharmacists among them will know which drugs are effective, and in what doses.

"Even those who decide on suicide, with or without their doctor's advice, must face the social stigma for their families.

"And they must die alone. Anyone who helps them may be found guilty of aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring a suicide, an offence punishable by up to 14 years' imprisonment".

Another argument put forward by opponents of voluntary euthanasia is that it would be impossible to frame a law that would not lead to abuse. Mrs Davies reminded the conference that in Holland doctors have not been prosecuted in over ten years for practising voluntary euthanasia, provided they have followed the guidelines set out by the Dutch Medical Association.

Jean Davies said it is often claimed that the wish for help to die only arises through lack of proper care, and that hospice-type care would solve the problem.

She said: "Leaving aside the practical problems of providing the necessary resources of such high level care for the huge and increasing numbers of the very old and dependent, this assumes that the recipient of such care prefers it to a peaceful death.

"This is by no means always the case. It wasn't

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# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## EQUALITY, NOT PRIVILEGE

Harry Greenway, Conservative MP for Ealing North, once introduced a motion calling for the infliction of Christian teaching on all children, including those from ethnic minorities. But that was back in 1981. The party of Victorian values was firmly in the saddle. There was much trumpeting of traditional standards, religious morality and conventional family life. Fundamentalist Christians had high hopes of establishing a British version of the Moral Majority.

Things are somewhat different now as we approach the end of the reactionary Eighties. Mr Greenway can no longer entrust his political future to the great Election Agent in the sky. So rather than advocating Christian teaching for all children irrespective of their ethnic background, he has turned his attention to the sizeable proportion of voters in North Ealing who are non-Christian religious believers. Mr Greenway therefore introduced another motion in the House of Commons last month, "to make provision for the punishment of persons who blaspheme against certain Religions".

This latest attempt to extend blasphemy law foundered and it is highly likely that a widely publicised move by the Home Office persuaded many MPs not to support it. John Patten, Minister of State, wrote to a number of influential Muslim leaders, respectfully but firmly informing them that the Government decided for a variety of reasons "it would be unwise . . . to amend the law of blasphemy, not least the clear lack of agreement whether the law should be reformed or repealed".

Mr Patten said that when considering questions arising from the *Satanic Verses* controversy, the Home Office was guided by two principles: "the freedom of speech, thought and expression; and the notion of the rule of law. The same freedom which has enabled Muslims to meet, march and protest . . . also preserves any author's right to freedom of expression for so long as no law is broken".

Although the Minister's statement is a useful antidote to the clamour for an extension of blasphemy law, it is nevertheless flawed in several respects.

First and foremost, the present law relating to blasphemy is discriminatory and therefore indefensible. So long as there is such law favouring Christianity, adherents to other faiths will demand the same privilege. And of course unbelievers do not receive or seek any protection for sincerely held views.

Mr Patten posed the question: "Should protection be extended to all faiths, including the very minor

# AND NOTES

or very obscure?" No doubt he is aware that until comparatively recently the Moonies, Scientologists and the Jesus Army fitted into these categories. Human gullibility, religious charity law and other factors can transform a very minor, very obscure sect into a major religious force.

The Minister asserted that Christian believers no longer rely on blasphemy law to protect their faith, "preferring to recognise that the strength of their beliefs is the best armour against mockers and blasphemers". What Mr Patten appears not to recognise is that Christianity, like Islam, has its zealots who, given the opportunity, will exploit any law, however outmoded and unjust. Mary Whitehouse initiated the *Gay News* prosecution not long after the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Donald Coggan, reminded Christians that blasphemy law was still available to them.

Mr Patten said that in modern Britain "there cannot be room for separation and segregation". Unfortunately there can and is, particularly in strongly religious communities. Many Muslim children are segregated and subjected to intense religious indoctrination at the mosque and in the home. It is therefore not all that surprising that some of the most vociferous demands for the murder of Salman Rushdie came from teenage and even pre-teen children.

Whatever the flaws in Mr Patten's statement, it is gratifying to note that it includes some of the points which the secularist movement has been hammering home for years. But there are few indications that the Muslim religious leaders will heed what he says. Indeed they are likely to increase the pressure for protection of their religion by blasphemy law. It is therefore imperative that freethinkers make their views known to the Government on this important issue.

Letters and resolutions calling for a repeal of the blasphemy law should be sent to MPs at the House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1, and to Mr John Patten, Minister of State, The Home Office, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1.

Jason Maynard, a "born again" Christian schoolboy, inflicted serious injuries on his Sunday School teacher when he attacked her with a heavy hammer. He told the police that he was possessed by the Holy Spirit at the time. Chelmsford Crown Court heard that the victim, the deeply religious daughter of a retired clergyman, was blinded in one eye. Maynard, now 15, was ordered to be detained for life.

## RELIGION REVEALED

The Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon to members of the General Synod at York Minster did not go down too well with some of his fellow-Christians. True, he made a snide comment about "corrosive secularism", but the main thrust and most publicised section of his address was an outspoken attack on religious fundamentalism.

In a reference to what he described as "ecclesiastical apartheid" in various parts of the world, Dr Runcie mentioned Northern Ireland as one fundamentalist dominated area that is "stained with blood". The Rev Ian Paisley's ferocious reaction might well have caused that ranting fundamentalist to burst a blood vessel, thus adding to the stain. He raged against the "arch-traitor" and "chief conspirator" in the Anglican sell-out to Rome. "It will come as no surprise that Dr Runcie should lie about the only force that can expose and oppose his plan — the forces of Bible fundamentalism", declared the co-chairman of a group of charmers known as the World Congress of Fundamentalists.

"Where toleration is in peril, persecution stalks not far behind", Dr Runcie warned. Well, he should know. For centuries the Christian churches have been malevolent foes of tolerance. Catholic and Protestant in turn have ruthlessly persecuted the sceptic and nonconforming believer. And one reason why tolerance is now being defended by an Archbishop of Canterbury is that the churches' teeth have been blunted by "corrosive secularism".

## "LIFE" CELEBRATIONS

Britain's pro-"life" (anti-abortion) campaigners include a large proportion of capital punishment freaks.

Their pro-"life" counterparts in the United States, who are even more fanatically religious and supportive of judicial killing, have been celebrating a double victory. First, the Supreme Court has overturned a 16-year-old ruling which in effect established a woman's right to choose. Five justices, including Reagan appointee Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, upheld a Deep South Missouri law which bans abortion counselling and public funding. It is generally admitted that the Supreme Court decision will make it more difficult for poor women to have an unwanted pregnancy terminated, whereas the rich will be able to travel elsewhere for the operation.

The pro-lifers' second cause for celebration is a legal ruling which allows the execution of minors and the mentally retarded in some American states.

Although the Moral Majority has been officially disbanded, its bad work continues in God's own country.

## THE BARMY ARMY

Noel Stanton's bunch of pathetic dupes, The Jesus Army, is conducting campaigns in a number of towns and cities. It deliberately appeals to impressionable, confused and socially inadequate young people who are mesmerised by repetitive chants of "Jesus!", and deluded by promises of healing and instant solutions to personal problems. Young recruits are also a source of cheap and unpaid labour. Describing this particular outfit as part of the Jesus industry is not a term of abuse. Behind the holy smoke screen of Jesusite quackery, "Pastor" Stanton has built a considerable business empire.

Attending a Jesus Army meeting is a revealing, though not pleasant, experience for the outsider. The proceedings are punctuated by outbursts of mindless sloganeering, grovelling and near hysteria. Many of the besotted recruits would be better served by a psychiatrist than a pastor.

The latest issue of the *Jesus Army Newspaper* reports a "Celebrate Jesus" event at which people were "cured" of assorted ailments ranging from a chest infection to swollen feet. But the paper's tallest story concerns Jasmine's "miracle healing".

Jasmine's left leg was shorter than the right, and a friend suggested that she should attend a Jesus Army prayer meeting. She went on to the platform and laid on the floor. The *Jesus Army Newspaper* reports: "Those nearby joined in the prayer and began to speak in tongues. The senior pastor, Noel Stanton, ministered healing in the name of Jesus. . . . At first she was afraid to look, but when she did she could see her left leg growing. After seven or eight minutes, Noel told her that they were the same length".

It is tempting to dismiss this story as a "leg-pull". But to people who are physically handicapped or mentally disturbed, the Jesus Army is a menace.

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It has been revealed that Billy Graham, one-time hero of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, received death threats by letter and telephone during his recent visit to Britain. They came from Protestant extremists who objected to Roman Catholic involvement in the American preacher's Mission 89. Paisleyites in Northern Ireland called for a boycott of churches which arranged a telelink with the London meetings. A spokesman for Cardinal Hume commented: "It is a sad state of affairs when one group of Christians attacks another group of Christians in the name of God".

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At an Old Bailey trial last month, a juror inadvertently tried to take the swearing-in oath on his Filofax. A court attendant spotted the mistake and substituted a Bible.

## Return of

In 1985 there were 17 million consultations with "alternative medical" practitioners involving a turnover of £300 million. Amongst the many "therapies" on offer, you could have chosen homoeopathy (favoured by the Queen), osteopathy, aromatherapy, Bach flower remedies, acupuncture, radionics, reflexology and many other even wilder techniques. Terry Sanderson asserts that they range from the dotty to the dangerous.

Many of the treatments offered by alternative practitioners are, when examined by a rational and objective eye, frankly crackers. Take the most venerable of them all: homoeopathy, which has the royal seal of approval. It proceeds from the assumption that the symptoms of some diseases are mirrored if certain poisons are taken, and therefore if you dilute these poisons (to the extent that there is not so much as a molecule of the original substance left), you can treat the disease with the resultant sugar tablet. A more incredible idea would be hard to imagine, and yet it has thousands of adherents who believe it passionately. Its proponents will produce hundreds of cases where homoeopathy has apparently triumphed where conventional medicine has failed. All are anecdotal, and every attempt to conclusively prove the efficacy of homoeopathy in clinical trials has failed.

In acupuncture, needles are inserted into the skin and, it is said, connect with an invisible network in the body (meridian lines). In this way it can relieve pain, cure ailments and cause changes in the general demeanour of the patient. A lot has to be taken on faith. The meridian lines are supposed to conduct a "life force" or "mind force" but these mysterious "lines" are totally undetectable by any known means.

It is true that alternative practitioners give their clients time and attention, which GPs often do not. A homoeopath will sit for an hour asking you questions about yourself and your condition. You'll feel like you're the most important person in the world for that hour. He or she will then give you sugar tablets and charge you £30 or £40.

In some instances there is a definite improvement. This is usually in cases where the symptoms have been brought on by stress or are in some other way psychosomatic. Alternative therapies also have their biggest successes on diseases — such as eczema and hay fever — which already have a high rate of spontaneous clear-up.

Nobody argues with the fact that stress can produce physical symptoms. We've all felt ill after particularly rough times in our lives. And there can be no doubt that some people are so prone to anxiety

# of the Witch-Doctor

TERRY SANDERSON

that they produce symptoms which are untreatable by any conventional method. The mind can certainly have a profound effect on the body.

In this respect, alternative "medicine" can help because it deals with the problems which are causing the stress and anxiety. The sufferer has probably been to his or her GP and been given a prescription but little sympathy. Along comes a complementary practitioner, allots the necessary time and provides what the GP could not. Often there is massage or close physical contact involved (osteopathy, chiropractic, spiritual healing), which brings great comfort. There will be long periods of discussion or counselling. Meditation and relaxation might be involved. The patient will be given the impression that they are taking a great part in their own recovery, which in some cases they are. All good stuff, and I have nothing against such techniques. The placebo effect is well documented. But, in the end, the sugar pills involved in placebo trials do not claim to be anything else.

My objection to complementary medicine springs from the fact that, in order to take advantage of it, you have to take on board a whole lot of garbage about "the essential spirit" or the "life force" and believe in organs of the body which are invisible.

In many ways rationality has to take a back seat, logic has to be suspended, and real, measurable science has to be abandoned. If people need counselling and massage and relaxation, let them have it, but let them have it free of mumbo-jumbo and sugar pills. There is no evidence that flower petal infusions can cure depression or that sniffing natural oils will have any effect at all on our health. No-one can produce a scrap of evidence to support the idea that pressing the bottom of the feet can cure kidney ailments. Yet those who seek alternative therapies are asked to accept all this and more nonsense in order to take advantage of the treatments.

There is a pseudo-religiosity about much of it (although we are assured that even non-believers can be healed by the laying on of hands). There has also been concern expressed that people with serious, treatable diseases such as early cancer, are consulting alternative practitioners and leaving life-saving, proven scientific treatment until too late.

An organisation called Campaign Against Health Fraud (or Quackbusters) was launched recently and revealed that many surgical consultants are alarmed at the rising number of patients they are seeing whose chances of survival have been severely restricted because they have chosen an "alternative cocktail" before seeking proper attention. It is understandable that people will seek a painless alternative — some of the promises made by alternative

practitioners are very alluring. No one wants to go into hospital and suffer the fears and risks of surgery if there is a quick, convenient and pleasant alternative.

But conventional medicine has taken a long time to reach its present state. It has taken many years of intensive research, experiment and yes, mistakes to get us where we are today. It isn't perfect — nobody would claim that — and it doesn't know the answer to everything. But this mass turning away from science coupled with an addiction to foolish, unproven witch-doctory is tragic. The alternative practitioners assert that the medical profession is in league with the pharmaceutical companies who just want to make vast fortunes from their drugs. Some of these powerful drugs have ghastly side-effects, they will say. Homoeopathic remedies, on the other hand, have no side effects. But as one eminent surgeon is reported as saying: "If a drug doesn't have side effects, it doesn't have any effects at all".

The drugs which are offered by conventional medicine are tested in strict trials to make sure they have the effect they claim to have. They are not allowed on to the market unless they have proved that they have an effect against a given invasive organism or bodily malfunction. Sometimes mistakes are made and there are tragic consequences. Even so, the wonderful progress in conventional medicine over the past century has been nothing short of stupendous. The occasional catastrophe which occurs when drugs have unforeseen side effects is the price we have to pay for progress.

And yet if the conventional physician does not provide an instant cure for every ailment, disappointed patients will pour scorn and derision upon him. Hardly anyone expresses such frustration with alternative practitioners, even though they promise a treatment for any condition you care to mention.

Few of these alternative therapies have such a history of research and development. They are fixed and do not progress. They require us to suspend disbelief and accept the illogical. They proceed from the assertion that if there is a disease, a therapy can be invented to treat it.

The answer, of course, is to accept that the mind often controls the functioning of the body and to proceed from there. Conventional doctors would be taught to use techniques such as massage, counselling and relaxation with patients whose lives are out of control. Such techniques should be embraced by the National Health Service. But the rest of the junk with which the alternative practitioners dress up such simple treatments should be consigned to the dustbin where they belong.

# Come Again . . . ?

PHILLIP ADAMS

Ever since the Crucifixion, Christians have been anxiously, ardently awaiting the Second Coming. From time to time, particularly in troubled times, the countdown has taken on a considerable urgency. But so far, nothing but false hopes, false starts and false prophets. Again and again the curtains have risen on the Final Act but the leading man has failed to appear.

Which reminds us of Pat Robertson. Pat, you'll recall, gave George Bush a run for the Republican nomination for the presidency. He was convinced that God wanted him in the White House. A successful televangelist, he was also convinced that the End was nigh, formally announcing that he had, somehow, purchased "exclusive television rights".

Robertson's team worked hard to organise the satellite coverage, doing detailed location surveys of Jerusalem so as to ascertain the best camera positions. There's also a record, in a biography of Robertson, of an earnest discussion about the possible effect of the Messiah's radiance on camera tubes. To what extent would lenses need to be filtered?

But our concern today is not so much the timing, or the lighting, as the costume. In what form will the Messiah appear? Should he take up where he left off? That is, present himself in the garb of the carpenter's son? Or should he take 2000 years of history and recent sociological developments into consideration and come back, for example, as one of those Messianic rock singers like Sting?

You could argue that he should maintain continuity, but even this, the simplest of answers, poses considerable problems. The theologians and Christian scholars tell me that Jesus did not look as popularly advertised.

Before Hollywood, the best-known portraits of the Lord were provided by Renaissance painters, with the Greenwich Mean Image established by Michelangelo for the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel.

Far from being small and swarthy — as he almost certainly was — here was a gigantic Jesus of Italianate colouring, and it's this image that evolved into Jesus Christ as Superstar, culminating in the performance of Tab Hunter who was crucified with shaven armpits.

Clearly, if Christ were to reappear as he really appeared, few would recognise him. Indeed, it's highly likely he couldn't get himself arrested let alone crucified. So I'm sure that Pat Robertson would agree that it might be wiser to embrace the Gospel according to MGM.

To overcome any suggestion of white supremacism, it might be a good idea if he came back a different colour. Obviously God's choice of white or swarth-

iness was an omnipotent whim.

Why not a Chinese Messiah, or a black one? Given that white civilisation, such as it was, is now in global retreat, and that the other colours have the numbers, it would seem a sensible marketing policy.

Oh, I know that some Christians would strenuously object to having an off-white Jesus, particularly deep southern fundamentalists and South African Boers. But then, most of them have a sizeable difficulty already, coping with the fact that Jesus was Jewish.

Pigmentation aside, there's the question of profession. Such biblical callings as carpentry, shepherding and fishing seem a smidgin unfashionable in a world of superconductivity and microchips. Given the deification of the mainframe, perhaps he should consider being a computer programmer. After all, if Moses were alive today, he'd be handing out the floppy disks, not clay tablets.

Or perhaps the Lord should appear as a television newsreader. Enormously respected are the television newsreaders. It would, on balance, be a very efficient way to announce the Second Coming. At six o'clock one night, the familiar network face reveals the Truth. "I am the News".

On second thoughts, one is making a number of assumptions. Why, for example, should the Saviour come back as a man? Women represent a sizeable percentage of the population, and tend to be more devout. The feminist movement would, I suspect, wholeheartedly endorse the idea of a female Messiah.

Conversely, they're very likely to reject a masculine one as yet another example of paternalism. All in all, I'd rather not get involved in this aspect of the argument. Let's leave that for feminists to discuss with God. It's between them and Her.

One has, of course, no wish to be sexist. Nor, I hasten to add, species-ist. Given the growing influence of green power and animal liberation, Heaven might be considering a completely new approach.

Clearly environmentalists will soon have the balance of power in most of our parliaments, and quite right too. Indeed, as surely as greenhouse and ozone represent a new apocalypse, the greenies are the missionaries of a new global religion where it is trees and whales, not loaves and fishes, that provide the inspiration and the metaphor.

"I talk to the trees, that's why they put me away", said the famous Eccles, echoing a fascinating habit of Otto von Bismarck.

Otto used to leave important meetings to embrace an elm. In hugging a favourite tree, Otto said that he gained physical and spiritual renewal. No, I'm not suggesting that the Messiah should stretch out his

arms to us in the form of boughs, though many a greenie would find such an embodiment profoundly beautiful.

Whatever, whenever, whoever. We'll have to remember one thing. The advice that provides the punchline for that marvellous joke of the 1970s, wherein the Saviour is seen walking through the streets of Manhattan, towards the Catholic cathedral.

A priest alerts a monseignor who, in turn, phones the cardinal of New York. Disbelief turns into alarm as to the appropriate response in behaviour. Finally, the cardinal rings John XXIII in the Vatican. "He'll be here in a few minutes, Holiness", says the cardinal. "What am I going to do?"

"For God's sake", came the response, "looka busy".

## In Memoriam: Sir Alfred Ayer

DAVID TRIBE

With the death of Sir Alfred Jules Ayer (better remembered by many as Professor A. J. Ayer), the humanist movement has lost one of its most distinguished, yet perhaps enigmatic, figures. I write this without the advantage of having read his two-part autobiography, *Part of My Life* (1977) and *Most of My Life* (1984), though I rather doubt if this would have resolved my questioning.

The public record is of a brilliant youth, a dynamic middle life and an honoured old age — an evolution not as common as might be thought in a supposedly meritocratic age. As set out in, say, the 1989 edition of *Men of Achievement*, it also reads like a litany of establishmentarianism: Eton College Scholar; Christ Church, Oxford, Hons Student; First Class Hons, Lit. Hum.; Fellow of three Oxford colleges (Wadham, New and Wolfson); two high-profile professorships (Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at the University of London and Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford); numerous honorary doctorates; Chevalier de la Legion D'Honneur; etc, etc. It would be easy to describe him as a "successful academic" with all that that implies to readers of senior-common-room fiction. But there was more to Ayer than that.

The first clue to a background not true-blue and involvements decidedly pink is Eton College *Scholar*. For doubtless he was patronised by boys who bought their way there and by certain members of staff. At any rate, as he describes in "Russell Remembered" (*New Humanist*, December 1972), he was "anxious to find reasons for disbelieving the truth of what my masters were telling me" and so acquired Bertrand Russell's *Sceptical Essays*.

At an early age, therefore, he was drawn to free-thought and he remained an honorary associate of the Rationalist Press Association to the end. Admittedly his most active involvement in the humanist movement was at the time of its greatest prospects in the late 1960s (at the instigation of Harold Blackham and/or the "young Turks" in the Ethical Union-British Humanist Association he replaced Sir Julian Huxley as BHA President in 1965) — but a similar

imputation might be levelled by those unfamiliar with personal circumstances at myself. The truth is that there was never any mileage for successful academics in associating themselves with humanism, and even less mileage in supporting the Homosexual Law Reform Society, whose president he also was.

At that time the EU-BHA, having exploded numerically by acquiring RPA members, was making exponential projections; and the first question he asked me when we first met was, "How many members has the National Secular Society?" (I replied that I didn't know and made it my business not to know, as the real influence of the movement — like that of the Anti-Corn Law League, Fabian Society or National Viewers' and Listeners' Association — was out of proportion to its membership.) I have no means of knowing whether disenchantment with BHA projections played any part in Ayer's retirement from the presidency by 1970.

How much he influenced BHA policy I also don't know. Certainly he upheld its most controversial aspects: repudiation of "a kind of religious war against the churches . . . in which only the humanists themselves took any great interest" (*Encounter*, June 1966); declaration that "a humanist is likely to be a man of the left" (*ibid*); and, at the "positive" level, support for Biafra, Israel, the "open society" and the Common Market. Yet he paid a generous tribute to the NSS in its *Centenary Brochure* (1966) — "all humanists must be grateful to your Society for the excellent work that it has done not only in combating superstition but in promoting the cause of justice and social welfare" — and his essay on "The Character of an Open Society" (*Humanist*, July 1971) shows some recognition of inconsistencies in and unfortunate social consequences of this trumpeted panacea.

To the world at large Professor A. J. Ayer was one of the best-known philosophers of the twentieth century. He was, by all accounts, a brilliant teacher, as his pellucid writing suggests. When I arrived in London in the 1950s his seminars at London University were legendary. In reappraising the work of other philosophers he had no peer apart from

Russell, whose disciple he claimed to be ("Russell Remembered"). How distinctive and original his own contribution was is a more contentious matter beyond my expertise.

He had the fortune and misfortune to achieve early notoriety. As a German-speaking Research Student, he was the right man in the right place at the right time: viz, the Vienna of Moritz Schlick in the mid-thirties. From this experience came the first English popularisation of logical positivism, *Language, Truth and Logic*, in 1936, when he was only 26. This philosophical school, to which Russell at one time belonged, posited that all statements which weren't tautological or empirical were "meaningless nonsense". Ayer's fortune was that intellectual notoriety ensures success in Academe; his misfortune was that the theory was flawed, and flawed in logic, as it is itself neither tautological nor empirical.

Ayer went on to write a great deal more that had nothing to do with logical positivism. Unlike many modern academics he read extensively outside his subject — to my surprise I was recently told he even read me — and his last published book was, I believe, on the non-academic *Thomas Paine*.

One of his major concerns was moral philosophy — the fountainhead of his humanism. Though eschewing "Bible-bashing", he was uncompromising in his rationalism on both logical and moral grounds. This is borne out by his inclusion of some forthright freethinkers in *The Humanist Outlook* (1968), in his "Introduction" to that book and in his *credo*, "What I Believe" (taken from a collection by that name and republished in *Humanist*, August 1966). Here are no "numinous experiences" or "reverent agnosticism" but a flat "I believe in science . . . I do not believe in God. . . Of survival, I do not think that it is true". Indeed he goes a little beyond where I would venture: "I do not believe that there is anything unknowable. Neither do I believe that anything is inexplicable".

He proceeds to an affirmation: "In my own view, love and friendship, the pursuit of knowledge, and the creation and enjoyment of works of art are goods in themselves and the fundamental principles of morality are those of freedom, justice and happiness". A worthy epitaph.

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## J.M. Wheeler and the

There cannot be many reference books still in demand and regarded as an authoritative source one hundred years after publication. Nevertheless this is true of Joseph Wheeler's *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations*, published in 1889. As such, this would seem to be the opportunity for an anniversary look at the author and the publication for which he is best remembered.

Joseph Mazzini Wheeler was born in London on 24 January 1850, the son of a journalist of radical tendency who signalled his admiration of the great Italian nationalist by bestowing his name upon his son. Wheeler's appetite for books and reading developed early and F. J. Gould's description of his library written towards the end of his life is sufficient to make any bibliophile salivate. Whilst his taste seems to have been broad, three strong themes emerge. First, he was concerned with theological issues in general, and from his writings he revealed a depth and breadth of understanding which were the equal of any. He was an authority on Buddhism and was interested in anthropological studies which impinged on religious belief. Secondly, he was particularly interested in the historical heroes of freethought; a collection of early editions of Thomas Paine's works demonstrate the importance of Paine in Wheeler's mind and that of other freethinkers. Thirdly, his love of Shakespeare is clear from his books, and was one of the foundation stones upon which a very special relationship with G. W. Foote was built.

Foote was a man who provoked both strong loyalty and animosity, but there was no ally more loyal than J. M. Wheeler. Their acquaintance began when they were both 18 and met in London. Their friendship was to last for 30 years. Both made some contribution to Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* at about this time, although Wheeler soon moved north to Glasgow and then on to Edinburgh where he worked as a lithographer. From 1876 Wheeler began to contribute to a number of journals launched at different times by Foote. These included *The Secularist*, *The Liberal* and then *The Freethinker*, which was first published in 1881. It was not long before the popularity of the new journal allowed Foote to offer Wheeler the position of sub-editor at a salary of £1 per week. Wheeler was also a regular contributor to *Progress*, another journal edited by Foote and launched in January 1883. Years later Foote wrote about the nature of their journalistic relationship:

"Our thoughts were as open as daylight to each other. No reticence but that of self-respect stood



# Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers

ELLEN WINSOR

between us. He influenced me, as I influenced him; and sometimes his thought passed into my work, as my thought passed into his. Rarely, I imagine are two men associated as we were."

There was, however, a difference of style. While Foote's prose was always exciting and frequently oratorical, Wheeler's was careful, precise and scholarly. They balanced one another well in a journal which has always set out to provoke as well as inform. In 1883 Foote was imprisoned for publishing blasphemous material in *The Freethinker*, and it was planned that Wheeler would keep the journal afloat. However, he soon suffered the first of a series of mental breakdowns with outbursts of mania. The situation did not stabilise until Foote's release from prison and after this their relationship was always a protective one.

Wheeler's contributions to *The Freethinker* took the form of a weekly column generally found on the first inside page following Foote's article. A sample of articles published in 1892 illustrates the breadth of his interest. They included "Prayer", "Women and Freethought", "Christianity in China", "The Crucifixion", "The Salvation Army", "Freethought 50 Years Ago" and "Shelley as a Freethinker", to name but a few. The sources for his writings comprised his own library, but he was also often to be seen in the British Museum Reading Room.

The *Biographical Dictionary* began to emerge in February 1889; it was first issued in eleven sixpenny parts which appeared at intervals during the year. Eventually a bound volume appeared in December, consisting of 355 pages at seven shillings and sixpence, and published by Foote's Progressive Publishing Company. Brief biographical details of some 1,800 personalities are given, together with an outline of the most important publications associated with them. There are numerous printing errors, but these hardly detract from a publication to which there is no real equivalent.

One particularly useful aspect of the *Dictionary* is that it contains identifications of authors of anonymous works whose identity had not been revealed previously. In his introduction Wheeler professed the aim of following it with "A History of Freethought in England". Sadly this never appeared as no publisher could be found. It seems that a manuscript did exist but it has disappeared. As well as his numerous contributions to freethought journals, Wheeler produced *Bible Studies*, *Footsteps of the Past* and *Frauds and Follies of the Fathers*, together with a variety of pamphlets and some books such as *Crimes of Christianity* which he co-authored with Foote.

All Wheeler's writings can be seen as part of a belief which he stated in an article in *The Freethinker*, 18 September 1892:

"Freethinkers war on Christianity because they see it to be a sham. . . It is to human thought and science, not to Christianity, we must look for aid to grapple with the difficulties which beset us, and which are lost sight of in a vain attempt to grasp cloudland."

In April 1898 Wheeler suffered a further mental breakdown. He was removed from his home to an asylum where he suffered mania for ten days. This subsided but had left him so exhausted that he died on 5 May. Foote's tribute to him in *The Freethinker* speaks not only of Wheeler's character but of the often heady optimism associated with 19th-century freethinkers and the special bond between the two men:

"He was brave, gentle, pure, loving and benevolent; full of kindness towards his fellows and all dumb animals. His nature had no stain of malignity. He loathed cruelty of every kind. He was as honest as truth, as veracious as daylight. He did whatever he undertook with a whole-hearted devotion. He was true to others and true to himself. He knew and felt that philosophy is barren without the fertilisation of love. He was one of the heralds of a new and more glorious day for humanity."

Needless to say such virtues involved few financial rewards. Soon, appeals for financial help for Mrs Wheeler appeared in *The Freethinker*.

Eventually Foote was to find a replacement sub-editor for *The Freethinker* in the young Chapman Cohen. While this was doubtless as productive as the earlier relationship had been in its way, one cannot help but feel that it lacked the passionate conviction which Wheeler and Foote had brought to the young journal in its most heroic days.

## References

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Stein, Gordon *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 1985.  
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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.

## BOOKS

GOD, MAN AND MRS THATCHER, by Jonathan Raban.  
Chatto & Windus, £2.99

Stimulated by the realisation that for too long the ideas behind Thatcherism have been allowed to dominate the political and intellectual agenda, Chatto have come up with a brilliant idea. They have launched a series of unashamedly polemical pamphlets discussing some of the more controversial issues of our time — written not by politicians but by literary figures, many of them novelists.

Pamphleteering has an honourable history in this country. Chatto published the Hogarth Letters in the 1930s, essays written by gurus like Rebecca West and H. G. Wells. Frederick Warburg, George Orwell and Tosco Fyvel formed Searchlight Books in 1940. The most sensational exercise in pamphleteering came with the Left Book Club, masterminded with that characteristic combination of financial flair and genuine conviction which stamped the work of Victor Gollancz.

Chatto's CounterBlasts are deliberately sustaining this tradition; in slim paperbacks of some 70 pages, they have revived the typeface and design of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, published in 1791 and arguably the most famous pamphlet ever. This first in the series, by Jonathan Raban, is a critique of Mrs Thatcher's address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1988.

The elders of the Assembly did not exactly leap about with enthusiasm on hearing Mrs Thatcher's speech. One Scottish theologian took particular exception to her rejection of collectivism in favour of individualism; "the Church", he said coldly, "has never countenanced the idea of an individualist's paradise".

The book takes the form of a transcript of the speech — relatively short, some twelve generously printed pages, followed by a point by point dissection of the text by Raban, who describes himself as "a literary critic, not a political commentator, who has spent a lot of time trying to understand what texts mean — reading between the lines, listening for undertones and ironies, chasing up key words and images".

Perhaps the most revealing point he uncovers is Thatcher's attitude to taxation and the semi-theological justification she invokes for it. "We must recognise that modern society is infinitely more complex than that of Biblical times. . .", she said, "in our generation, the only way we can ensure that no one is left without sustenance, help or opportunity, is to have laws to provide for health

## FREETHINKER

and education, pensions for the elderly, succour for the sick and disabled". And in a key passage she continues: "But intervention by the State must never become so great that it effectively removes personal responsibility. The same applies to taxation. For while you and I would work extremely hard whatever the circumstances, there are undoubtedly some who would not unless the incentive was there. And we need their efforts too".

In effect, says Raban, this means that poor people who are lazy must be deprived of State money in order to drive them to work, while rich people who are lazy must be given more money by the State in order to persuade them to go on working. "Both subsidies and tax-breaks are instruments for dealing with laziness in an impure, theologically unsound world", he writes. And Thatcher's patronising use of the phrase "you and I", implies that as co-religionists, co-fundamentalists, "we" need neither.

Raban nails several references throughout the text to Thatcher's emphasis on the individual as opposed to the collective, and her well-publicised contempt for "society". "Any set of social and economic arrangements", she says, "which is not founded on the acceptance of individual responsibility will do nothing but harm". And, referring to her much-quoted statement about her Cabinet that "as Prime Minister I couldn't waste time having any internal arguments", Raban asks whether her glorification of individual responsibility applies to Cabinets too?

Well trained academically as Mrs Thatcher is, she has never had much time for ideas; it is convictions she thrives on. Raban diagnoses one of the symptoms of our national *malaise* as a liking for language which is impatient with difficult abstractions, which dismisses imagination, which "cuts the cackle" and gets to the marrow of things. This is a language which Mrs Thatcher eagerly endorses; part of her triumph as a national leader, he says, has come from the way she has restored the language of government to the language of the family breakfast table.

But, he points out, the whole drift of government between the Education Act of 1871 and Mrs Thatcher's accession in 1979 was towards rescuing the individual from that language and that family. "For a hundred years", he says, "governments of every colour were committed to enlarging the language of citizenship. Now Mrs Thatcher's government is committed to closing it".

This pamphlet is a significant contribution in reversing that process.

TED McFADYEN

# REVIEWS

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT, by Steven Bruce. Clarendon Press, £19.50

Bruce has done it again. *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* surpasses his previous *God Save Ulster* study of Paisley, and is the best review of the Moral Majority to date. Given Jerry Falwell's formal declaration of the end of the Majority a couple of months ago in Las Vegas, the study is also timely.

Bruce is one of those rare sociologists who can explain and integrate sociological debate in a detailed study which provides an entertaining and informative read. The text zips along, presenting findings from the best of American scholarship, unattainable in Britain, together with Bruce's own assessment of the movement. In less than 200 pages this comprehensive review debunks popular and academic myths, and presents a wealth of detail and information to justify its conclusions. Unlike many other British commentators, Bruce's study is based on intimate contact and knowledge of the American fundamentalist scene. We are, therefore, able to see the motives behind the movement through the eyes of the fundamentalist, and thereby gain a greater understanding of their actions. Simply dismissing these groups as anachronisms as many do, undermines the need to understand the appeal of these groups, and to mount effective opposition. But here lies the book's weakness. While Bruce's analysis of the American scene can hardly be faulted, the same cannot be said for his insistence that there is no Moral Majority in Britain.

Bruce convincingly argues that that the American movement arose not only to protect its fundamentalist faith but a culture it had carefully protected over the last 100 years. This emphasis upon a defensive movement, rather than the offensive picture presented in counter Moral Majority myths, is vital. Although liberal reforms, black rights, acceptance of homosexuality, women's liberation and so on, were an affront to the fundamentalist faith, the reason for mobilization lay elsewhere: the centralising force of Federal Government, and various Supreme Court decisions which undermined the fundamentalists' local autonomy and promoted the cosmopolitan culture. In this sense, it was the State, not the fundamentalists, that was threatening American pluralism.

Borrowing heavily from American scholars, like Liebman, Bruce critically examines the other myths surrounding the role of televangelism, direct mailing,

and the relationship with the Republican New Right. Each is reappraised and placed in perspective, providing realistic accounts of size, role of TV ministries, the socio-moral rationales issues, and Political Action Committees. As any serious assessment must, Bruce draws attention to the real support base — existing fundamentalist congregations, whose indigenous growth convinced leaders and activists alike that things were changing. As a result, the Moral Majority's potential was always limited; the necessity for compromise in American politics ensured that it could never have grown as an independent political force beyond this base and its world view. Any weakening of that base would also adversely affect the Majority; and the Bakker and Swaggart scandals reopened the sectarian divide smoothed over by a common enemy — secular humanism. The end result is that the Moral Majority's success was limited to unseating a few liberals and banning a few books in local schools. In terms of federal legislation it made no progress at all.

But the American experience cannot be used to pass premature judgment on the British Moral Majority. Bruce's incredible claim that a Moral Majority could never exist in Britain is absurd. His argument rests upon the differences between the British and American models of government. It is true that State politics, public administration elections, ability to buy air time, and weaker political party discipline were vital for mobilisation and initial success in America. But why should a British Moral Majority have to adopt the same methods or conform to the same model? In fact, as *The Free-thinker* has consistently demonstrated, the British Majority has enjoyed as much if not *more* success than their American cousins. The Americans' ability to place X-Certificates on Rock records and blocking the Equal Rights Amendment and gay rights propositions at State levels, is matched by our Moral Majority's national controls on sexually explicit material and censorship of videos, the existence of a Broadcasting Standards Council and Clause 28, blocking Sunday Trading, numerous favourable court judgments, and a near miss on abortion.

History demonstrates that while it may be easier for American conservative Protestants to get issues into the political agenda, their British cousins have been more successful. The real difference is that our Moral Majority do not always declare who they are or they deliberately opt for pragmatic rather than moral argument: just look at the record of the Association of Christian Teachers, Sainsbury's influence on David Owen, not to mention Kinnock's conversion to family values.

JOHN CAMPBELL

# This Shylock Business

PETER COTES

Reading the critical reaction of the press to the latest stage production of *The Merchant of Venice*, seen in London's West End at the Phoenix Theatre, I was reminded of something once written by my old friend and mentor, the late Chapman Cohen, one time editor of this paper, on Shakespeare and The Jew. It was, I suspect, belief that in all probability the Bard had never *seen* a Jew, although this did not prevent Cohen forming the view that:

If Shakespeare had said in so many words, as did Lucretius, "See thou then, to what damned deeds religion urges men", he could hardly have said it more plainly than he does in this play. Had Shylock less dominated the play than he does, even Christians might have seen this clearly.

Chapman Cohen, like his predecessor, G. W. Foote, knew and loved his Shakespeare, and it was a sentence in this essay on the interpretation of Shylock — such a vexed question with our contemporary drama critics — that set me pondering all over again about the right and wrong way to depict the central figure who dominates the Tragedy, rather than the Comedy, of *The Merchant of Venice*. In our time, for instance, how best to bring out this many-sided character, without making him all-scoundrel or all-martyr? How to be just to "thine enemy", as the Bible has it, without sacrificing the meaning of the play, or even the reason for the play? How should it be tackled in the light of our times if one were to stage it oneself? The theme seems timeless, alas, although the play perhaps demands rather different consideration from its production today than it did the day before yesterday. And in the case of Shylock, Cohen used to say, we have the perfect example of the sort of man who has his soul narrowed and twisted — by his own religion and that of others.

Admittedly this is the "silly season", although it has to be acknowledged that this fact alone — despite the long hot summer that appeared to set in about June when the latest production of *The Merchant* was staged — fails to account for all the farrago of nonsense now being written regarding the performance of the latest incumbent to fill the play's most coveted role. There is little doubt that the current interest has been caused by Dustin Hoffman's appearance in London's West End. And mainly, I suspect, it is because his interpretation is lightweight and Shylock has always been regarded as heavy-weight. But whatever the reason, there's no doubt about the "hype" preceding the English stage debut of this kid from Brooklyn in the Old Play, and effect produced upon the attitude of many of our drama critics who were apparently trembling with excitement in anticipation of any possible gimmickry

that might be indulged in by the play's staging in a "new" version; introducing an international film star, with a New York accent, straight from Hollywood, to play a classic role that, perhaps, there has been more disagreement about than any other single Shakespearean character, apart from Hamlet. A challenge, moreover, that for ages past would appear to have defeated some of our very own star actors, as well as scores of scholars who have spent a lifetime arguing the toss about "meanings" in the play itself, as well as *interpretations* of its central figure.

Pontification abounded before, and after, the opening performance. As was to be expected from the publicity and the advance box-office, the "penny-a-line-judgement" journalists, nowadays swelling the ranks of drama critics, got their prominent headlines okay, as well as their bylines; managing to instigate old arguments — now to be waged anew by press, public and "thinkers" alike — that greeted their varied, not always predictable, conclusions regarding the conflicting interpretations that had, in any case, always existed about *that* Character.

Despite being written so much in verse, Shakespeare's is simple English — a fact that has failed to deter so many of his admirers, as well as detractors, reading into his plays ideas that merely serve as smokescreens; complicating rather than clarifying and proving a distraction for all those who favour understanding rather than confusion by the end of the play.

The engagement of an American film star in the flesh essaying such a role as Shylock is "big deal"; unsurprisingly enough, a "hot" box-office bet; a commercial justification being the packed houses played to during the summer months in a sweltering West End. But from his first appearance onwards, Mr Hoffman fails to dominate the proceedings (as he surely must) in the role of this misnamed "Comedy's" principal character. One could have excused him not resembling "a chapter of Genesis" — George Henry Lewes's immortal description of Kean's first appearance in the role — but any Shylock must be *seen* to impress his theatre audience, even if his stage audience inside a production of loutish, fortune-hunting snobs affect a sense of superiority that Shakespeare, with compassion and sense of justice, balances his conflict between the Jew, more sinned against than sinning, and his estate agent-yuppie tormentors.

And so we arrive at the key to the role of the one most tortured by religion — his own and others — the Eternal Jew. How should — how must — he be depicted if the plot is to be made credible and not merely another leaf out of John Cleese's "case-book"; in which farcical traumas (ducats, ships

sinking, male impersonators and pounds of flesh) abound? The drama critic of one national newspaper stamped his imprint upon the performance so firmly that his piece was headlined "Hoffman's Discreet Charm" (*Daily Telegraph*, 3 June); stumbling across, maybe, a fresh slant; a vital and necessary ingredient mislaid to date in the character of one who has always been played down the years as either villain or martyr. But was he ever a charmer? Somehow I don't think so.

"Was this the Jew that Shakespeare drew?" enquired Hazlitt of Macklin's depiction. Whilst an elderly James Agate was later to recall the Irving Shylock he'd seen as a boy at the Lyceum: "a 'gaunt Jew' one night and a 'tubby courtier' (Falstaff?) the next". Macklin, Kean (said to be the definitive Shylock) and Irving in their day, set the fashion of dissecting the good, as well as the bad, in the man, each of them making a well-rounded character of one who had previously been played as unmitigated scoundrel or comic Jew. (I saw the rumbustious Robert Atkins, replete with red beard, playing him like that, for comedy, some years ago at the Westminster Theatre. The result was disastrous.) But then Macklin, Kean and Irving were well known heavyweights, eschewing comedy, when they came to the part; as were the scores of famous actors (Wolfitt, Richardson, Gielgud and Olivier amongst them) who attempted, with only moderate success, to make the usurer-cum-butcher completely credible.

There had been an unsubtle portrait, on the same

lines as Robert Atkins's creation, when Joseph Greenwald, an American comedian who, like Mr Hoffman, was also a Jew, gave his own "original" interpretation some 60 years earlier at the Apollo Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. But even if at that time theatre audiences did not wish to cry with the Jew they certainly had no desire to laugh at him. Greenwald, fresh from his triumph in the comedy, *Abie's Irish Rose*, enjoyed only a short run. His, an idiosyncratic performance indeed, failed to run; as a stage performer Greenwald had no film star audience to attract at the box office.

An even shorter season was Ernest Milton's at the St James's Theatre during the 1930s. He was arguably one of our greatest, though most neglected, actors, possessing books, voice and a wonderful "sense of occasion". But although Milton (a convert from Judaism to Roman Catholicism) presented villainy and martyrdom in equal measure, his quota of charm-on-tap must have been severely limited. And unlike Wolfitt, Milton made no curtain speech, raising his arm to thank a tiny audience at the end of each performance. His was the best Shylock I have to date ever seen in a life of fairly constant theatregoing. But the run opened and closed inside the first week.

Nevertheless, I still regard Milton, an "unfashionable" actor, as superior to Hoffman, the world film star and "fashionable" entertainer, in the role of that charmless character who was neither fish, fowl nor good red herring. Perhaps a bit here and a bit there of each?

## LETTERS

### THE SUPREMACY OF RATIONALITY

There have been a spate of letters and articles lately where the thinking has not just been free but woolly or even wishful. John Bray (Letters, July) is one who could take more care. The scientific method is available to anybody, not just scientists. Secondly, logic does not need experience, still less be based on it: experience bears out the conclusions of logical thought you may feel some additional satisfaction. If it does not, you would be well advised to check your experience in addition to looking for flaws in your logic. In order not to be late, logic tells me that I should simply drive twice as fast and hence take only half the time; experience tells me it would be wiser to leave home earlier and not risk an accident; I will probably compromise!

Thirdly, the inability to prove either of two propositions does not render them equally rational. Any combination of rational/irrational is possible until proof finally decides the issue. In the meantime one has to fall back on what is probable, and there is certainly no reason to deduce they are equally probable. For example I cannot prove there are fairies at the bottom of Mr Bray's garden, and I cannot prove there are not: it is silly to say either possibility is equally

rational. Is he suggesting that every preposterous notion deserves anything more than a chuckle? Gods and souls are absurd, and every conversation I have had with believers leaves me laughing with astonishment at the nonsense people can hold between their ears. Once a person believes one crackpot idea they seem to fall easy prey to others: astrology, tea leaves, flying saucers, flat earth, etc. I wonder if any reader knows of any statistics suggesting such a correlation.

Lastly, why should defining the infinite be a contradiction in terms? A quick browse through an A-level mathematics text and Mr Bray will find that the concept of infinity can not only be precisely defined but also readily comprehended, which is more than can be said for his universal mind. By the way, the motive force behind a crank is, more or less, a lot of hot air.

In an otherwise sensible and interesting article, I was surprised to find T. F. Evans (July) considers that "the basic doctrine of the Church" is that we should consider others before ourselves. Just because some Christians have developed some social awareness does not mean to say it has anything to do with "the Church". It is hard to see how it can since the dogooding in the New Testament is always recommended in order to save your soul and be assured of a place in heaven, not for reasons of morality or social welfare. Does the Sermon on the Mount illustrate the caring attitude of the Church? Hardly, note that every

blessing is followed by a promise of personal gain. Maybe it was just a slip of the pen, but I thought that "the basic doctrine of the Church" was all that twaddle about gods, resurrection and judgement. Not much caring there: Christians lay up treasures for themselves in heaven (and earth), to hell with everyone else.

P. L. LANCASTER

### THE NAME OF GOD

If John Bray (Letters, July) doesn't want to be charged with belief in the supernatural, perhaps he should give up promoting theism, which is, of course, precisely that.

And if Mr Bray doesn't want me to look in the Bible for my definitions of God, then he shouldn't keep plugging the book in his local newspaper column, leading me to assume that he stood by what it says. If I wanted to recommend a book, it would be one which reflected my beliefs, not one that I disagreed with.

Mr Bray refers to God by religious jargon, such as "the supreme being", "the universal spirit", and "the infinite", and explains that he can't be more precise than that because God is indefinable. But if God is indefinable, it can't be defined, and what is Mr Bray's claim — that God is what made the universe — if not a definition? To say that God is indefinable, having already defined it, is to talk nonsense.

The potted summary of Mr Bray's arguments included the words "as yet incapable of proof", which suggest that he thinks that proof of God might become possible in the future. But if God is indefinable, then no-one can say what it's like, and Mr Bray couldn't recognise it — and thereby "prove" its existence — even if he met it. For all he knows, he's had his yearned-for proof already, and missed it.

Sadly for Mr Bray, his badly thought-out religious faith is just a forlorn hankering for something which, by his own definition, is unattainable. What could be more pointless than that?

NEALE BLACKFORD

### TAKE YOUR CHOICE

I have some comments on John Bray's latest letter (July).

First, a point of information. Mr Bray states: "A crank is, after all, a device for turning reciprocating action into forward motion". A crank converts reciprocal into rotary motion.

Mr Bray asserts that "since neither proposition can be proved, theism is as rational as atheism". There is a rational principle known as Occam's razor — "do not multiply entities beyond necessity". If, as Mr Bray concedes, the positive existential claims of theism cannot be proved, then according to Occam's razor atheism is the rational choice. I hereby propose to choose to believe there is an invisible hippopotamus ten feet above my house. On Mr Bray's principles this is "as rational" as disbelief in said hippopotamus.

"I can only point out that to define the infinite is a contradiction in terms": Mr Bray's grounds for asserting this curious conclusion are not clear. Presumably we are to understand that the "universal mind/soul etc" is infinite; again Mr Bray's grounds are unclear — they are certainly not stated. If the "universal mind/soul etc" is infinite and therefore indefinable, how can an analogy between it and Mr Bray's presumably "mind/soul/self/psyche" hold, or be informative?

"There is faith and there is knowledge, and there is nothing in between": perhaps Mr Bray would care

to enlarge on this interesting contribution to the theory of knowledge. In particular he could explain where "a judgement on the balance of probabilities" fits into this scheme. Also, how is this consistent with his earlier remarks (February) about belief in the existence of America being "a matter of faith".

MARTIN STOWER

### HUMANISM AND POP MUSIC

Reading *The Freethinker* on a regular basis, I sometimes feel that not enough space is dedicated to the Arts. Music in particular is rarely reviewed, and yet most people have an appreciation of music in some form. When music is discussed amongst humanists and freethinkers, the tendency is to concentrate on the classics and, occasionally, jazz. To the majority of the people in this country, their taste for music is in the more popular field and humanists rarely make reference to this music at all.

Many musical groups and individuals are prepared to stand up and be counted when it comes to politics and religion, but where are the humanists amongst this number? Cliff Richard is Christian, as he never stops telling us; Cat Stevens is a convert to Islam; Billy Bragg supports the Labour Party; the Proclaimers support the Scottish Nationalists; Sting and Bruce Springsteen work for Amnesty International; but where are the humanists? The only name that comes to mind is George Melly, and I am sure that he would not consider himself musically in the same field as the others I have mentioned. Bob Geldof would appear to have humanist sympathies, but has this even been pursued?

It is a similar story if you look at the Top Twenty music charts. The first UK chart was published in 1952 and they have been published every week since then, but only one record that has topped the charts can truly be called humanist; that is *Imagine* by John Lennon. Some of the so-called protest songs of the Sixties could be said to have humanist sympathies, but liberal Christians would also claim the songs as theirs. By contrast, there have been several religious songs at number one, including *Crying in the Chapel*, by Elvis Presley, and *Oh Happy Day*, by the Edwin Hawkins Singers, as well as many top ten entries. In addition, not surprisingly, many Christmas hits are religious, such as *Mary's Boy Child* and *A Child is Born*.

It would be wonderful to be able to organise a concert by pop music groups to raise money for the humanist movement. It would advertise humanism as a valid alternative for the young. Cliff Richard sings a song called *Why Should the Devil Have all the Good Music?* I don't think he does. Humanists certainly don't!

ROBIN WOOD

### INTEMPERATE FREETHINKER

Recent critics of a perceived Left wing bias in *The Freethinker* ought to be aware this is, sadly, a long-running complaint that has taken place largely since the present editor was appointed.

These trends were first singled out as a matter for debate in a highly critical letter to the journal published in November 1983 and signed by eight readers, including the distinguished philosopher, Professor Antony Flew. Three months later, in a *Freethinker* article, S. E. Parker and I itemised the many pieces of political propaganda that were constantly appearing in its pages. We deplored the intemperate use of language when reference was made to the Tory party as a party, which, in an unlovely phrase, "attracted jingoists and racists . . . like a dunghill attracts flies". We also

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 3 September, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Public Meeting.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group.** Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031 667 8389.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Friday, 8 September, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting followed by Social. Saturday, 9 September, 8 pm. Tenth anniversary party. Guest speakers, buffet, wine. Admission £3.

**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.

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

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton, Wednesday, 13 September, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Reports on the BHA Annual Conference and Summer School.

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

National Secular Society

### ANNUAL OUTING

Sheffield Park and the  
Bluebell Railway

Sunday, 10 September

Details from the NSS,  
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL  
telephone 01-272 1266

### THE FREETHINKER

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highlighted the support that was given in articles and in leader comments to movements and campaigns that were fundamentally anti-western or illiberal, or in other ways subtly opposed to freethought values.

In his reply, in April 1984, the editor did not seem to grasp why support for far Left groups could pose an inherent threat to the intellectual integrity of those who claim to believe in freedom of thought and democratic liberties. Instead he justified alliance with other radical groups "which many Freethinkers endorse". Other points he made had little to do with secularism, humanism or freethought. There was much talk of British "jingoism", Right-wing Tory racists, American-backed dictatorships, etc. "The only justifiable complaint about the paper's campaigning role", he wrote, "is its lack of forcefulness". He added ominously: "But we are working on it".

Straight out of the horse's mouth, as they say. The only solution is to do what I have done: withdraw support. I now no longer write for *The Freethinker*, and I seldom bother to read it.

ANTONY MILNE

### BLATANT FREETHINKER

I protest most strongly against the Right-wing bias evident in your editorial, *Strange Values* (July), in which readers are advised that they could do something useful by joining their local Conservative Association. Such blatant propaganda on behalf of a political party is deplorable.

PETER ASHBERRY

This correspondence is closed — Editor.

## Freethinker Fund

Loyal readers of *The Freethinker* may disagree on some issues, particularly politics. But they put differences aside when it comes to supporting the paper that for over a century has promoted freethought, rationalism and the rejection of religious superstition. Their generosity is reflected in the list of donations published every month. Appreciation is expressed to all contributors. The latest list is published below.

J. Little and J. E. Sykes, £1 each; K. H. Bardsley, £1.50; L. J. Johnson-Laird, K. J. Manning, D. Redhead and F. Walker, £2 each; D. Clamp, £2.50; W. Aikenhead, J. van der Sloot and J. W. White, £3 each; N. Blewitt, J. W. Carter, N. V. Cluett, S. E. Collis, M. P. Dobson, P. J. Gamgee, Q. Gill, L. Glyn, J. L. Greenhalgh, R. Hopkins, W. Horrocks, W. Irvine, C. Lee, S. D. McDonald, J. H. Morton and K. B. G. Spencer, £5 each; J. Paterson and M. Pinkser, £8 each; A. Akkermans, C. Bayliss, N. Blackford, K. R. Gill and L. B. Halstead, £10 each; C. Kensit, £13; I. Campbell, £19.40.

Total for June: £201.40.

The only motion on the agenda of Birmingham Humanist Group's annual general meeting was that the Group should affiliate to the National Secular Society. It was defeated by two votes.

# Suicide Ends Torment of Gay Christian

Humanists have expressed grave concern that an evangelist, whose gay son committed suicide at the age of 27 because he could not reconcile his homosexuality with the teachings of his church and Bible, is now running a "counselling" agency which seeks to "deliver" gay people from their "sinful" ways.

George Harvey, director of U-Turn Anglia, wrote an article in the evangelical newspaper, *Challenge* (January), in which he described his shock and surprise when police officers came to tell him and his wife that their son was dead. Correspondence and a diary kept by their son and found in his car revealed that he was gay, and had been driven by guilt and shame to take his own life.

Neither George Harvey nor his wife had suspected their son's gayness, nor the months of mental torment and anguish he had gone through before killing himself. Mr Harvey had always prided himself that he could spot "one of them" a mile off. He was "deeply scathing" in his attitude to the gay community and "full of righteous indignation" when speaking of AIDS as the "judgement of God" on homosexuals.

The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association declared in a press statement: "This very attitude was clearly more than enough to lead a sensitive and tormented young man, who believed himself a 'sinner' facing divine retribution, to the desperate act of suicide. But his son's death has not softened Harvey's judgemental attitudes. It has not caused

him to reassess his vile beliefs. Rather it has led him to put the fear of God into many other unhappy gay men and lesbians, and seek to persuade them that they must give up their sinful ways or face God's judgement. He calls this activity 'counselling'! It could lead to further deaths".

U-Turn Anglia is linked with two other notorious Christian "counselling" organisations, Turnabout and True Freedom Trust.

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**Relatives of the 189 Americans killed in the Lockerbie air disaster have not received any payment from the £2 million donated to the appeal fund. Many are in serious financial difficulties, but all they received is an inscribed copy of the Bible.**

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## Victims of Religious Mania

Abdul Malik, a devout Muslim who prayed three times daily at the mosque, cut his 16-year-old daughter's throat because she had decided to become a Christian. His wife and two younger daughters witnessed the horrific incident at the family home in Aston. Malik was found guilty of murder by a jury at Birmingham Crown Court and jailed for life.

Mr James Hunt, QC, who prosecuted, said that what Malik did to his daughter "was to sacrifice her for his religion". When Pharbin Malik started attending meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, her father threatened to kill her and himself.

The court heard what happened when the girl deliberately refused her father's demands to praise Allah and say Muslim prayers. He held her by the hair on the living-room floor and pressed a 12-inch kitchen knife against her throat. When she would not say "in the name of Allah", he slashed her with the knife, severing the jugular vein. She staggered out of the house and collapsed in a pool of blood on the pavement where she died.

Malik was described by defending counsel as a man who was blinded by religious faith.

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### *The Right to Die*

true of my own mother, for example. She died in May in an idyllic nursing home, but would far rather have died when she became incapable of looking after herself.

"Had I been paying the £12,000 or so it cost to keep her there, her distress would have known no bounds. As it was, she accepted the care with resignation".

Dealing with the question of mercy killings, Mrs Davies said that relatives who end a life out of compassion are usually given a non-custodial sentence.

"But this is not always so", she added. "I could tell you about a man who is serving a sentence of life imprisonment. His appeal and leave to appeal to the House of Lords have been denied".

Jean Davies said that although the VES, which was founded in 1935, had not yet achieved its aim, it should not be assumed that there were no signs of progress. When the Society was set up it was the only one of its kind in the world. There are now around 30 such organisations, forming the World Federation of Right-to-Die organisations.

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**Jack Straw, Labour's education spokesman, has come under fire from members of his constituency party for advocating the extension of voluntary-aided status to Muslim schools. The party chairman and his wife, who claim to represent a majority of members, said in a letter to Mr Straw: "This is an issue on which we must say a forceful 'no' to the Asian community, whether we lose votes or not". They described the Muslim education attitudes to girls as one "whose basic purpose is to produce women prepared for docile and devout acceptance of a reactionary family and social structure where women are possessions".**