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# The Freethinker

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## "BLASPHEMOUS" VIDEOTAPE BANNED BY FILM CENSORSHIP BOARD

The blasphemy law has raised its silly head again. For a year British Muslims were told that it couldn't be used against the offensive references to Muhammad in Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*; then — as briefly reported in the October issue of *The Freethinker* — it was used against the sexual representation of Jesus in the video film *Visions of Ecstasy*.

Nicolas Walter writes: *Visions of Ecstasy* is an 18-minute imaginative treatment of the 16th-century Spanish Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila, who became famous for her visions and trances and was made a Doctor of the Church and eventually a Catholic Saint. Nigel Wingrove, the director, and John Stephenson, the producer, explore the psychological connotations of Teresa's mystical experiences. Their film contains no factual information or dialogue, and the sound-track consists of background music. The main actress is a soft-porn model about half the age of Teresa at the relevant time. There are various scenes of violence and sex, the latter involving a series of erotic fantasies relating to another woman representing an *alter ego* and to a man representing the dead body of Christ on the Cross. All this has little to do with any of the writings by or about Teresa herself, in which there is no hint of explicit sex, but it is as legitimate a treatment of a religious subject as several recent films — *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, *Hail Mary!*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* — which are freely available in cinemas or as videos.

Under the Video Recordings Act of 1984 (which was strongly opposed by the freethought movement during its passage through Parliament), a video film may be publicly distributed only when it has received a certificate from the British Board of Film Classification (né Censors). The Board classifies videos (like films) according to age suitability, but it refuses

certificates to items which break the Obscene Publications Acts or which "infringe other provisions of the criminal law"; its refusals are subject to appeal to the quasi-judicial Video Appeals Committee. The Board passes large numbers of offensive films and videos every year. Few videos have in fact been refused certificates, all on grounds of explicit sex or violence, and very few producers have appealed. And no film or video has even been refused a certificate on grounds of blasphemy — until now. In September 1989 the Board refused a certificate to *Visions of Ecstasy* on the ground that "a reasonable jury properly directed would find that the work infringes the criminal law of blasphemy". In October the producers appealed against this decision, and in December the appeal was heard by a panel of the Video Appeals Committee.

The hearing, which was held on 6 and 7 December at the offices of the Royal Institute of Public Health and Hygiene in the presence of about 40 people, was a miniature repeat of the *Gay News* trial of 1977 — with even some of the same lawyers and reporters present. The factual question was the sexual treatment of Jesus, and the legal question was whether this was blasphemous.

The first day was taken up with examination of witnesses — a departure from the *Gay News* trial, in which evidence of merit or intent was excluded. Geoffrey Robertson, counsel for the producers (and a well-known radical barrister), produced expert testimony that sexual interpretation of Christian mysticism is a legitimate enterprise and that this particular treatment is doctrinally and artistically valid. The witnesses — Marina Warner, Colin MacCabe, Sara Maitland, Nicholas Coote and Fay Weldon — tried hard but didn't seem to impress the

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# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## A DISMAL DECADE

The 'Eighties passed unlamented by rationalists and humanitarians. It was a decade of the worst Victorian values. Philistinism, greed, jingoism and reactionary attitudes were given their head.

The extent to which Thatcherite Britain developed into a hard-nosed and uncaring society was reflected in a report published last month in *The Lancet*. The result of surveys conducted over a four-year period by a consultant psychiatrist at Friern Barnet Hospital, London, exposed the reality of Government policy on care for the mentally ill. Already 55 psychiatric hospitals have been closed and another 22 are likely to go. The report shows that "returning patients to the community" has in fact meant turning large numbers of mentally ill people out of hospital to wander the streets, "living like feral children in the forest of the city, scavenging for garbage and subsisting on charitable handouts". Many end up in prison for minor offences simply because the police cannot find a place for them in a mental institution.

In addition to the mentally ill, an army of young homeless, unable to find work in the provinces or reasonably rented accommodation in London, spend the winter nights in doorways and disused buildings. This state of affairs is a direct result of changes in the social security system introduced by the Government which makes it far more difficult for recipients to get bed and breakfast accommodation.

The 'Eighties was also a decade of creeping censorship — official and otherwise — with the Government setting the pace. The notorious Clause 28 of the Local Government Act aimed at imposing direct censorship and encouraging self-censorship in libraries and schools. The Government also attempted, with varying degrees of success, to censor the contents of radio and television programmes, while its expensive obsession with *Spycatcher* made Britain a laughing-stock.

In the private sector, Conservative Mary Whitehouse's and Left-wing Clare Short's prurient busy-bodies picketed and invaded newsagents' shops selling magazines they don't like. Islamic zealots fire-bombed bookshops suspected of selling a book they don't like.

Although reactionaries were unable to spawn a "moral majority" on the American scale, there was a dangerous upsurge of far-Right politics and fundamentalist religion. The two invariably flourish together, creating a climate in which it is extremely difficult to successfully promote progressive measures. Religious pressure groups, whose ideas would have

# S AND NOTES

been regarded as a joke in mainstream political circles ten years ago, were set up ostensibly to defend the family, community standards and true morality. They became increasingly successful as the decade wore on, being patronised and sponsored by politicians who worked assiduously for tougher religious clauses in the Education Reform Act 1988 and in defence of absurd Sunday observance and blasphemy laws.

Throughout the 'Eighties, Christian organisations continued to attack reforms that were achieved in the teeth of religious opposition during the 1960s. Their main target was the 1967 Abortion Act. Some of the crazier groups advocated recriminalisation of homosexual practices, although at least one Anglican diocese would collapse without its gay clergy and there would be rows of empty seats at evangelical rallies if a certain gay singing star did not put in an appearance.

Britain's evangelical and fundamentalist Christians became strongly influenced by the precepts and style of their American counterparts who were actively promoting the illiberalism and the hillybilly religion that complemented Reaganite political philosophy. But the "born again" fraternity in Britain were quick to reject their shop-soiled American brethren when religious business empires toppled in the aftermath of financial and sexual scandals.

The January 1980 *Freethinker* carried warnings — not for the first time — about the menace of Islam. Of course such warnings were dismissed as alarmist and racist by ecumenical Christians, "positive" humanists and political innocents. A few months later, Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington was grovelling to an Arab monarch over the televising of *Death of a Princess*. And in August the same year, it was reported that four Iranians were executed by stoning for alleged sexual offences. The murderous face of Islam was emerging.

In 1981, following the 1977 Old Bailey trial at which the editor of *Gay News* was threatened with imprisonment for blasphemy, the Law Commissioners issued a Working Paper on *Offences Against Religion and Public Worship*. In a final report four years later, the majority Commissioners recommended the abolition of blasphemy law. However, two of them wrote a note of dissent, an action that gave officialdom the excuse to do nothing.

Rejection of the Law Commissioners' recommendation on blasphemy law had serious repercussions before the end of the decade. Religious Muslims, encouraged by the mullahs and some Labour MPs,

became increasingly aggressive and demanded ever more privileges, including protection by blasphemy law, for their faith. Publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* provided them with a "cause" and, as blasphemy law applied to Christianity alone, justification of a kind for complaints about religious discrimination.

Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence on Salman Rushdie brought thousands of fanatical Muslims on to the streets of Britain, attacking bookshops and threatening publishers. The anti-Rushdie hysteria reached an obscene point last month with a Muslim Day of Solidarity. It would be more accurately described as a Muslim Day of Savagery. Thousands assembled in mosques and voted in favour of the death penalty on the "apostate". One Islamic leader quoted the Koran: "The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Apostle, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land, is execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land." Belief in such sadistic rubbish produces a Middle Ages mentality that caused the author of a booklet published by the Birmingham-based Islamic Propagation Centre, a registered charity, to write of Salman Rushdie: "May he die a coward's death, a hundred times a day, and eventually when death catches up with him, may he simmer in hell for all eternity!"

Of course the decade was not all Bible black. Reforms were maintained, censorship resisted and surveys revealed a falling away of religious belief and commitment. Nevertheless it would be foolish to ignore the continuing threat of Christian, Judaic and Islamic fundamentalism.

Next year the National Secular Society will celebrate its 125th anniversary and *The Freethinker* its 110th. An increase in registered members and readers will be a practical demonstration of support for "the best of causes". Organisations and publications cannot exist on goodwill alone.

It is also extremely important that individuals and organisations exploit every opportunity for making their views known to the media, Parliament and relevant authorities. And they should see to it that terms like atheism and secularism are not discarded or obscured by namby-pamby expressions of unbelief in the 1990s.

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Sheffield magistrates bound over Abeldam Bounya, a 28-year-old Muslim, to be of good behaviour when he appeared on a charge of striking his wife. She suffered injuries to her head and back. Bounya told the police that under Islamic law he was allowed to hit his wife. This claim was confirmed by Daud Musa Pidcock, leader of the recently formed Islamic Party of Great Britain.

## WITH "WARM" WISHES

Last month two representatives of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service received goodwill messages from soul-saving Christian opponents of abortion.

After Pastor David Church, head of something called Milton Keynes Covenant Fellowship, heard Josie Blair in a radio discussion on abortion, he was inspired, nay, directly instructed by the Almighty to warn her of the wrath to come. He wrote most movingly: "As I was praying early one morning last week, I believe that God said 'warn Josie of my judgement that awaits her unless she repents and changes her ways'." Modestly describing himself "as his representative" in Milton Keynes, Pastor Church conveyed God's warning that unless she repented, Josie Blair will in due course "stand before the judgement seat of Christ . . . and sentenced to eternal (never never ending) Hell. . . Yours with the love of Christ."

Seeing Diane Munday's name in the *Daily Mirror* prompted another specimen of Christian love, a Mr

R. J. Crosbie, Cheltenham, to inform her: "When you die and are brought before God, you will wish that your own existence will never have occurred." Although ranking her with Hitler, the Cheltenham Christian assured Diane Munday that his was not a hate letter. He wished her "a comfortably peaceful sleep tonight . . . because one day you will depart this life and your peace will disappear forever".

Christians who liken the BPAS's public relations officer to Hitler are either ignorant of or ignore the fact that abortion was outlawed in Nazi Germany. Indeed few regimes in modern times promoted early marriage and breeding with such fervour. Nor do many anti-abortion crusaders know, or else prefer to forget, that the incidence of foeticide by spontaneous miscarriage ("an act of God") is far greater than that of induced abortion.

The religious dogmatists are not just ignorant. They are cruel, preferring children to be born with fearful mental and physical defects rather than a foetus being medically aborted. But then what is to be expected of people who believe in an "eternal (never never ending) Hell"?

## Freethinker Fund

Throughout the year hundreds of weekly and monthly religious publications appear, while national and local newspapers allocate a considerable amount of space to commentary by the clergy. The secular humanist movement, on the other hand, is dependent on a few magazines, some of which are produced entirely by voluntary effort. Of these, *The Freethinker* has the longest history of unbroken publication.

The fact that *The Freethinker* has survived for nearly 109 years is a tribute to its unpaid writers, and the loyal and generous support of its readers. The need for its appearance without fail every month will be as great as ever in the 1990s.

An increase in postage was just one addition to expenses last year. However, it is necessary to keep the price of the paper at a modest level in order to attract new readers, particularly among the young. So *The Freethinker* relies on legacies and donations to the Fund if it is to remain on a sound financial footing.

The final list of contributors in 1989 is given below. Our thanks to them and to all supporters whose generosity resulted in such a splendid total for the year.

T. J. Davies, H. Ford, N. Ferguson, J. Hein and S. Watson, £1 each; F. Yates, £1.25; R. Power, £1.40; M. C. Ansell, R. Grieve, A. Hall, M. D. Hallett, G. McGhee and W. G. Stirling, £2 each; A. Beeson, R. J. Beale, G. Horner and M. Sargent, £3 each; F. J. Muskett, £3.50; A. Stern, £4; P. Stiehl, £4.40;

G. Airey, J. N. Ainsworth, R. A. Awbery, I. Baker, A. C. F. Chambre, G. A. Coupland, A. Dawn, R. Delaurey, G. Emery, M. P. Darley, M. Duane, P. George, E. Goodman, J. Greenhalgh, D. T. Harris, E. Haslam, J. Holland, J. Lippitt, S. G. Mace, F. Pamphilon, T. J. Peters, S. J. Sanders, S. Smith, W. S. Spencer, G. Taylor, P. K. Willmott, V. Wilson and P. D. Wrightson, £5 each; J. Ryan and W. H. Seddon, £9 each; L. B. Kendall and J. Watson, £10 each; F. G. Evans, £20; O. Grubiak and W. Scott, £25 each.

Total for November and December: £291.55.  
Grand total for 1989: £4,652.24 and \$65.

## NEWSWATCH

*The Freethinker* does not employ the services of a press cuttings agency. All the more useful then, are the newspaper reports sent in by readers from all parts of Britain and even further afield. Items from local newspapers are often of particular interest.

Although a newspaper report may not be referred to in the next issue of *The Freethinker*, this does not mean that it has been ignored. It can be a useful addition to our files. And of course some reports received by *The Freethinker* are sent to freethought publications in other countries.

It is not always possible to acknowledge press cuttings. But they are much appreciated and we thank all those readers who take the trouble to send them. Please continue doing so. The source and date should be clearly marked, and all items sent direct to the editor at 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.

# Embryos and Ethics

JAMES SANG

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill promises to be the most contentious of this Parliamentary session. Already the Duke of Norfolk, Britain's premier lay Catholic, has fiercely attacked the Bill in the House of Lords. On the other hand, the Archbishop of York, Dr John Habgood, supports its proposals. James Sang, Emeritus Professor of Genetics, University of Sussex, argues that embryo research and experiment is necessary if infertility and genetic defects are to be overcome.

Five years after it was published, the Warnock Report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Cmnd 9314) is to be the basis of new legislation during the current session of Parliament. This will get off to a bad start in the House of Lords since the Government is apparently also prepared to accept motions reducing the age at which abortions may be procured, as part of its package of legislation on reproduction, although Warnock noted specifically that abortion was outside its terms of reference. Since there is to be a free vote in both Houses, this confusion of issues augurs ill for the rational discussion of new laws codifying practices which have been regulated so far by the moral good sense of those involved. In fact, one can argue that the introduction of criminal law into this field of human behaviour is itself unethical. But it is too late to put that case now.

Over one in ten, perhaps as many as one in six, British couples are infertile, and one extreme argument, which will undoubtedly be put, is that this is an act of God which must not be interfered with; it is nature's way of dealing with the overpopulation problem! Contrariwise, one can argue that the many cases of infertility are physiological defects which can be corrected by modern medicine, just as we expect our GPs, clinics and hospitals to cure other metabolic weaknesses. In practice, of course, we have been treating infertile women (and men) by correcting their hormone balance for 50 years or more, and where artificial insemination (AI), either by the husband (AIH) or by a donor (AID), provided the necessary treatment, this, too, has been the accepted clinical practice for almost as long. The new legislation proposes the setting up of a licensing body which, among other things, would regulate and licence AID services for the first time. The practice of AID without a licence will then become a criminal offence. It is unlikely that this codification of practice will ruffle many feathers.

The debatable issues arise from three scientific developments. The first is our ability to collect human ova, by the hormone trick of superovulation, and of providing conditions under which they may be fertilised *in vitro* (IVF) before transfer to the

mother's womb. Louise Brown, the first child born using IVF, is now eleven years old, and some 4,000 UK parents have since started families this way. It is a small addition to the population, but a large addition to the happiness of erstwhile infertile couples. Although a well established technique, only around 11 per cent of IVF implants are successful — about the same proportion as normal sexually conceived embryos — but much research is still necessary, and this is where the argument starts.

The second development, which has already created controversy in American courts, is that embryos can be stored deep-frozen, essentially using techniques pioneered for keeping cell cultures. In practice, this has allowed one family to have twin daughters born 18 months apart! But in America, as one would expect, property rights over stored embryos have given employment to specialist lawyers and, accepting that IVF is an ongoing method for dealing with infertility, it is certainly proper that these legal rights should be defined. For example, an AIH child not *in utero* at the time of the husband's death should perhaps be disregarded for inheritance/succession; primogeniture should be timed from birth, not fertilisation, etc. Again, the proposed banning of all surrogacy is clearly a matter that has to be debated and the law defined. It is not obvious that our legislators will follow all Warnock's recommendations on the regulation of IVF.

The most contentious aspects of the Act arise from the third development: our ability to grow a human embryo outside the womb. Scientists want to do this for two reasons: so that they can understand human embryonic development in sufficient detail to improve the success rate of IVF, and because cultured embryos may permit the identification of those carrying inherited diseases. For example, one in 20 Britons carry a single copy of a mutant gene for cystic fibrosis. When such carriers mate, there is a one in four chance that their child will inherit two doses of the gene and will die of this fatal lung disorder. However, the new techniques of molecular genetics allow the identification of such a mutant pre-implantation embryo which can then be discarded in favour of its normal twin.

Twenty thousand children are born each year with inherited disorders, a fifth of them disabling, so it is not surprising that scientists argue strongly for continuing embryo research. Indeed, if it is not permitted, and this is the choice the Government is putting to Parliament, many research workers will simply emigrate to countries where they can continue their studies.

The Government is allowing a free vote on this choice which they see as an ethical dilemma, for one can argue that human life begins at fertilisation, and

that this single cell should be protected from experiment on account of its human potential. The Warnock Committee took a less simple-minded approach and argued that the very early embryo was so different from a fully formed foetus that it might "legitimately be used as a means to an end that was good for other humans". Ethicists will recognise the principle of utility which the Report moderates by fixing limits beyond which researchers must not be allowed to go — another ethical decision.

It is proposed that a Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority be set up to do the regulating, but it is unlikely to allow embryo culture to continue beyond the 14 days proposed by Warnock, which by a fudge is now called the pre-embryo. The mammalian embryo is peculiar in that at the blastocyst stage (*circa* day six from fertilisation in the human) part of this ball of cells forms an inner cell mass which will be the embryo proper, while the remaining cells form the placenta and foetal membranes. Thus not everything will be "human" from the beginning. Later (*circa* day ten in the human) this blastocyst implants

in the uterus, and by the 14th day the first proper embryo organisation (the primitive streak) is formed. If two primitive streaks arise, twins will develop; but this twinning cannot occur later. Thus we have an age, and a stage, which defines the embryo as an individual, and the Warnock Committee set this as the limit for embryo culture. All embryos must be destroyed after 14 days of development *in vitro*. Presumably researchers would like to let development run for longer. But the Committee was split even on this 14-day ceiling. Political considerations override ethics!

Since even Hume considered that a moral stance "was more properly felt than judg'd of", we cannot expect our politicians to do more than express their prejudices in moralistic terms. But perhaps their votes will recognise that many apparently unnatural medical developments have been highly successful. In any event, whatever happens here, embryo research will continue; for the prize of overcoming infertility and of ameliorating genetic disease is too great to be abandoned.

## Anti-Porn Feminism—a Religious Legacy

MARY HAYWARD

Mary Hayward examines the motives of a new feminist group led by Clare Short, MP (Labour, Birmingham Ladywood), who are trying to pressurise newsagents to withdraw from sale allegedly pornographic magazines. Mrs Hayward is honorary secretary of the Campaign Against Censorship.

One does not have to read much about anti-porn feminists to notice that a disproportionate number of them attended convent schools. Once inculcated in childhood, the habit of dogmatism — particularly of being dogmatic about sex — simply carries over from the old ideology to the new. So does a deeply ingrained fear of sex itself.

In this respect there is very little difference between the old fashioned Moral Majority or Roman Catholic campaigner and her younger feminist sister; only the jargon is different. But approach and method, strategy and tactics, are the same. There is the same manipulation of statistics and half-truths, the same selection of biased and anecdotal evidence, the same lobbying and bullying, and now the same intimidation.

It probably has not occurred to Clare Short and her companions, who invaded a central London branch of W. H. Smith, that there is no practical difference between their behaviour and that of American anti-abortion campaigners who invade clinics. Those of us who believe in freedom of speech and publications would be angry, but not all that surprised, to see them escalate from posing as victims

in order to exploit liberal sensibilities, to demanding that the law be changed to suit them. What we have got here is another brand of fundamentalist who can be expected to behave accordingly.

This means that, boring and unimportant though pornography is, the right of those who want it must be defended. It might be different if the feminist view of human sexuality bore any relation to the way all but a minority of men and women actually think and behave. The vast majority of women take Page 3 in their stride. However, just as a large number of people are nominal members of a religious sect but would be rightly furious if religious beliefs and practices were imposed on them by force, so a large number of people unthinkingly accept the anti-porn position with very little idea of what it would mean if the Clare Short brigade actually got their way. They have never asked themselves what a society would be like if it were based on the assumption that all men are rampant aggressors and all women passive victims, which translated the old phrase about looking on a woman to lust after her into the slogan "porn is the theory and rape is the practice", which insists that men should feel guilty about their sexuality and women should feel afraid.

The creed of the anti-porn feminist is little different from that of those who never leave their church; that the human mind is intrinsically wicked, the human body intrinsically evil, and the human spirit not to be trusted with the freedom to look, read, or choose for itself.

# Some Thoughts and Observations on Murdering the Wrong People

DAVID YALLOP

A Freethinker editorial (Justice Shamed, November 1989) drew criticism from Professor Glyn Emery (Letters, December 1989). David Yallop, who spent two years investigating the Derek Bentley case when researching his book, *To Encourage the Others*, defends the Freethinker assertion that Bentley and Timothy Evans were judicially murdered.

I recall many years ago a leading liberal-thinking figure in this country sympathising with me with the following observation: "It must be so difficult for you young people to find a cause to champion these days. Capital punishment has been abolished. Women have the right to obtain abortion. Homosexuality has been legalised. There seems so little left for your generation to change." My response was to the effect that those who do not remember history are condemned to relive it.

In my view you are absolutely right to draw a parallel between the case of the Guildford Four and the issue of capital punishment. There are certain crimes in this country, certain murders, that are referred to as hanging crimes. That is to say, that if we had the death penalty still with us, those found guilty of such crimes would certainly pay the ultimate price. It is relatively easy to give examples. The death of any policeman in our society, with its sliding scale of value on human life, has always been considered a hanging crime. Very often the sexual abuse and subsequent murder of a young child is considered a hanging crime. And there can be no doubt whatsoever that if capital punishment had been on the statute book at the time that the Guildford Four were found guilty, we could now only refer to them in the past tense.

It is equally correct to observe as you do in your editorial that there is still great enthusiasm for the noose in some quarters. Peter Bruinvels is not the only prominent member of the Conservative Party to volunteer his services in the role of public hangman. As I recall, one of his colleagues suggested that if society found the use of the rope obnoxious, then razor blades should be left in the condemned cell so that the individual concerned could oblige us all by performing a do-it-yourself job.

You are also absolutely correct to state that Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans were judicially murdered. I had thought that these facts were self-apparent until I read Professor Emery's letter. In it he states: "There was no question whatever that Bentley was guilty." He also observes: "As for Evans, there is little doubt in my mind that he was guilty of killing his child (though to be sure, Ludovic Kennedy does not agree)."

To take the latter case first, it is not only Ludovic Kennedy that disagrees with Glyn Emery, an entire Labour Government also disagreed with Professor Emery's proposition. This particular Government disagreed to the extent of ensuring that Timothy Evans was granted a Royal Pardon, posthumously. It is an exquisite example of the hypocrisy of this country that you can be given a Royal Pardon for something that it has been established beyond reasonable doubt you did not do.

Someone else who would take issue with Professor Emery's view on Evans's guilt is John Christie, the man who actually killed Mrs Evans and her child and subsequently confessed to these acts. It was of course argued at the time of these confessions that Christie was taking the view of "the more the merrier". These devotees of capital punishment were of the opinion that Christie felt that by confessing to countless murders, he would avoid the rope and be declared insane.

To turn now to the case of Derek Bentley. I spent nearly two years of my life researching this particular murder case, acquiring evidence and interviewing a vast range of people directly involved. I am not given to publicly quoting from my own books, but it is abundantly clear that Professor Emery has not read *To Encourage the Others*. I strongly suggest that he does. Perhaps the following, taken from my book, will indicate to him why he might find it a useful exercise.

Bentley's execution left not only unresolved problems, but unanswered questions. Why, in the face of such enormous pressure, in the light of the then known facts, in the name of justice, humanity, compassion and pure common sense, had one man set his face against the majority of the people of this country and refused to recommend a reprieve? One of the principles that Lord Goddard had called upon during the 1948 House of Lords debate on hanging had been that of "Vox populi, vox Dei". The voice of the people is the Voice of God. In Lord Goddard's view the voice of the people proclaimed loudly in 1948 that hanging must be retained. It was therefore his opinion that the Commons and the Lords should submit to the will of the people. Both Houses of Parliament and the Government of the day endorsed Lord Goddard's opinion. Less than five years and one change of Government later, the will of the people was contemptuously brushed aside, and Derek Bentley was executed.

The grounds upon which a Home Secretary might exercise the Royal Prerogative of Mercy and recommend a reprieve were, at the time of Bentley's case, as follows:

1. Youth has always been considered a ground for exercising the Prerogative of Mercy. Nobody under the age of eighteen can be executed. Those near that age are normally reprieved save in very exceptional

circumstances. Physically, Bentley was nineteen. Mentally, he was at the very most eleven.

2. When the leading actor in a murder cannot, for whatever reason, be executed, it has always been the practice to reprieve his associates. Thus, when Ley and Smith were found guilty of the Chalkpit Murder, Smith was reprieved by the Home Secretary after Ley had been found guilty but insane. Derek Bentley is the only man in our legal history who has been executed for a crime for which he was only vicariously responsible, when the principal could not be executed.

3. Persons considered insane are automatically reprieved. The defence of insanity was defined by the M'Naughten Rules, which have already been the subject for comment in this book. Under them this defence was only allowable when by reason of mental illness a person was considered *wholly* irresponsible for what he had done. In cases where the mental illness was such as to diminish responsibility without removing it altogether, insanity was not a defence, but the person was usually reprieved. Three years after Bentley's execution the then Home Secretary, Major Gwilym Lloyd George, stated categorically, "People who are suffering from any degree of mental abnormality which reduces their moral culpability are reprieved". There was an absolute obligation for the Home Secretary to hold a Statutory Medical Enquiry if there was reason to believe that the prisoner under sentence of death was insane. It was also the practice to hold an enquiry whenever there was anything to suggest that the condemned person was mentally abnormal. The information in Chapter 4 indicates how serious Bentley's mental abnormality was. And also how relevant his epileptic condition was. If the issue of his fitness to plead had been raised, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that a jury would have found him not mentally fit to stand trial. Equally, there is overwhelming evidence to support the view that on this ground alone Bentley should have been reprieved.

4. The report of the Commissioners of Criminal Law in 1839 and the Report of the Royal Commission in 1878 both recommended that the definition of murder should be altered to exclude cases such as Bentley's, where a man is held responsible for a death which he never intended nor desired. The law was not altered, because it was felt that the Prerogative of Mercy could be trusted to cover such cases as these. It will be recalled that the doctrine of constructive malice that was applied to the Craig/Bentley case had not previously been used in this century.

5. It has occasionally been thought right to commute the sentence of death in deference to a widespread or strong local expression of public opinion, on the ground that it would do more harm than good to carry out the sentence if the result was to arouse sympathy for the offender or hostility to the law. *Vox populi, vox Dei?*

6. The Secretary of State always attached weight to a jury's recommendation to mercy, and was very reluctant to disregard it if it was concurred in by the trial judge. When passing sentence on Craig, Lord Goddard publicly agreed with the jury's opinion that Craig was the more guilty of the two. He subsequently advised the Home Secretary that he felt Bentley should be reprieved (and was extremely distressed when he was not). Before Bentley, there had only been six recorded cases in this century where the sentence of death had been carried out after the trial judge had concurred with the jury's recommendation to mercy.

7. When there is a "scintilla of doubt" as to the

guilt of the accused, the Home Secretary had invariably advised commutation. In Bentley's case there is not merely a scintilla — it is more like a mountain.

Bentley's case assembled in the very highest degree every ground upon which the Prerogative of Mercy may be exercised. The rush to judgment was only equalled by the rush to execution. *There are good grounds for believing that a Statutory Medical Enquiry was not carried out in Bentley's case. I am certain that all the relevant medical evidence on Bentley was not considered, and was not placed before Sir David Maxwell Fyfe.*

It will be recalled that a few days before the execution Professor Sir Denis Hill (as he now is) wrote to the Home Office, leaving them in no doubt of the implications of hanging an epileptic. He received the following reply. The letter was from the Home Office and is dated the 27th January 1953. It arrived too late for its contents to be usefully contested by Sir Denis.

"Dear Dr Hill,

"Thank you for your letter of the 24th of January about Derek Bentley. I appreciate the terms in which you have written and quite recognise why you were anxious to bring this particular point to my notice.

"I can, however, give you an assurance that full regard was paid to the medical side of the case and that all the relevant information was before the Home Secretary when he came to his decision."

The letter is signed by Sir Frank Newsam, Permanent Under-Secretary to the Home Office. *The remark that all the relevant information was before the Home Secretary is untrue. I am quite convinced that a number of the documents in my possession, documents that are rightly relevant to Bentley's medical history, were never seen by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, nor was the information contained in them made known to him — for example, Dr Munroe's report on Bentley. I challenged the Home Office to prove otherwise.*

When Lord Goddard remarked to me that "Bentley's execution was an act of supreme illogicality; the responsibility for that act must rest with Fyfe", his Lordship was doing more than give a staggering exhibition of hypocrisy. He was, to my mind, declaring how ably he had been assisted in the destruction of Bentley by the Home Secretary.

With regard to Professor Emery's remarks that Bentley's offence was "merely one of incitement", he will discover if he reads my book that this alleged incitement, "Let him have it Chris", referred to the wounding of PC Frederick Fairfax, *not* the killing of PC Sidney Miles. Bentley denied making the remark, even when his defence counsel strenuously pointed out to him during pre-trial conference that the alleged remark was subject to a totally different interpretation to the one that the prosecution would put upon it. When I interviewed Christopher Craig, he was adamant that Bentley had not uttered the remark, but most significantly of all, the death of PC Miles subsequently occurred at least 15 minutes after Derek Bentley had been arrested. This young man, with an IQ of 66, which gave him the classification of a feeble-minded person with a mental age of no more than 11, was murdered by this State on 28 January 1953. That was my considered opinion after two years research into his case, subsequently



it was the considered opinion of the vast majority of people who had an opportunity to either read my book or see the play that I wrote for BBC television.

It may well be that even after reading *To Encourage the Others*, Professor Emery will remain unconvinced. Might I suggest that he then turns to another of my books, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*. This deals with the case of a New Zealand farmer, Arthur Thomas, who was found guilty of double murder in 1970 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Because of grave doubts concerning his case, he was tried again in 1973. Again he was found guilty. He lost two Court of Criminal Appeals decisions against his verdict. He took the case to the Privy Council and again lost. It has been said in defence of the criminal system that no man has even been given greater opportunity to prove his innocence than Arthur Thomas and that in view of the repeated conclusions that he was guilty then clearly he must be guilty. After *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* was published, the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, Robert Muldoon, ordered an inquiry into the evidence contained in my book. Subsequently Arthur

Thomas was granted a Royal Pardon and freed from prison. This, after serving nine years for crimes he had not committed. Subsequently, after a Royal Tribunal, he was granted one million dollars compensation for wrongful imprisonment.

Arthur Thomas's case, like the case of the Guildford Four, like the cases of Timothy Evans and Derek Bentley, were what I called at the outset hanging crimes. Because New Zealand had abolished capital punishment, I was able to succeed where both Ludovic Kennedy and myself had failed respectively in the cases of Timothy Evans and Derek Bentley in at least giving Arthur Thomas a small measure of justice and his personal freedom.

It may be that after due reflection Professor Emery will tell us that he is fully prepared to suffer the occasional error to obtain the return of capital punishment. Do tell me, Professor Emery, are you also fully prepared to be one of these "occasional errors"?

● David Yallop's book, *To Encourage the Others*, is to be republished as a Corgi paperback.

## Saying Farewell Honestly

DANIEL O'HARA

On the shortest day of the year just past, I took the train from Waterloo to Weymouth to attend the funeral of my last surviving uncle. Edward ("Dick") Dickenson was born in August 1903 in Peckham, an unsalubrious suburb of South-east London. By lying about his age he contrived to join the army in time to see action before the end of the first World War. Remaining in the army after the armistice, he was stationed in Winchester, the home of three famous regiments, and there met, and in January 1928 married, my mother's younger sister, Edna.

After demobilisation, he joined the Post Office as a telephone exchange supervisor, a job he continued to do (apart from the duration of the second World War, when he served with distinction as a sergeant in the Burma Campaigns) until taking early retirement in 1960, moving with his wife to Weymouth to help their son and daughter-in-law run the boarding house they had recently taken over. After a while, he joined the Admiralty, and worked at Portland until his final retirement. Just two years ago, he and Edna celebrated their diamond wedding, and he remained in reasonable health for a man of his age until cancer took its toll.

Uncle Dick was not religious. As a soldier, he attended chapel every Sunday, regarding it as part of his duty and important for good discipline. But once out of the army, he never again darkened the doors of a church, unless it was for a rite of passage of a friend or relative.

His funeral, at Weymouth Crematorium, was conducted by the local vicar, who, with misplaced familiarity, referred to him as "Dicky". In the lessons from St Paul, and in his short homily, we were pathetically assured that "Dicky" was now with God enjoying the life immortal. I was relieved for her sake that Aunt Edna was not well enough to attend the funeral, and I wondered what his son and daughter-in-law, his four grandchildren and great-granddaughter made of the proceedings. In the light of Barbara Smoker's successful campaign in Lewisham, I was particularly conscious that Weymouth's Municipal Crematorium still has a brass crucifix behind the catafalque, and a "holy" picture above. But it was the cant and hypocrisy of the funeral service from the Anglican Alternative Services Book that really disgusted me. The best I can hope is that it washed over the mourners like water over a duck's back. I was trying throughout to remember my uncle as the man with firm and definite opinions, but always an appealing sense of humour, that I had known throughout my formative years. He was someone you couldn't help liking and respecting, even if you didn't always agree with him, as I rarely did on political issues. He was a devoted husband and father who went out of his way to provide as well as he possibly could for his family.

At the end of the service, I was too angry to speak to or shake hands with the parson, but I did beard the undertaker, and asked him whether the

THE RUSHDIE FILE, edited by Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland. Fourth Estate, £5.95

alternative of a secular funeral had been offered to the family. What, he asked, did I mean? Surely, I said, he had heard of the non-religious funerals offered by the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. Indeed he had, and even had copies of their booklets. But the practice, it seems, is to ask people what their religion is; and most people, unless they have a definite affiliation to another denomination, will say that they are "C of E". Such, it seems, had been the response of Dick's family. The funeral had been arranged before I heard of the death, otherwise I might have suggested the secular alternative myself. But this undertaker, I suspect like most of his kind, will only offer the secular alternative if the deceased is specifically identified as an atheist.

I told the undertaker in no uncertain terms that he should not work on the assumption that everyone is religious until proved otherwise. In these days, because so few people have a definite religious allegiance, especially to the Church of England, he should rather work on the assumption that the deceased had no religion unless there was clear evidence to the contrary.

May I ask other readers to take similar action if ever they are in similar circumstances. Only in this way will those with no religious beliefs get an honest send-off which respects their dignity as unbelievers, pays proper regard to their real qualities and achievements, and sends the mourners away feeling that the occasion has done justice to the real person they knew, loved and respected. Uncle Dick deserved no less, and so do countless others whose final committal is marked by insincere obsequies steeped in foetid religiosity.

## OBITUARY

### Professor D. N. Hardman

David Rennie Hardman, of Hurstpierpoint, Sussex, who died last month at the age of 88, had a long career in education and politics.

He was educated at Coleraine Academical Institute, Ireland, and Christ's College, Cambridge, where he read English and Law. The first Socialist president of the Cambridge Union (1925), he became secretary of the University's Board of Extra Mural Studies. He was also a county councillor and chairman of Cambridge Education Committee.

Hardman was elected Labour MP for Darlington in 1945. He led the British delegation at UNESCO conferences during its formative years.

After losing his parliamentary seat in 1951, Hardman undertook an extensive lecture tour of the United States and also lectured in Europe for the British Council. He was an expert on Elizabethan drama and poetry.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Woodvale Crematorium, Brighton.

This invaluable volume is a product of the Rushdie affair, and it was almost a victim of it. *The Rushdie File* was originally commissioned by a reputable London publisher. "When the manuscript was delivered", the editors tell us, "Collins found a variety of excuses for backing out of its publication". Nothing could better exemplify the climate of fear engendered by Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* of 14 February 1989. (The book, incidentally, usefully makes available a transcription of the full edict for the first time.) Fourth Estate have done us a great service in courageously taking over the publication.

Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland have collected documents, letters, commentaries, reviews, and other writings on Rushdie himself, *The Satanic Verses* and the developing crisis. They have spread their net wide, and the documents articulating various Muslim points of view and the responses from abroad are particularly illuminating.

What has become apparent over the past months is the extent to which the cultural and political life of the country has been thrown into unprecedented turmoil by reactions to the publication of Rushdie's novel. If the affair has done nothing else it has forced many of us to think through and define positions otherwise easily, perhaps complacently, held. That some of the emerging positions have sometimes seemed disturbing (even when well meant), craven in their opportunism, and even downright insulting (for an example of the latter see Roald Dahl's letter to *The Times* reprinted pp 217-8 in the volume under review) is, perhaps, not to be wondered at. As I write, today's newspaper carries a report that the Archbishop of Canterbury's lay-adviser has requested that a television programme presented by the poet Tony Harrison called *The Blasphemers' Banquet* should be cancelled. The report concludes: "The BBC said that actors involved in the programme had all been asked whether they wanted their names removed from the credits. All had refused". It is a sign of the depth of the crisis that such a report seems relatively unsurprising.

The Rushdie affair comes at a time when the whole question of censorship has been once again placed on the agenda by a strand in radical feminist thought which issues in the demand for greater curbs on pornography. The concept of the legitimate exercise of censorship by the State needs hard thought. Diane Abbot, MP, writes in a letter reprinted by Appignanesi and Maitland, "... censorship is wrong and any calls for censorship by fundamentalist religious leaders should be resisted. Not

# REVIEWS

because of any lack of respect for anyone's sincerely held personal faith. But because it cannot be right to have one set of views imposed on everyone else by force, punishment and the censor". One warms to her downrightness, but simultaneously feels a certain unease because such a position seems incapable of coping with the subtleties and ramifications of the totality of the situation. To take a simple example. The Official Secrets Acts as they presently stand are a disgrace. But few, I suspect, would disagree that a measure of State secrecy is necessary. And yet any such powers could be construed as an obstacle to free communication of information regarding governmental activity — they act, in other words, as an organ of censorship.

The trouble is that, once the principle of censorship, in even very carefully defined circumstances, is granted, this is invariably taken as a precedent for extending curbs to free expression in other areas. Any position on censorship necessarily has to be hedged about with reservations and qualifications of one sort or another. So when Fay Weldon, a writer who has been admirably vociferous and forceful in her defence of Rushdie, comments: "In Rushdie's case there was not only a right but an absolute necessity for the incitement to think. But I'm not sure that in all circumstances you can have the right to free speech", one applauds her for eschewing an easy position. But when she sees as a natural extension of that position an endorsement of the "uniculturalist policy of the United States", which, according to her, amounts to: "Let the child do what it wants at home, here in the school the one flag is saluted, the one God worshipped, the one nation acknowledged" (*The Independent*, 19 July), one is left gasping at her cultural naivety. In this area one has to tread with considerably more subtlety and ingenuity.

What most of us would probably endorse, and some of the best pieces in *The Rushdie File* explicitly and implicitly say, is that *The Satanic Verses* should now be given the widest availability (Roy Hattersley's desire to suppress a paperback edition of the book stains his record as a serious politician); that the giving of offence is never on its own a valid reason for suppressing publications by whatever means; and that if, in whatever way, we appease the burners of books and the issuers of death threats then we will be taken by a short route to chaos.

The crisis will not be easily or immediately resolved. The pressure to do so by, for example, extending the blasphemy laws must be resisted. If this were to happen it would be an insult to free thought in itself and it would undoubtedly be taken as a precedent for curbs on freedom of expression

in other quite unconnected areas.

Today we desperately need the spirit which informs Mill's great essay, *On Liberty*, and Milton's *Areopagitica*. If the crisis sharpens an awareness of that radical strand in our national culture and gives us the resolve to act upon it, then all will not be lost. Meanwhile, we must be thankful to Appignanesi and Maitland for their work in producing this sometimes depressing but often inspiring book.

JOHN A. FLORANCE

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**UNDER THE HEEL OF MARY, by Nicholas Perry and Loreto Echeverria. Routledge, £30**

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A good test of any factual report, from a local newspaper item to a major research study, is whether the bits you already knew from your own experience are accurately reported: on that criterion, I must say I find this book impressively sound.

An important, though poorly publicised, work, it meticulously chronicles the close association over the past seventeen centuries between Marianism and papal power, with its underpinning of secular tyranny, and shows the present pope to be using this cult of "the exterminator of all heresies" in his attempts to crush the liberation theologians in Latin America.

Well-researched and scholarly, with no fewer than 97 pages of notes and references, it has, however, the drawback of its very excellence: it is by no means an easy read, especially as the style of writing tends to be both condensed and stilted. But the volume contains "overviews" of the three major sections, dealing with the past 170 years, and those chapters, together with the Introduction and the Epilogue, are certainly well worth reading by anyone interested in Christianity, sociology, or history — even if the remainder of the book is kept as a work of reference.

Most importantly, it amasses an impressive (if indigestible) amount of evidence for the great impetus that the Virgin Mary has given, during the past six decades, to the careers of the military dictators of Italy, Spain, Portugal, and central and south America. As Franco put it, "Without her we could not have won the laurels of triumph, nor could we have liberated the Fatherland". Only Hitler seems to have managed to liberate the Fatherland without her explicit assistance.

By any standard, this work — the authors of which are practising Christians, living in Chile — is undoubtedly a significant survey, and the fact that a number of journals and newspapers in this country (such as the *Guardian*) have neglected to review it is quite disgraceful.

However, there have been some comprehensive reviews during 1989, notably the one in the *Inde-*

pendent (27 March) by Marina Warner. As author of *Alone of All Her Sex* — which, concentrating on the BVM myth itself rather than on its socio-political aspects, complements this book — Marina Warner was an obvious choice as reviewer. And even some of her more critical comments can be taken as praise. For instance:

*Under the Heel of Mary* is a polemical blast against “Marian militarism”, but it strikes an odd, almost old-fashioned note. It is like a survival from a lost rational era, before everyone tiptoed around the question of believers and their sensibilities, before the princes of different churches preferred to club together and sympathise about blasphemy rather than defend the truth of their own creed. The authors reveal conclusively how the struggle to hold sacred ground is a struggle for temporal power.

On the other hand, she may perhaps have a point in accusing Perry and Echeverria of polemical selection:

The authors’ plain speaking is bracing, but their partiality ultimately weakens their case against the Church and its abuses.

She and several other reviewers also criticise the book for failing to take account of personal devotion — but the main object of its concerted attack is the way that the many alleged apparitions of Mary have been consistently exploited on behalf of papal authority and of Right-wing military dictatorship, not the visionaries themselves (usually daydreaming peasant children who have overheard adult conversation on church matters and politics) nor the gullible pilgrims who flock to the shrines.

The *Church Times* reviewer, A. M. Allchin, commented (on 23 March):

The authors show how large parts of the Roman Catholic Church were happy to be actively associated with the dictatorships of Franco and Salazar, and how, more recently, the regimes of Generals Galtieri and Pinochet have managed to secure considerable ecclesiastical support. . . The Blessed Virgin is made an honorary Commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The secret police are placed under her special protection. . . Our doubts about organisations like Opus Dei are reinforced. Our suspicions of an unholy alliance between Right-wing Protestant fundamentalists in the United States and Right-wing Papal fundamentalists in places like Chile and Nicaragua are strengthened.

In another Protestant paper, the United Reformed Church’s *Reform* (November issue), Kenneth W. Wadsworth summarises the book as follows:

*Under the Heel of Mary* is a broad and extremely detailed survey of the cult’s doctrinal and social development, which is seen as inimical to “the subversive Christ of the Gospels” and also to feminism, liberalism and liberation theology, but encouraging and useful to absolutist tendencies in state and church

(Fascism, McCarthyism, Papal infallibilism) and showing kinship to political and social views of more extreme Protestant fundamentalism.

*The Times Higher Educational Supplement* (16 June) contained a thoughtful review of the book by Alister McGrath, Oxford lecturer in Christian doctrine:

The work is deeply disturbing, suggesting that the cult has frequently been exploited as a means of social control within both church and state, or as a means of enhancing national prestige.

However, the reviewer in the Catholic journal *The Tablet*, though not altogether unsympathetic to the authors’ message, asks “why the Virgin Mary should be considered an ally of those who favour right-wing causes”, apparently failing to realise that the historical fact simply is (as overwhelmingly demonstrated in the book itself) that the authoritarian Right has, through the centuries, manipulated Marian devotion and its supernatural messages as a rallying point, rather than that there is necessarily anything intrinsically Right-wing in the Virgin myth itself. At the same time, the inherent tendency of the cult to emphasise the special role of woman does help to uphold male supremacy and preserve the nucleus of a conservative society, the patriarchal family.

Needless to say, it is only when the Virgin’s messages are likely to prove helpful to the status and current policies of the ecclesiastical authorities that her apparitions are accepted by them and proclaimed as genuine.

For the sake of light relief, I should like to quote the first sentence of the book’s Introduction:

On 24 March 1984 Pope John Paul II knelt before a white statuette of Our Lady of Fatima in St Peter’s Square and, watched by a crowd of 150,000 and a potential television audience of one billion, dedicated the planet to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

And finally, the depressing last sentence of the book’s Epilogue:

Our Lady is going through the acutest identity crisis, but whatever new guises she may assume, her cult is likely to remain rooted in apparitions and at the service of manipulative power.

Depicted on the glossy dust-jacket is one of the traditional representations of an apparition of the Queen of Heaven, as on the “Miraculous Medal”: under her heel she is crushing the head of the serpent of Eden — though with such a sweet expression on her face that she looks as though she would not hurt a fly! This is a most appropriate analogy of her cult relationship with humans, too.

BARBARA SMOKER

# A Christian Thinks Freely About The Freethinker

TIM LENTON

Tim Lenton is chief sub-editor of the Eastern Daily Press, a morning newspaper published in Norwich. He writes a weekly column for Christian Weekly Newspapers, is the author of a booklet called *The Respectability Barrier* and has contributed book reviews to radio. He has an honours degree in German from London University. Tim Lenton is a member of The Barn Fellowship, a small Christian group on the North Norfolk coast.

There are two ways of presenting the news. One is as objectively as possible. The other may be summed up in a front-page headline from *The Freethinker* in July 1988: "Pious Indoctrinators Tighten Grip on Classroom Captives".

It is at first sight strange that a journal dedicated to freedom of thought should be so frequently inclined to tell its readers what to think, rather in the style of tabloid journalism — if not on quite the same intellectual level. But of course, like many Christian publications, *The Freethinker* is not out to convince the uncommitted. It is preaching to the converted. So it is reasonable to see that headline, as a later contributor did, as an example of the editor's sense of humour.

All the same, it might be asked whether freethinkers should be quite so closed and cosy in their beliefs. In-jokes may be fun, but they are also revealing. Regular perusal of this magazine reveals a creed every bit as demanding as the Christian one — if considerably more fragile, to judge by the rather panicky reactions to alternative possibilities.

In one way, however, *The Freethinker* succeeds in being open. The letters page is available to correspondents of any persuasion and is often a lively forum of debate. There is also a sharp sense of humour in many articles, particularly the editor's News and Notes.

Perhaps the most valuable role played by this organ is its debunking of the extremes of religion: its exposure of financial dishonesty as practised by some televangelists, its warnings against nostalgia and superstition and its occasional articles on the damage done by cults.

What is surprising is its failure to discriminate between such things as these and genuine Christianity. The fact that this is often difficult to do is really no excuse: it is quite hard to distinguish between gold and fool's gold, but the difference is rather important. In "Religion Rots Reason?", a September 1989 piece, Eric Stockton begins: "There is much going on among Christians that we should be careful not to misunderstand" — and then proceeds to do so, in spades. The failure to understand what

Christianity is or says is a basic weakness of *The Freethinker*.

True, there are many voices; and we may if we like blame an apostate and disorganised Christianity for that. What we cannot blame it for is the violent language and dishonest reasoning of its critics. We often read in *The Freethinker* such phrases as "It is not unreasonable to infer. . ." when the subsequent inference is not only unreasonable, but contains a logic that would be despised in any cause other than debunking religion. An article in October 1989 by R. W. Morrell uses this phrase and another — "she remains pointedly silent" — to make quite spurious points about someone else's opinions. This is not an isolated event. Freethinkers should be aware of Richard Holloway's observation that "you can prove nothing from something that is not mentioned". Although Mr Holloway is a bishop, he is right. So was Albert Einstein when he advised us to "make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler".

In *Vision and Realism*, published in 1981 to mark the centenary of *The Freethinker*, Jim Herrick writes that "the sharp contrast between religion and common sense has been the central theme of *The Freethinker* for its hundred years of continuous publication". The founder of the magazine said it would "wage war against superstition in general and Christian superstition in particular". It is a pity that in all this time it does not seem to have come to grips with the core of Christianity: what it is waging war against is a series of caricatures — caricatures that have wrought havoc and sometimes convinced the world at large that they are genuine, but caricatures nevertheless. For this Christians should thank it, and we would do so if it had gone the whole way and seen through the disguise. *The Freethinker* may possess a certain common sense, but it needs a little more than that — uncommon sense, perhaps.

It is good to record, though, that another promise of the founder has been kept: that "any competent Christian will be allowed reasonable space in which to contest our views". Though the word "competent" may be queried, I have been accorded every courtesy and consideration by the editor both in writing this article and in earlier sometimes lengthy correspondence.

My first contact with *The Freethinker* came in 1982, when the editor responded to some remarks I made in my Christian Weekly Newspapers column. Oddly enough, the same issue of *The Freethinker* carried a letter by Simon Kirk which described rather nicely the sort of hole that the magazine digs for itself. He objected to "subtle stereotyping" and

added: "As a student of history it has become clear to me that no religious dispute has ever had religion as its real reason. . . Humanists need to look somewhat further than their immediate distaste of religion to find a viable explanation of events."

The fact that the letter appeared, I thought, was a good sign. But its point, that distaste rather than reason was the motivating force behind secular humanism, does not seem to have had any impact. If secular humanists gain power, I wonder how many of them would vote to stamp out Christianity, not because it was unreasonable, but because they simply didn't like it — or because people who called themselves Christians hadn't been very nice to them? An understandable reaction, perhaps, but not tremendously rational. The same verdict might be passed on *The Freethinker*.

## LETTERS

### BOXING A SHADOW

I am glad that Canon John Hester found the title of my article, *The Roman Fall of Dr Runcie* (November 1989), amusing. Though I write with a serious purpose, I should count any piece of mine a failure if it did not also raise a smile.

I did not, of course, set out to do full "justice" to Dr Runcie's achievements. My intentions were polemical, and I am gratified that within those parameters, a senior churchman should consider my article a "sensible appraisal".

Canon Hester accuses me of "fist-shaking against God". As he correctly supposes that I do not believe in the existence of any such thing, he should have been able to work out that I would hardly waste my energy railing against a non-entity. Freethinkers prefer to wield arguments, rather than fists, and to deploy them against those humans who would deceive us into thinking, in the absence of any evidence whatever, and against all the canons of common-sense, that the god-hypothesis is worthy of belief.

I am quite sure that John Hester is correct, however, in supposing that the "good Lord" in whom he believes doesn't "too much mind" anything that I write, nor, indeed anything that ever happens: he lacks the necessary sentience.

Freethinkers, on the other hand, do very much mind the systematic brainwashing and indoctrination of susceptible minds carried out by the proponents of religion. Their concern is eloquently demonstrated by the survival of this journal through eleven decades.  
DANIEL O'HARA, London W7

### ADVICE FROM THE SIDELINES

As a Christian I respect humanists for their valuable views on moral and ethical matters, and so it saddens me to see the negative attitude of Barbara Smoker in her presidential address to the annual general meeting of the National Secular Society which you printed under the headline, "Own Goals" Reduce Influence of Mainstream Religion.

Mainstream religion? Khomeini's distortions of Islam? The televangelists' perversions of Christianity? The malpractices of some Roman Catholics indulging in Freemasonry? If these are to be equated with "mainstream" religion then assuredly the tail is wagging the dog! The activities of lunatic fringes will always make the headlines; every group, religious, political or philo-

sophical, has such fringes: for all I know there may well be "fundamentalist" or "literalist" fringes to humanism. But fringes do not define the beliefs of the majority, going quietly about their lives in a manner which does not invite headline-making publicity.

As a Christian I cannot identify my beliefs with those of peculatory or lecherous fundamentalist televangelists, nor can I criticise Roman Catholicism on the ground that members of P2 Masonic Lodge show more regard for mammon than for God (though I might be prepared to criticise it on other grounds). May I present another target for Miss Smoker: how about equating the whole of Protestantism with the persecutors of Lord Mackay?

The reason why "almost 50 per cent of . . . Christians . . . now regard the Old Testament as 'a collection of stories and fables'" is simply that mainstream Christians are now able to accept the fact that the Jewish scriptures are just precisely that, and they now leave the contrary belief to literalists and fundamentalists as a comfortable way of saving them from the trouble of actually studying the Bible. I would also add that for Christians a devil is not a logical necessity for the existence of a god: such dualism died out with Manichaeism in the fourth century AD.

Comments such as those of Barbara Smoker can only convince those who are antagonistic to humanism that its apologists are at the best ill-informed or at the worst sadly bigoted in their attitude to mainstream or any other religion. May those of us who stand on the sidelines, and usually applaud, hope that the presidential address at the next AGM of the NSS will abandon knocking copy of this kind and instead present positive reasons for embracing humanism.

KENNETH DOUGHTY, Deerness, Orkney

### BROUGHT INTO DISREPUTE

St Paul ("Galatians", Ch 6, v 7) said "God is not mocked". Nor should the life-long atheism of people like myself be mocked. And yet we have all been made to look very, very foolish by an article which appeared recently in *The Independent*.

In it, a Maeve Denby, speaking on behalf of the British Humanist Association, claimed a BHA membership of 40,000. She then went on to describe humanist funerals as some kind of ghastly charade, with pop-music, mourners dancing the tango and coffins going in and out.

The BHA is now honour-bound to do something about this silly person. They should send *The Independent* a correct total of paid-up members. They should issue a public apology for bringing the humanist, atheist and secular movement into disrepute, including a posthumous apology to Julian Huxley, the BHA's first president, who would never have lent his name to such nonsense.

It is about time the Prince of Wales Terrace leadership took a look at themselves. As representatives of a philosophical movement they should take their responsibilities seriously. Stop prancing about, posing, posturing and life-stancing. Stop childish deceptions like *The Independent* article. They should aspire to the intellectual rigour of an older and wiser association — the National Secular Society.

KARL HEATH, Coventry

**Aileen Fleming, a Roman Catholic student nurse, was afraid to tell anyone that she was pregnant. After delivering the baby herself, she left it to die in a plastic bag. After admitting to manslaughter, she was put on probation for three years at the Old Bailey.**

# EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton, Sunday, 4 February, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Members' Forum.

**Edinburgh Humanist Group.** Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031 667 8399.

**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.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 6 February, 8 pm. Public Meeting. Speaker: Meredith McArdle, Media Director, British Humanist Association.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Monday, 12 February, 7.30 pm. Neville West: RE in Schools.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 25 January, 8 pm. John Evitt: Philosophy, Knowledge and Belief.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone (0603) 427843.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 14 February, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 15 January, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

National Secular Society

**ANNUAL DINNER**

Speakers include  
**MICHAEL FOOT, MP**

The Bonnington Hotel, London  
(Southampton Row,  
near Holborn Underground)

Saturday, 21 April

# THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

President: Barbara Smoker

Founded 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Secularism affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement.

It asserts that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress.

Secularism affirms that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication; that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.

Affirming that morality is social in origin and application, Secularism aims at promoting the happiness and well-being of mankind. Secularism demands the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.

It seeks to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace, to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

.....

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

(Please use block capitals)

To the Secretary, NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

I accept the Principles of the National Secular Society as shown, and apply to be admitted as a Member. I am over 18 years of age.

Name .....

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.....

Post Code..... Telephone.....

Occupation (optional) .....

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Minimum Annual Subscription: £2  
Bankers' Order Forms are obtainable on request

# Atheist Centre Celebrating 50 Years

Atheists from all over the world, including Britain, are converging on the Indian village of Vijayawada to participate in a significant celebration, the Atheist Centre's Golden Jubilee.

Sir Hermann Bondi, chairman of the international committee supporting the event, describes the Atheist Centre as "a showcase of what social work should be like and can achieve in the circumstances in which it is placed.

"It is immensely active over a wide area in helping those disadvantaged through caste, through being female, through position in the social order, to become active and useful members of the com-

munity.

"A major programme tries to educate away from superstition, from enslavement to ancient religious practice like child prostitution, through appreciation of science and an understanding of the world we live in."

Throughout its 50 years, the Atheist Centre has been in the forefront of the struggle against religious superstition and the caste system. "A belief in miracles is the bane of progress," says Mr Lavanham, the Centre's present director and son of the founder. From its early days, workers at the Centre have debunked claims made by holy men. Scientific demonstrations and exhibitions have been organised in the villages.

The Atheist Centre has also promoted family planning which, its director declares, "liberates women from drudgery and gives them leisure and opportunities for personal growth. . . Real women's liberation is possible only when there is recognition of the fact that men and women are equal partners."

Sir Hermann Bondi says the Atheist Centre "is in vigorous health". Long may it flourish and succeed in its aim to lead people to a post-religious society.

*(continued from front page)*

Committee. Richard Du Cann, counsel for the Board (and son of C. G. L. Du Cann, once a regular contributor to *The Freethinker*), called James Ferman, the director of the Board, to show that the refusal of the certificate was reasonable. Robertson subjected Ferman to a long and hostile cross-examination, which didn't shake him or impress the Committee either.

The second day was taken up with submissions by counsel. In general these repeated the arguments of the *Gay News* case; in particular they related to whether the relatively restrained treatment of Jesus was blasphemous; and in detail they turned on whether the Jesus figure seemed to respond to the sexual attentions of the Teresa figure. This absurd debate ignored the point that sexual attentions to or even response by Jesus need hardly be "contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous" (the current terms of the common law), because the case was discussed in the light of James Kirkup's poem in *Gay News*, which was held to be blasphemous on just such grounds. The debate also had to ignore the point that the video would be bought by people who want to see it in private and would not be offended, because this is precisely what the Video Recordings Act ignores. And no one dared to mention that erotic treatment of the crucified Christ is a common theme of pornography in Catholic countries, or to suggest that the Crucifixion is itself one of the most offensive of all religious images.

The appeal was refused on 14 December and the reasons were given earlier this month. Meanwhile the inevitable has happened — interest in and demand for the video has increased and pirate copies have begun to circulate. As the Committee Against Blasphemy Law has said: "It is absurd that anything should be banned in this way." But then the laws relating both to blasphemy and to video recordings are absurd and should be abolished.

## Killjoy Law Spoils New Year Fun

New Year's Eve celebrations were blighted for many people by an 18th-century law which prohibits Sunday dancing. A typical example of this ridiculous restriction occurred in Bawtry, Yorkshire, where the Licensing Committee refused permission for a dance in the village hall. Arrangements for catering, a bar and disco were cancelled.

Nearly all tickets for the village's traditional New Year's Eve party were sold when it was discovered that dancing was forbidden on Sunday. Pauline Walker, secretary of the organising committee, said: "We have had this dance for many years. It never crossed our minds that there might be an obscure law prohibiting dancing on Sunday.

"The village hall will lose out as well as the people. Last year we raised £300 for the upkeep of the building."

Lysa Biffle, a 26-year-old Jehovah's Witness, who refused to have blood transfusions, died after giving birth to a healthy baby. Doctors at a New York hospital said they respected her wishes on religious grounds. She and her husband were among bystanders gunned down in the street during a fight involving drug dealers.