

# The Freethinker

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## NANNY KNOWS BEST: INFORMATION SUPPRESSED AND LIBERTIES ERODED

When Ludovic Kennedy presented the 1989 Freedom of Information Awards, he reminded an audience at the City Conference Centre, London, of Daniel Webster's dictum: "Knowledge is the fountain of all true liberty".

Recipients included Professor Richard Lacey, who robustly attacked the secrecy that surrounds Government food advisory committees. Jonathan Aitken, MP (Conservative, Thanet South), also received an Award for "his outstanding parliamentary contribution to the campaign against the new Official Secrets Act".

In his address, Ludovic Kennedy said that from the vantage point of his 70 years he looked back on a time of lingering paternalism, "a time when there was still a residue of the old Edwardian jingle, 'God bless the squire and his relations, And keep us in our proper stations'. Forelock tugging was still very much in vogue. Depending on who you were, it was, as was said of an earlier period, the best of times and the worst of times.

"It wasn't until after the War that the old order, which for so long had kept us in our proper stations, began to crumble."

Mr Kennedy said there were two principal reasons that brought about a levelling of society.

"The first was the gradual rise in the standard of living, so that for a time anyway, the rich became less rich and the poor less poor.

"And the other influential factor was of course television which has been, I think, the greatest leveller of our time."

Yet despite all the levelling, Ludovic Kennedy said that under this present Government there has been a marked backsliding to the old, outworn paternalistic attitudes. "Deep in many of our fellow countrymen there is a masochistic streak which yearns for domination by both male and female," he added.

"I do not think it entirely accidental that we have the Prime Minister we do have, have had for the past ten years and look like continuing to have until the end of time. For those who crave domination, who feel all the safer for a strict Nanny figure in their lives, she is, as it were, tailor made. And such a figure is not and by its nature cannot be an egalitarian one, nor one that is prepared to reveal its own humanity, at least publicly. It must by its nature be the opposite, its slogan must be 'Nanny knows best', and Nanny will not share with you things she feels you have no need to know.

"Hence, instead of a Freedom of Information Act, we have a new Official Secrets Act, with no defence allowed for public interest and despite the farce of the Spycatcher Affair, no defence of prior publication.

"All around us we see under this Government an erosion of hard-won liberties; the 1986 Public Order Act which puts unnecessary restrictions on public assemblies and demonstrations; the 1988 Education Bill which squeezes university financings and threatens academic freedoms; the undignified attacks on Church leaders for speaking their minds; a whole series of attacks by Norman Tebbit and other undesirables on the integrity of those in television; the forbidding of interviews on television with Sinn Fein leaders with whom, since there can be no military solution, we shall have to talk one day; and the appointment of Lord Rees-Mogg, the man who banned the *Real Lives* programme, as television's first censor-in-chief, to tell us what in his view would and would not be wholesome viewing.

"As Professor Hugo Stephenson of the City University has pointed out, no other country in Western Europe has put such clamps on its citizens'

(continued on back page)

# The Freethinker

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# NEWS

## LADY C. REMEMBERED

The death last month of Lord Gardiner, Labour Lord Chancellor from 1964 to 1970, coincided with the 30th anniversary of his most notable courtroom triumph. As Gerald Gardiner, QC, he led the defence of Penguin Books at the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial, a rare accomplishment by a product of Harrow and the Coldstream Guards described by one obituarist as "typical of someone born into the English upper classes before 1914".

Penguin Books had caused consternation in the dovecots of prudery and conformity by publishing the unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's work. To make matters worse, the novel retailed at three shillings and sixpence, the equivalent of 17½ pence in today's currency. It was probably the modest cost of the book as much as its content that inspired prosecutor Mervyn Griffiths-Jones to implore the jury: "Is it a book you would even wish your wife or servants to read?" The question was of little relevance, but it caused considerable mirth at a time when cheap domestic labour was but a fond memory of even the reasonably affluent.

When *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published on the Continent in 1928, the Home Secretary ruled that copies being imported into Britain should be seized by the Customs and destroyed. It was felt in the corridors of civil and ecclesiastical power that the reading public could not withstand the shock of seeing a certain four-letter word on the printed page. In real life it is frequently used as an expletive when knuckles are grazed at a factory work-bench or toes stubbed in a suburban bathroom. And there are over a thousand synonyms for the word, impressive evidence of an abiding interest in the act of doing what comes naturally.

The trial cost Penguin Books a hefty £13,000. But sales of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* eventually topped the four million mark, demonstrating yet again that attempted suppression of a literary work is a copper-bottomed guarantee of its commercial success.

Aunty threw caution to the wind and marked the 30th anniversary of the trial by broadcasting *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as A Book at Bedtime. Listeners of a timid disposition were warned that it contained "explicit scenes and language". But apparently Ian Hogg's relating of Lady C's and the gamekeeper's amorous romps did not undermine civilisation as we know it, or even disturb the chaste slumbers of Mrs Mary Whitehouse.

# AND NOTES

## HITTING BACK

The battle against blasphemy law is far from over. Although still the exclusive privilege of some Christians, it has become clear that church leaders will support demands for its extension to other faiths. Islam today, tomorrow the Moonies?

So it is gratifying to announce that the Rationalist Press Association has published a significant addition to freethought literature by publishing Nicolas Walter's *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern*. This work has been written "in the belief that freedom of expression in religion as in other controversial matters is a precious possession, and in the hope that the story it tells will be both interesting and instructive".

With *Blasphemy Ancient & Modern*, Nicolas Walter has produced a meticulously researched and cogently argued case against an outmoded and discriminatory law. It contains a wealth of information which will enable the reader to combat this revived form of religious privilege and censorship.

• See display advertisement, page 27

## WHERE IGNORANCE IS BLESSED

There is always a plentiful supply of anti-abortion and anti-contraception leaflets in a Roman Catholic church, while the building is a collection point for signatures to clergy-approved petitions. At the present time, in anticipation of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill debate, church notice boards are adorned with appeals urging the faithful to write to Members of Parliament expressing opposition to embryo experimentation.

Of course people have the right to make their views known to parliamentary representatives, but before putting pen to paper, should become informed about the issue on which they are expressing an opinion. In fact the vast majority of protestors against embryo experimentation have no knowledge of this complex subject. They are simply responding in knee-jerk fashion to priestly exhortation.

In the past, petitions and letter-writing campaigns were organised against family planning facilities and information being available at local hospitals. Such campaigns were actively supported by celibate priests who, it must be presumed, had no experience of parenthood, planned or otherwise. Fortunately, a large proportion of Catholics in Britain now decide the number of children they have in accordance with

their means and other considerations. This is possible because, no thanks to the Church, they have knowledge of and access to methods of contraception. But they are not knowledgeable about embryo experimentation and should therefore ignore the crude propaganda of ignorant priests and others who are endeavouring to flood Parliament with ill-considered protests.

## ISLAMIC BLARNEY

Believe it or not, members of a Muslim sect have set out to convert Ireland to the Islamic faith. Starting in Galway, where a mission house has been established, they aim to turn the land of St Patrick away from the false faith of Christianity. We would normally applaud such a noble enterprise, but on this occasion we can forbear to cheer. For by comparison with Islam, Irish Catholicism is a tolerant and quite jolly form of religious superstition.

Ireland is known as the Emerald Isle, but the band of missionaries who have set up shop in Galway will discover it is the grass, not the natives, that is green. Moving statues and visions of Our Lady are all very well, particularly when the local economy is not too healthy, but the Irish will not readily give up their Guinness and lively dance music in favour of insipid mineral water and mournful dirges.

In a recent interview, Mohammed Hanif, president of the mission and owner of the Shalimar Tandoori, expressed his belief that the "humble and devout" Irish will convert when they know the truth about Islam. "Of course there will have to be a certain change in their culture," he added ominously. (Shaw, Joyce, Beckett and O'Casey were not always appreciated in the country of their birth, but unlike Salman Rushdie, they were not sentenced to death by a religious fanatic for their writings.)

Other "certain changes" were outlined by missionary Tasleem Amhed who said: "The Irish will not find giving up drink hard. . . The Arabs used to drink, but when Islam came they gave it up." No doubt they gave up other pleasures when threatened with the amputation of limbs or stoning to death.

The Irish tend to be carnivorous, but as Muslims they will have to forgo the pork pies and bacon. Dr Ahmed imparted this pearl of Islamic wisdom: "It has been proven that the pig is the only homosexual animal. As this perversion is most prevalent in pork-eating nations, it is obvious that it gets into your genes through the meat." Has the fellow never heard of gay vegetarians?

Dr Ahmed and his colleagues have been received with good-natured curiosity by the Catholics of Galway. But a different reception will be awaiting the disciples of Allah should they move north and confront the Rev Ian Paisley.

## PIOUS CHILD ABUSERS

Christian "family" pressure groups and their supporters at Westminster constantly protest that they are motivated by concern for children's welfare, not an arrogant desire to impose their standards on others. But in fact children have always had a rough deal at the hands of those who proclaim that theirs is a "God of love". For centuries the young were subjected to indoctrination and terrorism by lurid stories of what would happen to them if they died "unsaved". Many thousands physically perished in the Crusades and the Christian organised witch-hunts that ravished 15th- and 16th-century Europe.

Child abuse by physical violence, indoctrination and deprivation of medical treatment on religious grounds, is still widely practiced by the God squad. The Roman Catholic Church in parts of the United States and Canada is shaken by scandal over sexual assaults on children, particularly boys, by priests and members of religious orders.

Protestant enthusiasm for physical punishment of the young is also widespread. It is reflected in a letter from a lady — a Reverend, no less — published in a national daily. The Rev Margaret M. Lloyd, of Weston-super-Mare, obviously had little difficulty in finding biblical passages to reinforce her case for beating children. The reverend lady declared: "God knows best of all. His formula throughout the ages, for raising law-abiding, civilised and decent children is discipline and a jolly good spank when and where necessary."

Of course God sometimes felt that something more than a jolly good spanking was necessary. He had 42 children killed by bears for being rude to Elisha. Nowadays that would probably be regarded as somewhat excessive, even in Weston-super-Mare.

## Freethinker Fund

Many readers have received notification that *Freethinker* subscriptions are due. Of course an annual postal subscription of £5 does not cover production and distribution costs. It is largely due to our unpaid writers that it remains at this level.

Donations to the Fund are essential in order to keep the paper on a sound financial footing. The generous response by readers produced last year's magnificent total. We trust that it will be repeated in 1990.

It is also extremely important that circulation is increased. Please introduce *The Freethinker* to potential readers or send names and addresses to the editor (117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT) who will forward complimentary copies.

The first list of contributors to the Fund in 1990 will be published next month.

## Bloody Miraculous

R. J. CONDON

When will the Catholic Church realise that relics, like dogma, are better validated by faith than by science? The Shroud of Turin was a no-hoper from the start. Now the *Catholic Herald* (5 January) informs us that medical researchers have been investigating another notorious product of the charnel-house, the miraculously liquefying blood of St Januarius at Naples.

At three ceremonies held each year the dried blood of this fourth-century martyr either melts and bubbles up, or it doesn't. It didn't the last time the relic was trotted out, in December last, to the disgust of the group of elderly fanatics known as "the aunts of St Januarius". At one time these ladies would scream and tear their hair, shouting insults at the saint for failing to deliver his miracle. Nowadays, says the paper, they confine their lamentations to wailing and moaning. One wonders why they bother, when their disappointing idol has been upstaged in his own Neapolitan stamping-ground. The blood of St Patricia never fails to liquefy, not a measly three times a year but every Tuesday.

The present Cardinal Archbishop of Naples is said to have little enthusiasm for the traditional ceremony, probably because of the aforesaid "aunts". Two years ago he authorised a spectroscopic analysis of the relic. The *Catholic Herald* claims the examination turned out well for the traditionalists, for "the researchers said they believed the spectrum pattern was that of blood — unless, perhaps, it belonged to a red pigment, carmine". So now we know — the relic is either blood or it isn't.

After this scientific triumph it is disappointing that no explanation was forthcoming for the liquefaction. It has been alleged that, just prior to the scheduled dates for the miracle, priests may be overheard in a Naples pharmacy asking for "the usual mixture", said to be a solution of spermaceti in ether, suitably coloured. This, solid at ordinary temperatures, will melt and even boil when a phial of it is held in the hand. These ingredients would not have been available for the liquefaction miracles reported in primitive times — they go back to the fifth century — but there are other possibilities. With a little sleight of hand, chalk and vinegar would have done the trick.

Alban Butler, in his *Lives of the Saints*, notes that several Protestant writers have offered conjectural explanations for the miracle of St Januarius. Says he: "These surmises suppose a fraud or juggle in the priests; but how will these authors persuade us that so many most holy, venerable and learned persons have been and are hypocrites, impostors and jugglers?" Perish the thought!

# Feminist Moonshine

JANET McCRICKARD

Christians' hostility to the New Age movement is rooted in their dislike of competitors in the superstition market-place. Freethinkers regard both as hucksters of irrational beliefs. Janet McCrickard examines a lesser known aspect of New Ageism.

Most freethinkers are aware of the "New Age" and its exaltation of the irrational. Not so many are familiar with the "feminist spirituality movement" or "Goddess Revival". This started in the late 'Sixties as part of a more-or-less serious attempt to discover how world religions, past and present, have viewed women — an attempt to see with other eyes than merely those of the Christian West.

In this process it was, of course, discovered that the past is a different country. Instead of accepting this, some women are attempting to get back there, by reviving a hypothetical matriarchal religion, that of the "Great Moon Mother", supposed to be the universal and original faith from the dawn of time, when women were supreme, nobody was ill or unhappy, and everyone was politically correct. They claim that the patriarchal religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — are at root the same thing as rationality, logic, science and technology. These are supposed to be "Sun-god religions", and as such responsible for all human problems — particularly female subjection — as well as the destruction of nature. Moon-religion is, in contrast, totally good.

Where do they get this religion from? The Palaeolithic people left no texts, but that does not worry matriarchalists such as Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, whose book, *Great Cosmic Mother*, tells us quite dogmatically just what the prehistoric woman thought, did and believed. This work, a barrage of misinformation, confusion and illogicality, is effectively the New Testament of the feminist spirituality movement. It fulfils the Law and the Prophets in the shape of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* and Robert Briffault's *The Mothers*, which matriarchalists treat as infallible sources of hard fact. *Great Cosmic Mother* quotes uncritically from these and other flimflam sources, reproducing their errors with devout faith.

The matriarchalist account of history and religion sounds like a cross between Tolkien and British Israel-in-drag. Briefly, from the Palaeolithic era until about 1500 BC (or later) the world was ruled by women, who had also discovered fire and invented pottery, writing, medicine and anything else of value. All cultures had one religion, that of the supreme Moon-goddess, in which women were ruling priestesses with special psychic and magical powers. Nobody took any notice of the Sun. Then men proclaimed the idea of a Sun-god, and by rape, coercion,

violence, clitoridectomy and so forth, subjugated women and black people. Now everywhere there was patriarchal worship of the Sun-god, along with female subjection, racism, war, and above all, *rationality*. Despite total absence of support in any ancient text, the Sun-god was supposed to be the deity of technology and science, the god of logic and the critical, sceptical, anti-occult, reasoning faculty.

One cannot over-emphasise the hostility of matriarchalists towards reason, science and free inquiry. Anne Kent Rush says that academic and rational discipline "destroys moon-consciousness" (thus causing, among other things, irregular menstruation, reduced magic powers and impaired ability to understand psychic truths) while "academic sloppiness", "kookiness" and the lack of an education are strengths, not weaknesses. In her view, which is that of the movement as a whole, fantasies, intuitions and dreams are more legitimate and more to be trusted than "sun-consciousness", i.e. than rational, critical thought. Anne Kent Rush says that when running a class on Moon-religion, she provided topics that "would stand up to the intellectual criticism of the class"; these turned out to include Tarot, alchemy and astrology! On the same page she calls the intellect "life-stultifying".

Feminist orthodoxy is obsessed with the dogma that the Moon is feminine and the Sun masculine. During my 12 years in the movement I made myself unpopular by my researches showing that numerous tribes and cultures saw things the other way around. My predilection for Sun-goddesses was seen as a sorry lack of psychic wisdom and a symptom of my politically incorrect attitude.

Matriarchalists like Rush and Sjöö attribute virtually every natural process or phenomenon to the Moon's influence. They believe it is the source of energy for life on earth, that it causes plant and animal growth, the seasons, the weather, the functions of the brain, menstruation and animal fecundity. (I have met women who think that the moon is self-luminous!) The Sun, on the other hand, is held by matriarchalists to contribute nothing to life on earth. All it does is kill things. According to Rush, scientific writings about the Moon must be seen as propaganda and reinterpreted from a subjective, psychic, matriarchalist viewpoint, for "it is always central to listen to our own individual and collective female body experience".

There are liberals and moderates on the feminist spirituality scene. But they are only slightly more numerous than Jewish pork pie factories. Matriarchalists are usually fundamentalists. As a whole, the movement is bitterly opposed to reason, consistently valuing the irrational over the rational, unquestion-

ing faith in the occult over free inquiry, the subjective fantasy over objective knowledge, and magic over science. If this is the holy essence of true femininity, then women deserve to be kept in subjection.

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## Biblical Pseudo-Science

DAVID A. STATT

It goes back, like everything else in our civilisation, to the Greeks (who invented philosophy) and the Hebrews (who invented monotheism). By the time the Greeks had taken advantage of their easygoing gods to make the worship of Reason the most important human activity, around the fifth century BC, God Himself was over a thousand years old, and far too shrewd an operator to be elbowed out of the game.

The ancient Hebrews, like all fundamentalists, believed in the literal truth of their inspirational vision and this literal truth became literary truth when the vision was enshrined in the Torah, the five books of Moses. The Hebrews became the first People of the Book, and every syllable of that Book was sacrosanct. However, devout and fundamentalist though they were, they produced people who were able, during the seventy years of the Babylonian exile, to distance themselves from God far enough to realise that while literal and literary truth did a lot for the soul, it didn't get the wood hewn nor the water drawn. In order for the Word of the Lord to maintain any influence on daily life, therefore, it had to be interpreted, and this interpretation grew into an enormous series of commentaries stretching over some fifteen centuries; the Talmud.

The major challenge to the Hebrew faith was not the false gods of polytheism which surrounded it. Psychologically they were a pushover. As long as their representatives were material and visible they could be manipulated by the average punter looking for the best return on his religious investment. But the Hebrew God was solitary, unitary, immaterial and transcendental. His only real existence, in other words, was internal, and thus the believer was thrown back on his own resources. Knowing how to behave; the difference between right and wrong, was something that the individual punter has to work out for himself by consulting his newly-invented conscience — the God within him — and acting accordingly.

But the Greek way to knowledge of right and wrong was radically different: it was to ask the question "why?" about everything and reason a way to the truth from first principles. That is a marvellous way to build a powerful scientific method to understand the material world, but it doesn't do much for

the soul and the absolute imperatives of faith. So when the intellectual power of Greek thought met the emotional power of Hebrew monotheism a fudge of epic proportions was required to keep both sides in the same game.

In our own day Judaism is a tiny minority faith, but in the early Roman Empire it was espoused by a relatively large minority and was accorded a privileged place by the Romans, who respected its antiquity and probably its oddness. But the Romans revered and adored Greek civilisation and spread it with their conquering armies. Thus the crucial battle between Greek philosophy and Hebrew monotheism was fought 2000 years ago in Alexandria, a city as Jewish and cosmopolitan then as New York is now.

Philo of Alexandria, a devout Jew and one of the most celebrated scholars of his time, saw with his Talmudic training the dangerous attractions of philosophy and made the first attempt to unite Faith and Reason in one coherent system that could accommodate both the Greek and Hebrew world views. It was a heroic attempt but bound to fail, as we now realise, because faith and reason provide for different psychological needs. The very essence of reason is that it proceeds on the assumption that everything is, in principle, knowable. The essence of faith is that it transcends the knowable world and takes it on trust that something unavailable to reason — God — exists.

Despite the efforts of Philo and, over a millenium later, of Thomas Aquinas, there is no such thing as a reasoned faith, nor evidence of the existence of God. The modern attempt to prove the literal truth of the Bible is part of the same fruitless quest — except that, at the end of the twentieth century, it no longer has anything to do with philosophy or theology; it is simply magic thinking. And the fundamental point the fundamentalists always miss is that if such validation of their faith were available it would no longer be faith — but science.

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.

# Christian Science Fails the Final Test

LAURA MEREDITH

Christian Science, established in 1866 by Mary Baker Eddy, is one of the more easily demolished of the religious superstitions. Its principal ethos lies in a rejection of the efficacy of orthodox medicine. Christian Scientists have a stubborn belief in the power of faith over disease, based on the notion that disease has no reality in itself, and can be overcome simply by refusing to accept, acknowledge or even think of it.

Despite the obvious dangers of such a philosophy peddled to the impressionable or imposed on the vulnerable, Christian Scientists have had remarkable success in the United States in their aim of having their "prayer-based health care" accepted as equivalent to standard medical care. In some American States they are even exempt from child neglect laws if children suffer from being subjected to Christian Science faith healing in place of medical care. Money spent on this superstitious nonsense is tax deductible in the USA, where it is even covered by State Medicare and some health insurance policies.

It is hardly surprising that Christian Scientists have never collected data or permitted others to conduct formal studies of the value of their "health care", relying instead on "testimonials" from the faithful. The Christian Science Church forbids even the publishing of the numbers of its members — so when an American scientist decided to put their claims to the ultimate test, he had to use indirect means.

A report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*\* describes a study of Christian Scientist students by Dr William Franklin Simpson of the Division of Mathematics and Physical Science at Emporia State University in Kansas. Principa College in Elsah, Illinois, is not officially an organ of the Church, but all of its students are expected to be practising Christian Scientists. Its directory of alumni lists college graduates year by year, indicating those who have died. So Dr Simpson analysed the death rates, up to 1987, of Principa College graduating classes from 1934 to 1983 (a total of 2,630 men and 2,928 women). He compared them with those of normal students (17,753 men and 12,105 women) who had attended a faculty of the University of Kansas.

The Christian Science graduates had a significantly higher death rate than the other students. This is in accord with previous findings that Christian Scientists in Washington State tended to die younger than others, that the death rate from cancer among Christian Scientists is twice the national average; that six per cent of deaths among Christian Scientists could be classed as preventable. What makes the results especially interesting, Dr Simpson says, is that

Christian Scientists are forbidden to use either tobacco or alcohol — whatever positive effects this might have on health, they are clearly overridden by the negative effect on longevity. "Christian Scientists have a lower life expectancy", Dr Simpson concludes. This implies that Christian Science healing does not work as well as normal medical care — but the influence of the religious lobby in the United States is such that scientific proof may not count for much.

## Religion "Down" Under

Only 12 per cent of New Zealanders attend church regularly and pray daily, according to researchers at the country's Massey University. Their findings, resulting from an extensive survey carried out in 1985, have been published under the title, *The Religious Factor in New Zealand Society*.

Dr Alan Webster, of the University's Education Department, and Dr Paul Perry, a sociologist, say that barely a third of the population believe in a personal God. The New Zealand level of belief in traditional Christianity is similar to that in Northern Europe. It is lower than in Australia and considerably lower than in the United States.

Roman Catholics are the largest group in the population who attend church regularly. Next come the fundamentalist churches, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Baptists. But one in four churchgoers hold a non-traditional view of God.

Webster and Perry found that while church leaders "may give support to renewal issues such as justice, equality, gender, power and peace, there is little evidence of any general impact of such views upon those who are religious". Evangelical sects tended to be Right-wing in politics.

Commenting on the report, Mr S. J. Jones, secretary of New Zealand Rationalist Association, said the organisation already knew from its own research that there had been a marked decline in religious belief. This was confirmed by the 1986 census returns in which 16 per cent described themselves as having no religion.

"We believe this figure will rise to over 20 per cent in the 1991 census," he added.

Holiday accommodation to let: a self-catering chalet to sleep a maximum of six, situated eleven minutes from the sea at Mablethorpe. March to May and October to November, £40 per week; June to September, £70 per week. Further details from Secular Properties Company, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB, telephone (0533) 813671.

# Cranmer, Thou Shouldst be Living at This Hour

BRIAN DONAGHEY

On 19 December 1989 Prince Charles, presenting the Thomas Cranmer Schools Prize, sponsored by the Prayer Book Society and the Spectator magazine to mark the quincentenary of Cranmer's birth, used the occasion to review the state of English. Here is a response to the text of his speech. Brian Donaghey is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Linguistics, University of Sheffield.

Prince Charles, perhaps thinking of his future role of safeguarding "the King's English", has again taken up the cudgels of controversy. With his evident sincerity and depth of feeling, tribute is due to him for daring to enter the arena to wrestle with this intractable subject. Debates about language arouse passions even in those generally indifferent to weighty moral and political issues.

Discussions about linguistic matters should be objective and informed, for passionate responses, generating more heat than light, do not contribute to the quality of debate. It may be too early to decide whether the Prince's utterances were a considered, self-contained statement, or designed as a provocative stimulus to further debate about a crisis point in the language. Either way, by the form in which his speech is cast he risks eliciting unhelpful responses and obscuring the problem he claims to address.

Why have an article about language in a rationalist journal normally concerned with other matters? Readers should perhaps be reminded that language and philosophy are now allied, for the whole drive of modern philosophy has been away from its traditional domain, towards a rational investigation of the nature of human constructs through both the liberating, and the confining, medium of language. The concerns of professional linguists and philosophers have been converging; developments in each subject have contributed signally to advances in the other. The subjects have proliferated well beyond their previously defined "natural" or fixed bounds.

As in most matters subjected to modern scientific enquiry, the layman is well advised to exercise caution when approaching them. Prince Charles must be seeing his subject as a layman, since he is not known to be a professional linguist or philosopher. Now, there is nothing wrong with a layman's voicing concern about things he finds perturbing, provided he does so from as informed a position as possible. Prince Charles weakens his position by giving the impression that he is not so informed, for he deals with the state of English within a narrow range, showing no awareness of wider aspects of modern

English needing consideration. If his principal concern is with the precious historical heritage of English, to be protected from damage, then his way of viewing it is decidedly weak in historical accuracy, bordering on an idealisation of what never existed as he sees it.

Perhaps the Prince erred in keying his remarks to a particular occasion. Had he published or spoken separately about the state of English, the focus might have been more securely linguistic. As it is, there is a question whether the state of the language is the exact focus of his remarks. There are really two distinct issues which he has made uneasy bedfellows in the Procrustean bed of a format in which he can do justice to neither. Probably unintentionally he may therefore give offence to many people.

Since the ostensible issue is the linguistic one, let this take priority in discussion. Prince Charles makes some assertions about declining standards in the use of English, tracing these to an abandonment, in our educational system, of respect for the language itself as "an enormously precious legacy to be handed on". He supports this by defining the standard as a "heritage" chiefly encapsulated in the Book of Common Prayer, comparing the Alternative Service Book with it unfavourably, lamenting a loss of "respect for tradition, for humility before the ideas and practices of our forbears which served them so well". These points, occupying about half his speech, are misguided, for the "heritage" of the language includes *everything* which is historically verifiable as having happened in it, from the colloquial and dialectal bottom of the scale, in the mouths of the non-literate, to the heights of sublimity in oratory and poetry. From this range, and the willingness of its speakers to adapt to new conditions, English has derived more force, vigour and vitality than weakness.

If, however, we look more closely at the Book of Common Prayer itself, should such respect as Prince Charles desires really be accorded to it as a model of language? The most elementary principles of linguistic theory show that no utterance exists in and for itself, but always operates in a specific socio-political context. Although the Prayer Book may have acquired status and become venerable through age, it should be understood as the brilliantly executed project of a man intent on consolidating the conversion of England from one form of religion to another, in line with the political ambitions of the Tudor ascendancy. This required the replacement of a system that emphasised the role of clerics as

mediators, and monastic orders and the panoply of saints as intercessors for people's spiritual welfare (with little active participation by the people themselves) by a system of corporate worship able to inculcate and reinforce the desired "community" values and to give the Anglican Church a distinct national identity. Cranmer and his team simplified the old (Latin) service books to make this form of worship more palatable. They cleverly adapted the vernacular language of pre-Reformation works of private devotional piety for use in a public context, and added original composition such as the Collects and hortatory elements. Insofar as the language imitated something already familiar, it was deceptive; and insofar as the book became an instrument for ends not purely religious, it was manipulative. Cranmer also saw clearly that only the superior technology of printing would ensure the success of this programme, so that its use in all churches was enforced. It did not immediately give to everyone the comfort and hope that Prince Charles claims, for Catholic recusancy persisted for a long time, and at the opposite extreme, the Puritans abhorred it.

In using the Prayer Book as his touchstone of excellence (however one may judge its credentials for respect) the Prince is doing a disservice to past writers and speakers who chose to frame their language within alternative, but equally authoritative, traditions. Their contributions to the rich texture of English must not be neglected. Even the colloquial forms in lexis and structure — the "language of the streets" — have been used to telling effect (by Shakespeare, among others) whereby independent value must be credited to them.

To be fair, Prince Charles is a little aware of the limitations of his view, for he opens it out into a wider matter. In linking the "defacing of Cranmer's Prayer Book" with "a calamitous decline in literacy and the quality of English" he proposes a remedy for maintaining the heritage of English in good order, incidentally illustrating its decline with a rendering of Hamlet's soliloquy into the language of today. This is infelicitous because a false comparison is made between two unlike things (Hamlet did not in fact use the everyday idiomatic language of 1601). The Prince's remedy leans rather too heavily towards a narrow prescriptivism, probably coloured by a literary bias, in favour of some "standard" English. This also carries with it social implications of some elite authority which defines the standard, handing it down from above through the educational system. Indeed, Prince Charles approves of this in the new national curriculum for English. It leads one to wonder whether he knew that both the Kingman and the Cox Committees set their face against this, recommending that children be given an appreciation of the variety and potential of the language instead of being trained to adhere to some

artificial form of it.

In the end, many arguments about language are not linguistic, but social. They aim at affirming the superiority of one group, and the inferiority and marginalisation of others who do not conform. Prince Charles must know that the society in Britain over which he will rule is a complex organism comprising many groups. Some groups use forms of English that have their own systems, consistency and distinctive lexis, and their own criteria for excellence of expression. The reclaiming of the vigour and independence of regional dialects (paralleled in other countries) is one example, but newer groups are asserting their legitimate claims to be heard, such as black English and the English of other ethnic groups. They must not be relegated to the status of quaint revivals or inferior aberrations from some norm. The complexity of this situation just within these islands demands recognition, even without entering into the question of English as used in other countries, where British condescension to these (now autonomous) cultures generally clouds the issue. In failing to acknowledge all these claims, Prince Charles is tacitly providing a rebuff to them, and he risks stifling innovation and experiment in the language.

There is a sub-text in the Prince's speech in which a second issue is raised. Outside the Prayer Book's merits as a model of language, in concentrating, with admiration, on its role as "the spiritual resource of English and English-speaking people for four centuries" he invites us to infer what it signifies for him. This exclusivity of its role again distorts historical accuracy, for one can think of many other spiritual resources alongside and competing with it over that time-span. But this same exclusivity is perturbing because it speaks to us of the Prince's thought being unilinear and monolithic. The Prayer Book becomes a symbol of stability, faith in the correctness of the form of religion which it serves, and restraint of the dreadful centrifugal forces leading to heterogeneity. We are led to ask whether this is the actual focus of his remarks, to which the other subject is only an accessory. His remarks may indeed cause anxiety to many, in not acknowledging the truly multicultural and pluralistic nature of modern British society. Some groups have their own spiritual resources drawn from equally venerable traditions, which they are also capable of expressing in English to those prepared to listen. Some people conclude that no religion has the monopoly of expressing noble ideals and investigating principles of moral action, and there is no evidence that they lead less useful lives than the most zealous adherents of religion. Let us hope that the Prince, among others, will recognise these complexities and come to terms with them. God (or whatever) bless the Prince of Wales.

# BOOKS

**THE GOD SQUAD, by Paddy Doyle. Corgi, £3.99**

Coincidences. My life is full of them. The editor called me out of the blue asking me to review this book. Within 24 hours, at a Dublin children's Book Fair I ran into Paddy Doyle himself for the first time. I recognised him immediately from the cover of his book: the beard, the sad but intelligent eyes and the jug ears.

He was in a wheel chair, his body twisted and restless, but emanating the sense of a man at peace with himself. He was delighted to have made the bestsellers' lists in both Ireland and England. I was able to ask him directly about the strength of his book. "It shows," he said, "that a person can live through the most awful experiences without bitterness."

The experiences were indeed awful. Paddy's mother died of cancer when he was four years old. Soon after, his father hanged himself and the little boy witnessed it. That image of a man dangling in space, never to be articulated or discussed with him by adults, was to haunt him day and night during his long stint in an Irish industrial school. The school was run by tyrannical nuns whose love was given entirely to Jesus. One of them sexually abused him and religion was used as a means of bludgeoning him into conformity. But it was the Mercy sisters' inability to enter into the world of a child, their lack of sensitivity to his needs and loneliness as a little orphan that appals the reader most. They did not even bother to tell him that he had a sister.

The writing is a model of frankness, precision and economy. The author's description of people, good and bad, are evocative and memorable. However, overall, the book is impersonal, almost clinical. Paddy Doyle might have been writing about someone else. Many critics have, I believe, approved of this aspect. Frankly, I thought it a major weakness. It gives the book more the air of a documentary than the autobiography of a man who has suffered more than any human being ought to have suffered. In eliminating self-pity, he almost rooted out compassion. It irritated me that someone who has endured so much should seem to have accepted it so evenly. I would have preferred a few traces of good old fashioned rage!

There is, too, a pervading sense of vagueness about what the lad's ailments were that required frequent hospitalisation and the brain surgery that left him a complete cripple.

The book would have benefited, too, from editorial direction. There is a sameness about the incidents leading to a slight boredom in this reviewer at least.

# FREETHINKER

The writing would have benefited from more light and shade. Finally, whereas the early part of his life is treated in detail, the latter part where he married in 1974 and fathered children is dealt with in a few enigmatic lines. Perhaps he intends writing a sequel in which he will deal with his triumph over disaster. Seeing his very pretty wife and his children straight as arrows at the Book Fair, I felt that Paddy must consider them every day as miracles in their own right.

My somewhat negative reaction is intended to help. There is plenty of evidence in *The God Squad* that the author has tremendous talent. But literature is more than a record of the past; it is a transfiguration of it. It is a way whereby one man's story becomes part of the heritage of every other person and of humanity as a whole. The little boy of *The God Squad* is too much Paddy Doyle and not enough every lonely little boy and girl in city, town or forest glade crying in the dark. This is a good book. I look forward to the next one being great.

PETER DE ROSA

● *The God Squad, by Paddy Doyle, is obtainable at most bookshops, price £3.99, and from G. W. Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL (add 50p postage).*

**SPIRITUAL WARFARE: THE POLITICS OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT, by Sara Diamond. Pluto Press, £17.50**

This book comprises a detailed study of the various American fundamentalist Christian organisations. Detailed for a good reason, as Sara Diamond says in the preface: "To the fullest extent possible, I have tried not to draw overly broad generalisations about the religious Right. The counterpoint to sweeping conclusions is specific detail, which, I believe, is necessary in analysing any political movement."

The author begins by outlining the history of Christian fundamentalists' use of radio and television which began in the 1920s. The Scopes "monkey trial" in 1925 coincided with a peak in public derision of evangelical Christians who, as a result, tended to shy away from "worldly" matters. However, the use of radio for evangelical (and political) propaganda continued. Animosity towards the "apostasy" of liberal churches affiliated to the Federal Council of Churches (later the National Council of Churches) was notable during the 'Twenties and has continued ever since. Fundamentalists sought to break the liberals' control of religious broadcasting. The National Association of Evangelicals set up the National Religious Broadcasters for that purpose in

# REVIEWS

1944. Their broadcasts are directed not only to fellow-Americans but to a world-wide audience.

Pat Robertson honed his propaganda technique as a televangelist (a label he was later to disown) at the Christian Broadcasting Network. Sara Diamond notes Robertson's links with the Grace Empire which devoted considerable efforts to breaking the Labour movement across the Americas. She comments on the 1987 scandal over Jim Bakker's resignation as head of the Praise the Lord ministry: "What is truly scandalous about the PTL affair is that adultery and financial impropriety rank as more significant . . . than the day-to-day involvement of the Christian Right in foreign and domestic political matters." She adds: "After the unprecedented scandals . . . of 1987, the NRB still wielded enough political muscle to attract all of the Republican presidential candidates to speak at their 1988 convention (none of the Democratic candidates was invited)."

Sara Diamond examines Dominion Theology, also known as Kingdom Theology, and quotes Bob Weiner: "The Bible says we are to . . . rule. If you don't rule and I don't rule, the atheists and the humanists and the agnostics are going to rule. . . We should be taking over every area of life." The concept "that Christians are biblically mandated to 'occupy' all secular institutions" has been developed by Rousas John Rushdoony and his son-in-law Gary North into what Sara Diamond describes as the *central unifying ideology* for the Christian Right". I hope she is correct in describing this as "a hopelessly unrealistic scheme".

The rise of the new Christian Right in the mid-1970s is well described. Christian Voice, began the "moral report card" scheme in 1980. These cards complimented candidates on their "Christian" voting record or branded them for their "unChristian" position. Although there were rumblings of discontent in 1987 among Christian Rightwingers, with threats of the "formation of a major third party" thus blighting the chances of the Republican Party, they have generally supported the Republicans. Such support has been framed in terms of "pro-family", "traditional" values.

Secular humanism has become a convenient label for all that the Christian Right opposes. "Secular Humanist" textbooks are denounced and home schooling with a suitable Christian bias promoted. Opposition to abortion is vigorous and sometimes violent, with the use of inflammatory rhetoric like "holocaust . . . murderers . . . baby killers". Joseph Scheidler, of the Pro-Life Action League, described the fire-bombing of women's health clinics as "trivial" and "not particularly wise".

The AIDS epidemic has been used by Jerry

Falwell and others to stir up anti-gay prejudice. Gays are linked with mass murder and child molestation. Non-gay AIDS sufferers are seen as being punished by God for society's acceptance of homosexuality.

The Christian Right is arguably most dangerous in its eschatology. Its doctrines of "the last things" include that of tribulation, a seven-year period of war, famine and social chaos which will precede the millenium (a thousand years of Christian rule). Fundamentalists differ on whether Christians will avoid tribulation, or if Christ will join his followers to rule during the millenium. Pre-tribulationists hold that believers will be taken up in "the rapture", thus avoiding the hardships of tribulation. The implications of pre-tribulationism for a calculation of the risk of a nuclear Armageddon are obvious.

Sara Diamond presents detailed evidence for the considerable — and dangerous — political impact by the Christian Right. Some readers may have minor reservations about her treatment of Third World political movements. For instance, opponents of the Nicaraguan Government are lumped together as Contras, without any attempt to separate the different strands there. But such minor quibbles have to be set against the considerable value of a well-researched book on the theology, ideology, politics and influence of the Christian Right in the United States.

COLIN MILLS

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Right-wing Catholic "family" organisations in the Republic of Ireland are preparing to resist homosexual law reform. Four years ago these groups led a campaign to prevent divorce. There is a distinct possibility that the Government will decriminalise homosexual acts. The European Court of Human Rights recently ruled in favour of Senator David Norris, a veteran campaigner for gay rights. In a telephone poll for a radio programme, 66 per cent of the callers were in favour of reform.

# LETTERS

## MISSED OPPORTUNITY

It is right for *The Freethinker* to give Christians the opportunity to contribute; we can only benefit from considered criticism of our secular positions. Sectarianism, while being the only occupant of many of the cages in the religious menagerie, is an infantile disability to which the human mind is generally prone. Secularists have no immunity. We can be as blinkered as almost any of them. Unfortunately, Tim Lenton's "freethought" seems to be free mainly in the pejorative sense of "undisciplined", and his article is therefore disappointing. It could have been salutary.

Its crucial weakness may be the question-begging use of "genuine" as applied to Christianity. Christians profess belief in a real creator (God), that Jesus was God Incarnate and that the Bible has divine authority. The genuineness of such professions could only be known to the supposed god and if, as most readers opine, such an entity does not exist then "genuine" can only have a subjective connotation in this connection. To Mr Lenton, "genuine Christians" can only mean "Christians with whom I agree sufficiently to enable me to use that adjective sincerely". Christians are not famous for endorsing one another's genuineness across the sectarian divides.

Christians come in all shapes and sizes. We have the intelligent respect for doubt of the Archbishop of York and the quaintly arid certainties of the Bishop of London. We have the "Vicar of Christ" who is another Christian's "Anti-Christ". We have the crude ravings of the doorstep pamphleteer and the urbane obscurities of the kindly Bishop of Durham. We even have Don Cupitt who has reduced God to the "sum of our values" — as pithy a statement of classical atheism as one could desire. As a local minister said to me, "Cupitt has created God in his own image". Any, but not all, of these may be considered "genuine" Christians if one so wishes. The televangelists' Christianity may be genuine even if their criminality is more demonstrably so. Jim Bakker may hold the three beliefs I have listed above, and many others too, even in the nick.

The truth, as I see it, is that Christianity is mostly vacuous and so can be absurd, revolting or valuable according to what you make it out to be. That is why knee-jerk anti-Christianity is merely tilting at windmills. We sometimes fail to see this. That Mr Lenton likes the bits he likes is no big deal; that he calls those bits "genuine" is possibly offensive to some fellow Christians but merely sloppy freethinking to us. We do not need sloppy Christian writers when we can rustle up sloppy writers of our own.

Many of us are told by benevolent believers that "you are the only true Christian in the room". My counter to this gambit is, "How kind! You are a Monday to Saturday Humanist." It never fails.  
ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

## SUPERSTITIOUS NONSENSE

In his interesting *Freethinker* article (January), Tim Lenton laments the fact that when the magazine was founded in 1881, the founder declared that its main purpose was to "wage war against superstition in general and Christian superstition in particular". But according to Mr Lenton, it has still not come to grips with the core of Christianity.

It seems to me that Tim Lenton is but one of thousands of Christians who simply fail to realise that Jesus of the gospel narratives (if he existed at all)

was an arch-exponent of appalling superstitious nonsense. May I ask Mr Lenton to consider the following facts and ask himself the question I pose at the end of this letter.

Approximately 400 years before Jesus was ever heard of, the great Greek physician, Hippocrates, declared in a medical treatise on epilepsy: "Every illness has a natural cause and without natural causes, nothing ever happens." Contrast that statement with the gospel narratives in which Jesus is depicted as curing the blind, the dumb, the epileptic and the lunatic by first, rebuking, and then casting out "the devils" which he clearly believed were responsible for those afflictions. Mr Lenton should ask himself one simple question. Are modern medical practitioners in closer accord with the natural cause beliefs of Hippocrates or with the "devil possessed" beliefs of Jesus? The simple answer to that question explains exactly why the Christian religion is quintessentially a superstition and all the eloquent moralising and sermonising in the world cannot alter that basic, fundamental fact. One could quote examples of the horrific tragedies that have occurred in our own day and age as a direct result of that Jesus-inspired nonsense but meantime I will merely content myself with the observation that there is more than a grain of truth in the old cliché, "superstitions die hard".  
MARTIN O'BRIEN, Cardiff

## WHAT IS GENUINE CHRISTIANITY?

Tim Lenton writes that when *The Freethinker* attacks Christianity it is really waging war against a series of caricatures, failing to discriminate between religious extremism and genuine Christianity. This is a familiar argument used by Christian apologists.

In his book, *The Misery of Christianity*, Joachim Kahl writes: "Everyone who has attempted to criticise Christianity has had to endure the reproach that he was fighting against a caricature. . . The method of taking what Christians themselves define as Christian as one's point of departure would seem to lead us into a state of embarrassment that cannot be overcome. Christians themselves do not know what is a Christian. What some Christians regard as God's most holy will, others condemn as the way of the devil."

I don't know Mr Lenton's definition of genuine Christianity, but it is a safe bet that whatever it is, some of those "many voices" which he refers to in an "apostate and disorganised Christianity" will say that he is in theological error.

RAY McDOWELL, Larne, County Antrim, N. Ireland

## DEFINITION

Significantly, Tim Lenton, in common with so many other Christians, except fundamentalists, never says what Christian belief is. He takes so long to say what freethinkers don't understand and then explains nothing of what he believes.

Maybe a definition would be helpful, in order that some Christians and the more genteel atheist understand what is being attacked. Christianity is a monotheistic form of religion taking its rise from Judaism and from the life and works of Jesus Christ. Along with Judaism, it regards God as personal — as He rather than It. Christianity claims for him wisdom, will and creative power, and that He is the origin and ground of all things that are or will be. It believes that he is the God of history and the God of nature who designed everything from the cucumber to the cor-morant, making them all with no regard for evolutionary process. Christians believe that in Christ, God himself in some mysterious way entered into the stream of

human history, which they perceive to be marred and thwarted by evil. Christianity offers no explanation of the fact of evil, but rather simplistically claims an ultimate victory of good dependent upon a "Kingdom or Reign of God".

Perhaps Mr Lenton would like to apply reason to, and comment on this definition. All religions make similar supernatural claims. Most of the ancient religions are dead, forgotten and un lamented. When Christianity follows them, does Tim Lenton consider that we will have a more or less reasoning and reasonable society?

ROBERT SINCLAIR, Coventry

### HUMANIST FUNERALS

Humanist and non-religious funerals are an area where members of the British Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press Association, the National Secular Society and South Place Ethical Society have co-operated over the years to provide an important service. It seems sad that one unfortunate report in *The Independent* should have created such a tirade of abuse from Karl Heath (Letters, January).

Certainly there was a mistake in the figure for BHA membership: we have never denied it. *The Independent* was told at once that this had occurred, and they were not interested. Concerning the contents of the report, anyone who has had dealings with the press and the media will know that even a reputable journalist will latch on to some aspect of a story which is felt to be of popular interest. In *Woman's Hour* recently a brief account of Humanist funerals was sandwiched between two excerpts from a quite atypical "showbiz" cremation, thus distorting the overall picture. Those of us who are concerned with Humanist funerals know that our ceremonies are sensitive, serious and usually quite formal. On a rare occasion a family may choose unconventional music, which is appropriate for that particular person.

Many readers of *The Freethinker* are also BHA members. They will be aware of the breadth of our field of activity and our growing influence. The concept of Humanism as a naturalistic (as opposed to a theistic) life stance is now recognised internationally, and we have Humanists representing the naturalistic life stance on 30 Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) at the present time in this country.

But we are far from complacent and much concerned about the vast amount that remains to be done. In-fighting between the various Humanist organisations is destructive to our common purposes: it can only damage the whole movement.

JANE WYNNE WILLSON,  
Chairperson, British Humanist Association

### ALL PUBLICITY IS GOOD PUBLICITY?

Karl Heath may claim greater wisdom and intellectual vigour for the National Secular Society, but in the tone of his letter (January) criticising British Humanist Association policy, he is guilty of showing very little commonsense.

His attack on Maeve Denby, the BHA's National Funeral Co-ordinator who, with fellow BHA member Jane Wynne Willson, author of the excellent booklet, *Funerals Without God*, and Barbara Smoker of the NSS, has probably done more for the cause of secular funeral ceremonies than anyone else, was both intemperate and unnecessary.

In the first place, he "doth protest too much". Everybody concedes that the press, in general, are

notorious for printing inaccurate statistics and it in no way impugns Maeve Denby's integrity to have been misquoted or misunderstood. Given that an error was made, however, surely (from the publicity angle) if you are going to be misquoted it is marginally better, from the Association's point of view, to have their membership exaggerated rather than minimised.

He also, in classic vein, takes quotes from Maeve Denby out of context. The remarks he objects to in the *Independent* article were not used in describing an average Humanist funeral, as he implies, but in citing examples of the more outlandish requests received by secular officiants.

I notice that he fails to mention or give any credit to the BHA for getting much needed publicity about Humanist activity on to the front-page of an influential national daily newspaper — a significant feat not achieved by the NSS recently, as far as I am aware.

I can assure him that the BHA Executive do indeed take their responsibilities very seriously. I doubt, therefore, whether they relish the prospect of a bout of ill-considered and petty in-fighting of the kind that Karl Heath has seen fit to initiate, just when the whole Humanist movement, including the NSS, is starting to achieve some useful publicity and gaining public support.

NIGEL COLLINS, Moreton-in-Marsh

### "SIX OF ONE. . ."

Kenneth Doughty (Letters, January) criticises the "negative attitude" of my presidential address to the National Secular Society in which I asserted that certain religious leaders are typical of their followers.

If Ayatollah Khomeini did not represent the average Muslim, why have millions of Muslims world-wide supported his sentence of death on Salman Rushdie, with no fewer than 20,000 demonstrating violently in London on 27 May 1989?

If Marcinkus, and the Pope who protects and promotes him, do not really represent Roman Catholicism, how is it that Peter's Pence still pour into the coffers of the Vatican?

If the affluent televangelists do not represent the Protestants of the United States, how is it that their gullible viewers have made them millionaires?

Those millions who support the "lunatic fringe" of each of the major religions are surely more "lunatic" than the religious leaders who ponce off them!

BARBARA SMOKER,  
President, National Secular Society

### A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA

In his article, *Crocodile Tears* (December 1989), about his native South Africa, Barry Duke makes a number of unreasonable assumptions.

First, that a people cannot change its attitude from generation to generation. If that were true, the English would still approve of slavery and the Germans would not now be welcoming to Jews.

Secondly, that pale-skinned South Africans have a desire to commit genocide. This would deprive them of "a vast reservoir of near-slave labour", referred to later in the same article.

Thirdly, that Mrs Thatcher — whatever her faults — is an apologist for apartheid. She expresses opposition to the system quite strongly, even though this may only alienate some of the sort of people who vote for her party.

Fourthly, that there is wrong in being a minority of one. Among some group of "Afrikanerdom in a semi-rural part of the Transvaal", Barry Duke could well

be in a minority of one; he would not be in the wrong for that.

Fifthly, that de Klerk desegregates beaches and hotels. Had we not heard of such cosmetic desegregation — under Botha — long before the name of de Klerk had become known? Have we not now heard of

releases of political prisoners, of meetings, of curb on police misuse of power?

There is change for the better in South Africa, much too slow for my liking, but to be applauded as far as it goes.

PETER DANNING, Richmond, Surrey

## Stop Dwelling on Death

KARL HEATH

Preoccupation with death, an occupational hazard shared by the religious and some humanists, is an unhealthy, morbid obsession.

Some religious people spend a lifetime running away from death, trying to escape it by nurturing a faith in the hereafter. The exercise is fruitless since they cannot escape, but worse than fruitless because it diminishes life. It engenders guilt complexes and psychological disorders. It is a pathological distraction.

It is distressing to find humanists among those who are fascinated by funerals and euthanasia. Every week the Personal Column of the *Guardian* newspaper carries a British Humanist Association advertisement which must lead some readers to suppose that the BHA is a firm of undertakers. When some professed humanists clutch at straws like near-death experiences, I wonder what has happened to the old rationalist courage.

There is an element of self-indulgence even in some of the classical humanist responses to death: Epicurus making a virtue of passive acceptance; Swinburne's "weariest river, winding somewhere safe to sea"; and even Robert Green Ingersoll, whom I

greatly admire, writing in *If Death Ends All* of "floating in the clouds, and bursting in light upon the shores of distant worlds".

Sensible atheists should put death where it naturally belongs — with eating, drinking and making love, but well into the background and far behind reading, writing, learning, debating and sharing human affairs and aspirations. Do not put death on the mantelpiece for all to see. Keep it in a cupboard until it is time to take it out.

I confess to some resentment. Immortality is meaningless, but prolonged life is not. I would have liked to compose music, to conduct an orchestra, to learn advanced mathematics, to be a Test Match bowler, to be an actor. But why repine? I have been fortunate never to have been bored with life and to possess, I hope, a sense of humour. I have never had a guilt complex; when guilty I have known why and tried to make amends.

Karl Marx, playing a party game with his grandchildren, was asked his favourite word. He replied, "Struggle". He did not mean ill-natured conflict, but the dialectical exchange of opinion and argument which gives life significance.

Life is more than a stance: it is an active process.

## Lewisham Anniversary

DENIS COBELL

The only Pope alleged to be of English origin (Nicholas Breakspear: Adrian IV, 1154-59) had family connections with Lewisham, in South East London, celebrated in the name of a local hostelry, The Breakspear Arms. John Wesley, the 18th-century preacher and founder of Methodism also lived in Lewisham for nearly 40 years. But in the 20th century, humanism saw the light of day in Lewisham. Barbara Smoker, better known as the president of the National Secular Society, is also chairperson of the local Group. She has spent a lifetime in the borough and was instrumental in the formation of Lewisham Humanist Group.

In 1960 humanist groups were springing up like mushrooms all over the country. Although many of these have since vanished, the Lewisham group has managed, against the odds, to survive. We have never been a large group, and it is interesting to note from early records of attendance at meetings, that this figure has only varied slightly during the inter-

vening 30 years.

The programme of regular monthly meetings was established then; amongst early speakers were many of the well known advocates of rationalism and secularism. The local Unitarian Meeting House has been the venue of these events over almost 20 years. Our neighbours, Sutton Humanist Group, annually celebrate the Summer Solstice with a garden party: we, less soberly but indoors, mark the Winter Solstice with a Saturnalian party.

Times have changed since the Group was formed. In 1961, Family Planning Association advertisements were banned by London Transport. Few now turn a hair when condoms are promoted on television in the wake of a burgeoning AIDS epidemic. The Group distributed free condoms to purchasers of *The Free-thinker* at a Lewisham People's Day, an event held every July in a nearby park.

We protested through the local press against Ichthus Church Fellowship's persecution of gays.

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and posters proclaiming "Ban Blasphemy Law" were prominently displayed on our stall at last year's People's Day. The police were alerted prior to the event, but there was no trouble. In fact most comments were sympathetic.

Ethnic and racial discrimination has naturally received attention in a borough with a large black community. I recall a march we joined in the 1970s. Our banner said "No Racism or Religion in the Classroom". A fellow marcher, wearing a clerical collar, expressed agreement.

It is gratifying to read in humanist journals of a resurgence of local humanist groups. In the current climate of "moral" attitudes, this is hardly surprising and emphasises the need for continued activity to avoid a return to pre-1960s days. Unfortunately, of the 1988 Education Act, with its entrenchment of Christianity in schools, is not reassuring.

The campaign waged by Lewisham humanists against the cross in the borough crematorium has already been reported in *The Freethinker*. But it was only last year that the seven-year battle against the exorbitant surcharge imposed on bereaved families who wanted the huge cross removed, finally succeeded. A Sunday newspaper feature included a photograph of Barbara Smoker at the entrance to the crematorium with an array of angels on the building behind her. How long before Lewisham Humanist Group sees them sent sky high? Not another 30 years, we hope!

## OBITUARY

**Mr S. Beer**

Sam Beer, who has died in his 77th year, was a staunch freethinker all his life. He was a member of the National Secular Society, Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society (a Trustee of the latter). Other organisations to which he belonged included Humanist Holidays, of which his wife Betty, who died in 1986, was an outstanding secretary.

Sam Beer was born in the Battersea district of London. He won a scholarship to Battersea Grammar School and then an Exhibition at Downing College, Cambridge. He obtained a postgraduate teaching qualification at the London University Institute of Education.

He travelled widely and spoke several languages. An avid reader, he had a particular liking for the works of Voltaire, Byron, Shelley, Morris and Shaw. His wide range of interests included ballet, opera and the visual arts.

The last years of Sam Beer's life were clouded by the deaths of his two wives and his son Geoffrey. But he faced these losses with much fortitude, and was active until the end.

There was a secular committal ceremony at South London Crematorium.

## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 4 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. James Sang: Bio-Technology and Ethics.

**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 March, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 22 February, 8 pm. Denis Cobell: Humanism in Lewisham, 1960-1990.

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

**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, 12 February and 12 March, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include  
MICHAEL FOOT, MP  
MERVYN JONES  
BARBARA SMOKER  
NICOLAS WALTER

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

Saturday, 21 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £16. Vegetarians catered for  
(advance notice essential)

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

# NSS Report Urges "Freedom From Religion"

The National Secular Society's annual report, which has just been published, declares that secularists "stand squarely for freedom of personal religion — which is a prerequisite of freedom from religion".

Commenting on the upsurge of dissent in Eastern European countries, the report welcomes "signs of many dissidents (for instance, within the ranks of Poland's Solidarity), who, wary of exchanging one authoritarianism for another, are now standing against the alliance of political dissidence with the Church".

Wars and internal conflicts around the globe continue, with the social divisiveness of race and language aggravated by that of religion. One example is the civil war in Sri Lanka between the mostly Hindu minority and the Sinhalese Buddhist majority.

"The Buddhists, who are generally thought of in the West as a pacifist sect — sort of oriental Quakers — have shown themselves to be just as violent as their opponents, or as any other religious group involved in such conflicts anywhere."

Northern Ireland's 20-year-old campaign of sectarian terrorism has been extended to the continent of Europe, with British servicemen and their families now major "soft" targets.

The main concern of the NSS during the year under review was the campaign by Muslim zealots for the withdrawal of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the death sentence on its author, and demands for extension of the archaic blasphemy law to non-Christian religions.

There has also been an increase in Muslim demands for separate Islamic schools and for Islamic personal laws to be recognised in British courts.

The report criticises leading members of the Labour Party who have misguidedly tried to "curry

favour with Islamic fundamentalists by backing their demands for the extension of blasphemy law and for Muslim schools. Even so, a separate political party, the Islamic Party of Britain, has now been formed — though this (as some Muslim leaders have pointed out), is likely to be counter-productive, since it cannot possibly win parliamentary seats in the foreseeable future and will reduce the current Islamic influence in the Labour Party."

Another of the Society's concerns has been the implementation of the religious clauses of the Education Reform Act 1988. These have given the Christian religion a legal prominence it never had under the 1944 Act. But it is unlikely that the broadening of religious education that took place during the past 45 years will be eliminated.

However, while the original intentions of the Bishop of London and Baroness Cox are likely to be defeated in practice, "the mere existence of the new legal emphasis on Christianity, both in RE and RO (religious observance) in schools, has, unfortunately, given the non-Christian minorities additional grounds for demanding their own separate schools or their own separate religious assemblies in State schools. And the exemption afforded to schools with a substantial number of children from minority religions could give rise to the even worse situation of the school doors being opened to their religious leaders."

The report describes increased ecumenistic activities of the various Christian churches as "a sign of weakness", and an attempt to breach centuries of schism.

"The Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury pledged their respective flocks to halt the tide of secularism that is sweeping Europe, and it is because they now see non-belief and secularism as a powerful enemy that they feel the need to join together against us.

"Their attempts in this direction have, however, received a major setback during the year, caused by the infiltration into holy orders in some of their sects of the 'monstrous regiment of women'. It is ironic that women, who have historically played a compliant role in Christianity, are now rocking the boat of Peter the fisherman."

(continued from front page)

liberties, especially as regards freedom of the press."

Ludovic Kennedy concluded by saying that when we talk about suppression of information, what we really have in mind is suppression of the truth.

"In public affairs as in private ones, unless we can know what the truth of any matter is, then we cannot come to grips with it. It slips like quicksilver through our grasp.

"One of the reasons I am so against our lousy system of criminal justice is that it is not aimed, as the courts on the Continent are, at seeking the truth, and because of that it often hides it; because of that, evidence which should be admitted is often disallowed; because of that, corrupt policemen can secure the conviction of the innocent and skilled counsel the acquittal of the guilty."

Tammy Sue Bakker, teenage daughter of televangelist Jim Bakker, has been offered a £110,000 modelling contract by Playboy magazine. She is tempted to bare all to finance her father's appeal against a 45-year prison sentence for conning "born again" dupes out of millions of dollars. Church secretary Jessica Hahn has already put the cat among the evangelical pigeons by baring all for Playboy — and Jim Bakker.