

# The Freethinker

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## POLITICIANS BOW TO RELIGIOUS PRESSURE OVER RITUAL SLAUGHTER

The British Parliament and the European Community are planning to introduce new regulations governing the conditions under which millions of farm animals are slaughtered every year. But because of religious opposition, large numbers of cattle and sheep will not be stunned prior to slaughter. This has been opposed consistently by religious groups. Since the Government-appointed Farm Animals Welfare Council report in 1985, Jewish and Islamic leaders have been lobbying in defence of their "rites".

There has been long-standing criticism by a number of organisations over conditions and methods used in abattoirs. Under existing legislation, animals "must be rendered insensible to pain until death supervenes". In practice this is often not the case, particularly when the operation is carried out by inadequately trained workers.

It is expected that the directives from the EEC will insist that head restraints are used as a means of ensuring effective stunning. Whatever the intention, lack of supervision and skill makes it unlikely that the new rules will be strictly adhered to.

The greatest obstacle to pre-slaughter stunning is insistence by some groups that animals are killed in accordance with religious ritual. According to Jewish doctrine, an animal must be healthy and uninjured when killed. Stunning is classed as injury and therefore unacceptable. Defenders of Shechita assert that it is more humane than stunning, a claim contested by researchers at the Food Research Institute. A spokesman said that brain activity in unstunned cattle can continue for over two minutes after the throat is cut. After captive bolt stunning it disappears immediately.

In its 1985 report, the FAWC criticised in strong terms the use of rotary casting pens in slaughterhouses. Cattle are herded into the pens and then

bodily rotated, a terrifying experience for a large animal. It is fully conscious when the throat is cut. However, it will be at least two years before the use of these contraptions is prohibited and they are replaced with upright pens.

Commenting on that report, the RSPCA's Assistant Chief Veterinary Officer said: "There is now no scientific doubt that religious methods of slaughter without pre-stunning do cause pain and distress."

The British Veterinary Association is also opposed to ritual slaughter.

Poultry are also exposed to terrible conditions before they are despatched by the million. Investigators have found that birds are carelessly handled and those which are not healthy enough to meet the requirements of religious ritualists are often left overnight in crates without food or water.

The new EEC regulations will insist that all meat killed by religious methods of slaughter must be identified to the consumer. It is well known that a large amount of such meat is sold on the open market without any indication as to how it was killed. Jews will not eat the hindquarters of a carcass unless they have been "porged". This is a process which entails the removal of veins, lymphatics and the sciatic nerve and its branches. Up to two-thirds of Shechita meat rejected by the Jewish inspector is sold to the general public. And much of the meat from animals slaughtered by the Muslim method is sold in non-Halal outlets.

Jewish leaders, particularly Britain's Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, are determined that their barbarous slaughterhouse ritual will not be outlawed. Their work is made easier by prevaricating politicians who are reluctant to upset religious groups.

For at the end of the day, animals don't have a vote.

# The Freethinker

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Editor: WILLIAM McILROY

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# NEWS

## FOR HUME THE BELL TOLLS

The resounding defeat inflicted upon (overwhelmingly religious) opponents of the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Bill has caused the normally placid Cardinal Hume to get his canonicals in a twist. In a long statement during which he described Parliament's decision as "appalling", the Cardinal said "as a society we have abandoned fundamental aspects of Christian morality". Fortunately he is right. For centuries an increasingly enlightened humanity has been abandoning the morality of a church which blessed the warmonger, persecuted the thinker, condoned slavery, treated women as inferior and resisted social reform.

Possibly the true purpose of Cardinal Hume's statement is to boost flagging morale among the "Pro-Life" troops. Their well-financed campaign which featured gruesome photographs and pink plastic foetuses — not to mention the masses, prayers and supplications — flopped badly. And the restoration of capital punishment, a cause dear to many a pro-lifer's heart, now seems unlikely.

Cardinal Hume is free to express his disappointment over the outcome of the embryo-abortion debate. But in this context he should be careful about making remarks like: "One has to have a certain respect for the law, but a thing can be legal but not moral." Such statements may encourage Operation Rescue zealots who have been picketing clinics and resorting to physical force to prevent women from exercising their legal right.

It cannot have suddenly dawned on Cardinal Hume that Britain is no longer a Christian country. In 1970 the Catholic bishops' *Statement Concerning Moral Questions* admitted that we are living in a post-Christian society. A few months later, Cardinal Hume's predecessor, Cardinal Heenan, declared: "England is a post-Christian nation, a land of former believers." But although it is only one of many religions attracting adherents in Britain, and around one-third of the population hold no religious belief, Christianity still enjoys an unwarranted position of privilege and influence in national life. Church leaders' pronouncements are widely reported, while the humble faithful in "front" organisations have no qualms about blackmailing MPs and hoodwinking the public with bogus statistics and misleading propaganda.

When attempting to impose its social policies on the whole population of a country, the Catholic Church frequently shoots itself in the foot. For example, its implacable opposition to contraception



# AND NOTES

results in a large number of abortions. Every year thousands of women travel to Britain from the church-ridden Republic of Ireland to have a pregnancy terminated. Yet the Irish Family Planning Association has just been fined £400 for selling a packet of condoms in a Dublin store.

Cardinal Hume has the good grace to admit that as leader of Roman Catholics in England and Wales he represents a minority view. Certainly it is not one that is shared by all Christians or even all Catholics. That is something which the press, politicians and legislators should bear in mind.

## A DEVILISH AFFAIR

While not necessarily subscribing to the theory that some who hold high office in the law and order profession have a screw loose, it must cause concern when a bigwig announces that his decisions and actions are influenced by a "higher power". And a number of questions arise. Do they become afflicted by this delusion because of the pressure and added responsibility that invariably follows an ambitious person up the career ladder? Are interviewing boards informed that a candidate is under supernatural guidance? If so, does this extra "qualification" give him an advantage over other hopefuls?

Of course it is impossible to ascertain the influence of this mysterious "higher power" on those who occupy posts in the nation's courts and penal institutions. Were the aberration confined to the lower orders — solicitors' clerks, courtroom attendants and the like — it would go unremarked. However, it is a more serious matter when a prominent figure in public service believes that he is doing the will of the Christian deity or some other figment of his imagination.

There have been several notable examples of this. Judge King-Hamilton, who conducted the *Gay News* blasphemy trial, recorded in his autobiography that during the summing-up he was "half-conscious of being guided by some super-human inspiration". When James Anderton, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, is not having a quick burst on his accordion, he is on a hot line to the Almighty, whose prophet he claims to be. And now Brendan O'Friel, Governor of Strangeways Prison, asserts that the recent 25-day siege was a metaphysical battle between good and evil.

When it ended, Mr O'Friel called a press conference on "the religious aspect" of the riot. Not surprisingly, only the religious press and religious

affairs correspondents were invited to hear Mr O'Friel's sermon, described by one Christian weekly as "his extraordinary statement of personal faith".

Mr O'Friel said that during the upsurge of violence and destruction "the Devil was clearly, visibly at work during Holy Week. Good Friday was also the thirteenth", he reminded journalists. Never mind; "there was also a Holy Week experience. Many of us were living out Our Lord's Passion in a way that we never had to before. I feel that we have had our crucifixion and that we can look forward to a glorious resurrection."

The Strangeways Governor and chaplains believe that the riot was the work of an evil and diabolical force intent on destroying their missionary work which last year resulted in around two hundred prisoners making "a commitment to Christ".

Mr O'Friel explained: "The incident started in our main chapel, followed by the destruction of the Roman Catholic chapel. One of the first things the prisoners did when they broke on to the roof of F wing was that they pushed the cross off. I find it very strange that we achieved so much on the religious front in a relatively short time at Strangeways and this unparalleled disaster occurs, and starts in the chapel. . . One possible theory is that if you are doing well, the forces of evil do in fact strike.

"I don't believe that the pattern of the riot was coincidental. Call it Satan, call it the Devil, or an evil force, but whatever name you prefer to attach to it, that force was certainly at work in Strangeways. I am totally convinced of it."

Faced with impending disaster, Mr O'Friel asked the chaplains if they could mobilise spiritual resources to fight the powers of darkness. The response by these dog-collared drones — whose missionary work amongst a literally captive audience is paid for out of the public purse — was to telephone fellow-Christians asking them to pray that disaster would be averted. Mr O'Friel believes "it was only the spiritual outpourings that came in response to the cry for help that got us through Good Friday". It remains to be seen whether this simple faith in the power of prayer is shared by Lord Justice Woolf, who is conducting a judicial inquiry into the Strangeways riot.

It is agreed on all sides that conditions in many British prisons are very bad. The situation is aggravated by the remand system which detains in custody people who have been accused of, but not tried for, petty and non-violent offences. A spokesman for the Prison Officers' Association has warned that a number of prisons are "on the brink" of serious trouble. Should it occur, Mr O'Friel's experience at Strangeways may prompt the authorities to send in a team of exorcists instead of the riot squad.

## BROADCASTING BILL

Intensive lobbying by Christian pressure groups has led to Government concessions on the Broadcasting Bill. Religious advertisements will be on British television screens within a year. Letters from the Independent Broadcasting Authority have already gone out to over a hundred religious organisations.

Frank Willis, the IBA controller of advertising, has expressed anxiety over the possible content of religious advertisements. One concern is about the type of organisation that will be allowed to advertise on the small screen. Another is that appeals for money will be permitted. He also has misgivings about "the dignity of the whole thing and packaging faith in 30-second ads".

David Mellor, the Home Office Minister, assured the Commons that by inserting clauses into the Broadcasting Bill, abuses by religious extremists would be prevented. As many groups of religious extremists are also extremely wealthy, this may be more easily said than done.

The Rev Lyndon Bowring, chairman of Christian Choice in Broadcasting, said they were "delighted" by the Government concessions. Mr Bowring is also executive chairman of CARE for the Family (the Festival of Light in a previous incarnation), so his reaction is understandable. But many thoughtful Christians, with the example of religious advertising on American television in mind, are not so enthusiastic.

## WRONG-HEADED

She may have no practical experience of parenthood, but the star turn at 16th Annual Conference on the Family, to be held at Brighton in July, will undoubtedly be Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For although her retirement has been announced, it appears that she will carry on a selective programme of propagandising for the breeders' lobby.

Rather than a cause for regret, Mother Teresa's retirement is a boon to humanity, particularly women. For years she has travelled around the world undermining birth control programmes and encouraging ever more breeding in already over-populated countries. Her church's denunciation of "intrinsically evil" contraception has inflicted fear and guilt on many Catholics who have taken practical steps to control their fertility.

Few would question the depth of Mother Teresa's compassion for the sick and dying. Her thwarted maternal instinct finds an outlet in comforting unwanted and abandoned babies whose lives are past saving. But no matter how genuine her tears and prayers, they are no answer to mass starvation, disease and ignorance. She will not, and probably cannot, face the bitter truth that Rome's implacable

hostility to contraception is responsible for much of the misery she has sought to alleviate.

Allowance can be made for an old lady who spent many years in a convent before venturing back into the real world. But there is no excuse for well-heeled journalists and commentators whose extravagant promotion of her otherworldly pronouncements have exalted Mother Teresa to the status of a pop megastar. With their carefully planned families and unrestricted access to contraceptive facilities, they have no intention of following her advice to "have lots and lots of babies".

## Freethinker Fund

Writing in a national daily, the Rt Rev Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, says that only nine per cent of the population of England go to church. Increasingly we read dire warnings in religious publications of the "threat" posed by secularism, secular humanism and atheism. Such lamentations are music to a freethinker's ear, but while organised Christianity may be in decline, other forms of superstition continue to flourish. Fortune tellers, faith "healers", spiritualists and clairvoyants attract a large number of clients. And of course Islam is a growing threat in Britain as in other parts of the world.

*The Freethinker*, through its writers and readers, will endeavour to combat superstition from whatever source. However, it must be kept on a firm financial footing. Donations to the Fund are essential to bridge the gap between income and expenditure. We express thanks to all who have sent donations, including those listed below.

J. Ancliffe, F. A. Avard, N. G. Ball, J. Bridle and J. C. Dixon, £1 each; M. C. Bartholomew, C. R. Fletcher and M. A. Pugh, £2 each; J. Hemming, £2.50; E. V. Hillman, D. A. MacIntosh and L. M. Wright, £3 each; O. Kaplan, £3.60; N. Green, £4; D. Baker, H. Barrett, A. Bernstein, C. M. Cotton, J. Gibson, L. Glyn, W. B. Grainger, R. J. Hale, W. C. Hall, F. M. Holmes, H. Madoc-Jones, M. Mordew, R. J. Orr, R. H. Pierce, R. V. Samuels, A. V. Stewart, N. S. Thompson, R. Tolhurst, R. Tutton, S. M. Williams, A. E. G. Wright and F. Yates, £5 each; Anonymous, N. G. Baguley and J. M. Thomas, £10 each; A. C. Charles, £13; I. Campbell, £19.40; Edinburgh Humanist Group, £20.

Total for April: £222.50.

**The Islamic Party of Great Britain made little impact on last month's local council elections. Islamic candidates stood in four Bolton wards, and one each in Blackburn and Derby. Labour increased its majority in all of them.**

# Scottish Boost for "Best of Causes"

Scotland's faithless are now able to join their own national organisation. In accordance with a decision taken at the 1989 annual conference of the Scottish Humanist Council, preparations commenced for setting up the new organisation and a constitution drafted for consideration at this year's conference in Stirling. It was approved and the Humanist Society of Scotland formally established.

The Scottish Humanist Council was formed in 1978 on the initiative of groups in Glasgow and Edinburgh. It became recognised as the voice of humanism in Scotland, being consulted by the media and official bodies. The Council consisted of twelve members, four each from the sponsoring groups and four elected at the annual conference. Humanists living in Glasgow or Edinburgh could join a local group; elsewhere it had to be a London-based organisation like the British Humanist Association or the National Secular Society.

The enterprising SHC and individuals made people aware of the humanist presence in Scotland. And the

excellent quarterly, *The Scottish Humanist*, is another outlet for the humanist viewpoint. Editor Eric Stockton may be a Sassenach, but he has a sound knowledge of Scottish affairs which, with an eye for interesting writing, is reflected in every issue of the journal.

The Humanist Society of Scotland aims to promote "the principles and practice of humanism defined as the moral, intellectual and social development of individuals free from theistic religious and dogmatic beliefs and doctrines". It is endeavouring to form more local groups and encourage increased participation by young people. The annual subscription is £5, which includes four issues of *The Scottish Humanist*. Readers of *The Freethinker* living in Scotland are urged to join the new organisation; others may wish to help by sending a donation.

There is an executive committee of twelve members and the secretary is Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

## False Economy Hits Family Planning

"The family planning services that are so important to prevent unwanted pregnancies are being axed throughout the country," declared Labour's Shadow Health Minister, Harriet Harman, when she introduced a report being submitted to the Secretary of State for Health.

"Unless the Government steps in now, the cash crisis will spell the destruction of family planning clinics," she added.

"With an estimated 200,000 unplanned and regretted pregnancies every year, we need to improve family planning services."

Expenditure on family planning services is being reduced in every region of England, Scotland and Wales. Based on information compiled by the Family Planning Association, the report shows the extent of damage being inflicted on clinics, training programmes and counselling services. In some areas plans to cut all family planning work have been frustrated only by local campaigns. Rural clinics are usually the first to be hit by expenditure cuts, restricting access to family planning services even further.

Examples of family planning expenditure cuts include Gravesend 50 per cent, Cheltenham 55 per cent, Mid Essex 48 per cent, Cambridge 42 per cent and Chichester 50 per cent. Although family planning is a vital preventive health care service for women, cash-starved local authorities, anxious to keep hospitals and wards open, are picking on family

planning as a 'soft option' for Government imposed cuts. Attempts are being made, usually without success, to shift the work to GPs.

Specialist youth centres which aim to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies among teenagers are seriously affected. Hampstead Health Authority has reduced by £5,000 its support for the London Youth Advisory Centre. The youth sessions at Southampton have been discontinued. Health Authority expenditure cuts have also hit Brook Advisory Centres in London and Bristol.

The report urges the Government to allocate adequate funds to enable every Health Authority to provide a comprehensive family planning service.

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# A Case of Free Speech That Proved Expensive

TED McFADYEN

Bill Goodwin is a young trainee reporter on the trade magazine, the *Engineer*. Earlier this year he was telephoned by one of his sources with information about a company which was relevant to his magazine's editorial coverage. Quite properly, Bill Goodwin attempted to check the information with the company concerned. It was because he tried to check the facts that the case came to court. The story was never printed. But in April Bill Goodwin was fined £5,000 in the High Court for contempt.

The issue focusses on the right of journalists to refuse to disclose their sources of information — a right which has long been fought for by the National Union of Journalists. Bill Goodwin is by no means the first journalist to fall foul of the courts over this issue. In 1963 Brendan Mulholland and Reg Foster were sentenced to six and three months respectively for refusing to disclose sources to the Vassall spy tribunal. In 1971 Bernard Falk was sent to prison for four days over a programme he made for the BBC, refusing to give the court information about a man he had interviewed.

Because of the widespread controversy these cases aroused, Parliament sought to tackle the issue with the 1981 Contempt of Court Act. Ostensibly this gives journalists statutory protection when they refuse to name sources, and it seeks to prevent disclosure with the exception of four categories: "the interests of justice or national security, or the prevention of disorder or crime".

But it is these four categories of exceptions which are allowing the courts still to find journalists guilty of contempt. In 1988 Jeremy Warner, a financial reporter on the *Independent*, was fined £20,000 for refusing to disclose to the Department of Trade and Industry his sources for two articles about insider dealing on City take-over bids.

The relatively small size of Bill Goodwin's fine is seen as something of a victory by some observers, including the NUJ — and more importantly the fact that, even though under considerable pressure, Goodwin maintained his silence about his source. His lawyers claimed that Section 10 of the Act gave him protection, but the Lords refused to accept this, saying that the disclosure was necessary "in the interests of justice". Jake Ecclestone, NUJ deputy general secretary, said that the Act was an "illusory protection", if the courts can find their way around it so easily.

The concept of freedom of speech comes under severe scrutiny in *Freedom of Expression and the Law*, a report recently published by the law reform organisation, Justice.\* Lord Deedes, former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and chairman of the committee

which drew up the report, writes: "What has troubled us has been the impression that the Government and judiciary have grown progressively more careless about the principles which should govern all limitations on free expression. Instances of this abound."

The report suggests that much of the Official Secrets Act breaches Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression and the right to receive information, because there is no public interest defence. It recommends that there should be a defence that an unauthorised disclosure of protected information was justified in the public interest, having regard to the exhaustion of any internal avenues of complaint. And it concludes: "The fundamental rule should be that the free expression of ideas and information is only to be restricted for the most pressing of reasons, and that restrictions must be only those that are necessary for those reasons."

None of this should blind us to the fact that what we really need from our press is that they should operate responsibly within a clearly perceived code of ethics which observes basic principles of truth, accuracy, and fair treatment of minorities. As the character in Tom Stoppard's play *Night and Day* says: "I'm with you on the free press. It's the newspapers I can't stand."

\**Freedom of Expression and the Law*. A report by Justice, 95a Chancery Lane, London WC2A 1DT, £3.50

A court in Boston has heard how a devout Christian Science couple caused the death of their two-year-old son. Instead of calling for medical help, David Twitchell and his wife prayed over the child who had a bowel obstruction which made him vomit his own excrement. And in Santa Monica, another Christian couple, Eliot and Lise Glaser, caused the death of their 15-month-old son who was suffering from meningitis. They resorted to prayer and the services of a Christian Science "healer". Under the law, parents are required to provide their children with basic necessities, including medical care. But a law sponsored by the Christian Science Church and passed in 1976, exempts parents from the medical care requirement if they believe in treatment of illness by prayer alone.

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.

# Satan in Sunderland

R. J. CONDON

Having recently paid a first visit to Wearside, my general impression of the area is one of unrelieved dullness. A boring place to be unemployed in, so perhaps it is not altogether surprising that the Devil is said to be literally finding work for idle hands there. An article in the *Sunderland Echo* (May 8 1990) informs us that "serious" Satanic groups are recruiting young men and women who have too much time on their hands, or are disillusioned with their mundane jobs. Once in the groups, they are "pushed" into perverted and sexual rituals.

Fortunately Wearside has a "psychic minister", Canon Granville Gibson, who deals with around twenty cases of Satanism and haunting a year. The *Echo* gives us his own account of how he succeeded, after a terrible struggle, in driving out an evil "presence" from a house in Sunderland. A "power" seemed to be choking him and every word of his exorcism had to be forced out. As with the general run of such reports, lack of detail makes rational assessment virtually impossible.

Why, for example, did the Canon recite the Lord's Prayer, which was never used by Jesus to cast out demons? There is little in it to the point — Satan has nothing to fear from a request for a daily ration of bread. Jesus's simple "Go" was sufficient to expel six thousand devils. Canon Gibson should try it sometime.

The ringleaders of these groups claim that Satan actually appears to them. How do they know it is Satan? Does he have horns, hooves and a tail? One is reminded of the old Hell Fire Club of Medmenham Abbey, whose members once managed to conjure up the Devil. At the appropriate moment in the Black Mass, Satan suddenly appeared on the altar, to the consternation of the brotherhood. Lord Sandwich ran about the chapel screaming "Spare me, gracious devil! You know I never committed a thousandth part of the vices of which I boasted. Take somebody else, they're all worse than I am. . ."

"Satan" was really a baboon dressed up in a devil's outfit and smuggled in by John Wilkes. It fooled the Hell Fire Club because rituals such as theirs inhibit reason and the daftest things become believable. So it may be on Wearside.

Satanists are said to be able to distort time. One young woman told the Canon she travelled to Cornwall by motorbike for a ritual and returned to Sunderland within a couple of hours. But how did she know she was in Cornwall? Did she just believe what somebody told her? We would like to know.

One group sailed to Denmark in a fishing vessel, indulged in a homosexual orgy and returned to Sunderland, all in less than two hours. How did the Danish authorities react to these outrageous goings-on? Canon Gibson doesn't say.

Dealing with ghosts and poltergeists, the Canon claims to have seen a portable fire move across a room and switch itself on — by itself, he adds unnecessarily. He has also seen an ornamental sword swinging on a wall, again by itself. Such things are easily accomplished by trickery, the children usually responsible for poltergeist activity becoming very skilful at it. Did Canon Gibson investigate at all? Silence once again — frustrating, isn't it?

With the backing of the Church of England's Psychic Ministry Group, Canon Gibson was taught how to handle evil spirits. No doubt he believes there is more in his experiences than mere subjectivity. A clever novelist such as Dennis Wheatley can make the supernatural seem very real, even to sceptics. So it is no surprise to learn that the Canon's first knowledge of Satanism was what he had read — guess where!

## Minister Criticised for Moonie Interview

Robert Jackson, the Minister for Higher Education, has been criticised by Conservative colleagues for granting an interview to a Unification Church magazine. The interview was featured prominently in *New Meanings*, published by the Collegiate Association for the Research of Principle. This grandly titled organisation is the student wing of the Moonies in Britain.

The Minister's critics accuse him of conferring credibility on the sect which has been at the centre of scandal in this country and the United States. It has been attacked for brainwashing and exploiting young dupes. CARP is a recruiting agency for the church.

The interview with Mr Jackson was arranged by the Department of Education press office. The Minister knew that *New Meanings* is a Moonie publication. David Wilshire, MP (Conservative, Spelthorne), said the Minister "should know better". Anything he said was bound to give the Moonies credibility.

For some years MPs have been demanding that the Unification Church be struck off the register of charities. At the end of a six-month libel case, which it lost to the *Daily Mail*, the High Court jury urged that the Moonies' charity status be investigated.

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A report issued by the Church of Scotland is a splendid example of the pot calling the kettle black. it criticises writers of children's books which feature the supernatural.

# Intellectuals

T. F. EVANS

**Z. You're an intellectual, aren't you?**

**A. What do you think you mean by an intellectual?**

**Z. Only that you consider me no better than an idiot, and that you were a bad husband, most likely.**

**A. You are quite right on both points.**

**Bernard Shaw, *Village Wooing***

Paul Johnson is a very well-known author and journalist. He has written a number of books, chiefly on historical and religious subjects, and he has written studies of British castles and British cathedrals. In addition, he has performed the notable double of having been editor of both the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*, although not at the same time. He was once on the Left in politics but is now an enthusiastic supporter of the present Prime Minister and her Government. He has always been a lively and formidable controversialist with more than a touch of fiery irascibility to add flavour to his argument from time to time. If one word were to be used to sum him up, it might well be the word "intellectual". Yet, a short time ago, he wrote a book, *Intellectuals*, from which it might be deduced that he would certainly not take it as the greatest compliment to have that term applied to himself.

There is no introduction to the book and no definition of the word, "intellectual". Instead, a brief preface explains simply that the book is "an examination of the moral and judgmental credentials of certain leading intellectuals to give advice to humanity on how to conduct its affairs". Johnson then launches into the intellectuals, beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and going on from Shelley, Marx, Ibsen and Tolstoy to the 20th century, ending with a chapter that ranges widely in our own day to Kenneth Tynan, Rainer Fassbinder, James Baldwin and Noam Chomsky.

If, however, the word "intellectual" is never defined, there are enough general statements throughout the book which, sweeping and mostly negative as they are, add up to a fairly clear idea of what it is about intellectuals that the author does not like. Thus we read, in connection with Tolstoy, that "it is one of the characteristics of the intellectual to believe that secrets, especially in sexual matters, are harmful". Edmund Wilson's personal hostility towards other writers is described as "another characteristic he shared with many intellectuals". The chapter on Victor Gollancz begins with the assertion that "one thing which emerges strongly from any case-by-case study of intellectuals is their scant regard for veracity". It is asserted that "unlike most intellectuals, Orwell embarked on his career as a socialist idealist by examining working-class life

at close quarters". It is stated authoritatively, in a passage on Cyril Connolly, that "violence has always exercised a strong appeal to some intellectuals". The second characteristic we learn that Norman Mailer has in common with many intellectuals, is "a genius for self-publicity". Thinking about Kenneth Tynan leads the author to remark, kindly, that "unlike most intellectuals", he was not avaricious. "The ability to get the best of both worlds, the world of progressive self-righteousness and the world of privilege, is a theme which runs through the lives of many leading intellectuals, and none more so than Bertrand Russell's", and "like most leading intellectuals, Sartre was a supreme egoist".

At the end of the book, on the very last page, Paul Johnson sets out his conclusions, although they might equally be the fundamental propositions on which he began to examine the nature of intellectuals. He says that he thinks he detects today "a certain public scepticism when intellectuals stand up to preach to us, a growing tendency among ordinary people to dispute the right of academics, writers and philosophers, eminent though they may be, to tell us how to behave and conduct our affairs". He suggests that "a dozen people picked at random on the street are at least as likely to offer sensible views on moral and political matters as a cross-section of the intelligentsia". The ineffable silliness of such a remark can only be justified on the assumption that "a dozen people picked at random" may be relied upon to express views that more nearly approach Paul Johnson's own ideas than would anything put forward on the basis of the thoughts of those mentioned in his book. Otherwise, the contention means nothing at all. Johnson's warning is "Beware intellectuals". His final words are that "the worst of all despotisms is the heartless tyranny of ideas".

The effort required to bring oneself to accept that the former editor of both the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator* is capable of writing such rubbish is very great, but it must be made. The book really does contain an enormous amount of very sloppy thinking and argument towards already decided conclusions. Of course, intellectuals, however defined and with minds trained in whatever academic, literary or philosophic discipline, are guilty of these faults as well, but an untrained mind is just a little more likely to produce sense than is a trained mind — or does Paul Johnson wish to close all schools and universities? (He was at Ampleforth and Oxford.)

His book is based on careful selection of his victims. The names that are excluded contain some surprises. Anyone, except perhaps many people picked at random on the street (has Paul Johnson ever carried out this test?), invited to name the lead-



ing intellectuals of the last hundred years, say, might be expected to include Shaw, Wells and Eliot, to limit the number to three. Perhaps Paul Johnson thought that it would be very difficult to make his charges stick against Shaw and Wells. The targets are too big and his darts would inflict pin-prick wounds only.

To take just one fault of which Paul Johnson accuses many of his victims: "Shelley, like Byron, always considered that he had a perpetual dispensation from the normal rules of sexual behaviour." An intellectual response to such a statement would be to ask for the meaning of the word "normal" in this context, but let that pass. It would be very difficult in a book of this nature, in which the examination of sexual behaviour plays a prominent part, to condemn at the same time, Shaw for being too little interested in sexual activity, and Wells for going to the other extreme.

Eliot would present a very different problem. If there has been an intellectual in the 20th century, it has been he. Yet there are difficulties. The one thing that Paul Johnson's victims have in common is that they were all, if not formally of what we would now call the Left in the political sense, very anti-conservative in almost every sense. Eliot, monarchist, very orthodox churchman and very Right-wing in his political utterances, would manifestly not fit into the framework of the book and his inclusion would blow it sky-high. While on the subject of Eliot, however, it is not irrelevant to think of the "intellectuals" whom he most valued himself (although he did not use that word of them). Among the writers, he praised most highly Coleridge, Burke, Newman and Charles Maurras. It would be most interesting to learn how such a group would stand up to Paul Johnson's strictures against intellectuals as they certainly qualify for the title. The other great question which Paul Johnson poses is if we are not to trust the "academics, writers and philosophers" to whom should we look for guidance?

There is one other category not so far mentioned: religious leaders. To be fair to Paul Johnson, it must be said that while he may be a man of strong religious conviction, he does not attempt to proselytize in any way and the comments that follow are not intended to reflect upon him, but to develop the theme of his book. Put quite simply, if obviously, if we are to ignore the intellectuals and take no notice of the intellectual approach to life, we must turn to the non-intellectuals. This is what considerable sections of humanity have always done, and one of the more disturbing signs as we approach the 21st century is that there is still so great a predilection to follow the illusory star of religious authority, however little intellectual basis it may have. To say this is not to deny the values that have accrued to humanity from the codes of con-

duct that have been derived from the teachings of religious leaders. It is to raise the eternal question whether humanity is not capable of regulating its affairs by relying on the conclusions drawn from its own resources, instead of depending, for inspiration as it were, on an imagined construction of a deity or law-giver outside the scope of the reasoning mind.

In short, intelligence is the great gift that man has and to abandon it because some who steer by that light run on to the rocks is to deny the essential greatness of the human species. Eliot came near to such a denial when, referring to D. H. Lawrence, he wrote in 1934 of "the Inner Light, the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity". Against the "Inner Light", Eliot set, although he did not say it in so many words, the authority of an Established Church. One of the faults of which Eliot accused Lawrence was "his lust for intellectual independence".

If we look around today, we see signs of the feeling that we ought to accept authority without daring to question. In religion, as in politics, there are plenty of signs of authoritarianism to cast a cloud over any brightness with which we feel inclined to celebrate the bi-centenary of the French Revolution, that triumph of reason and enlightenment over the crippling fetters of the old regime. A recent article in the *Guardian* drew attention to this tendency in a slightly different context. (Incidentally, it may be mentioned in a brief parenthesis that, in some quarters, the title *Guardian* is a fairly accurate synonym for "intellectual" in the sense in which Paul Johnson uses that word.) Kenneth Leech, director of the Rannymede Trust, reflected on the question of religious fundamentalism. He was set thinking on this subject because of the Salman Rushdie affair. He found that "fundamentalism", that is a religious position based on literal dependence on a sacred text, had won considerable victories recently. Yet he thought that the victories had been won not at the intellectual but at the political level. The "liberal" strain in Christianity had been overcome by the theological crudity and moral attitudes of the religious Right. (It is worth noting here that, with the skilful, if unscrupulous, use of the word "liberal" as an epithet for "anti-American" in the 1988 presidential election, something of a sleight of mind was carried out, similar to that used on "intellectual".) The argument could, and no doubt will, go on for a long time.

As an interim judgment, it is enough to say that, with all the faults laid at the feet of intellectuals by Paul Johnson and others, the human race has far more to fear from not using its intelligence, or not listening to the writers and philosophers and even the academics, than in following the leadership of the politicians and the religious fanatics who instruct their adherents to put their minds away.

**EUPRAXOPHY: LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION**, by Paul Kurtz. Prometheus Books, \$US15.95

Just when you thought it was safe to go to a humanist meeting without being asked if you were committed to a life stance or a stance for living, you're now likely to be buttonholed on your attitude to "eupraxophy". No, it isn't some new sexual perversion but "a new word to describe humanism", derived from three Greek roots and meaning "good practical wisdom". Old-fashioned freethinkers may well feel that if it takes ever odder words and phrases to explain "humanism" then perhaps there is something wrong with the label itself.

Though some may argue with the flier's description of Professor Paul Kurtz as "the leading expositor of humanism in the world today", no one can deny that he is a very distinguished and influential humanist. Not only that, but everything he writes is both thoughtful and graceful.

*Eupraxophy* is the third volume of a trilogy including *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (1986) and *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (1988), neither of which I've read.

Apart from wanting to define humanism, Kurtz was motivated to write this book by the following concerns: many capital-h Humanists see their beliefs as a new religion or quasi-religion (an opinion which he once shared); scientists are becoming increasingly specialised and unable to communicate beyond their narrow disciplines; philosophers are now dedicated to thought about thought rather than thought about issues; humanism isn't making the impact that could be expected in a world (at least outside Islam) of declining religious belief and practice.

These are all important topics and fruitful material for ongoing debate, articles and manifestoes. Secular humanists are likely to agree with the author's basic position, especially on the first issue. Of course, they've been saying for a very long time that humanism lacks the basic criteria of a religion. Never mind; joy shall be in hell over one saint that defecteth, more than over ninety and nine godless persons, which need no defection.

In justifying this position Kurtz outlines what he sees as essential principles of humanism on the one hand and the major world religions on the other. While this material might have benefited from some reorganisation, the major criticism that can be levelled, in my view, is that it gives a rather garbled account of Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly the doctrine of *karma*. There is also an interesting prudential reason for his stand. Whereas in Britain the humanism-as-religion school seems to hope to

pull freethought along on the coattails of charity law, chaplaincy services, religious education in schools and religious broadcasting, in the United States, with its secular Constitution and First Amendment, the opposite consideration applies. Some religionists are arguing that the theory of evolution, social studies and other aspects of the general school curriculum are based on humanism, and that if it's a new religion such teaching is unconstitutional!

Whether or not humanism is a religion could be said to be of interest to "positive" humanists and uncommitted "seekers after truth". Kurtz's other three concerns might be thought to have different audiences: professional scientists, professional philosophers and active humanists respectively. On top of this, Kurtz chooses to include in his fourth brief an essay in "uplift" prose unsullied by harsh practicalities — a market well served by the writings of James Hemming. In the compass of one comparatively short book there isn't space to deal authoritatively with these diverse issues or find the right tone for these disparate audiences. Since the issues themselves are far from new, one needs more than the simple assertions that might pass muster in a short article or manifesto.

Not only do such assertions lack weight, they may float off in false directions. Having at one stage been airily assertive myself in the moral arena, when I undertook rigorous analysis for *Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society* (1972) I was both surprised and shocked to find how glibly I had passed from ideology to precept to practice. I finally concluded that, in the case of humanism (as with other ideologies), while it was comparatively easy to pass from a naturalistic world-view to basic ethical principles (Kurtz plausibly names courage, reason and compassion), it was much more difficult to draw up a detailed moral code and impossible to establish "moropractice" (ie, whether anyone would actually follow it). This led me to consider how workable moral codes and legal systems are possible in multi-credal societies and to the totally unfashionable view that moral behaviour can be related to computer technology.

The fashionable but philosophically and sociologically unsupported alternative in *Eupraxophy* is striving towards a universalist humanism based on human free will, a humanised workplace, global ethics, space travel and the establishment of "eupraxophy centres" that sound like a cross between Christian Science Reading Rooms and Butlin Holiday Camps. In this best of all possible worlds not even "life-stance" is left out, though I'm not sure Harry Stopes-Roe would recognise it.

# REVIEWS

I don't wish to be a Humanist Jeremiah and I'm genuinely sorry not to be more enthusiastic about this well-intentioned book. But Kurtz does say that ideal eupraxophers have, among other formidable qualifications, "a sense of history". That should prompt us to recall that 100 years ago there was a wealth of eupraxophic weeklies and other publications, even "eupraxotheques" (called halls of science, temples of humanity, ethical churches and the like), and we should ask ourselves why most of these have disappeared before advocating their establishment as if they were novel.

A final word. Neologisms find it hard to survive infancy. I trust Professor Kurtz is more successful with "eupraxophy" than I was with "nucleoethics".

DAVID TRIBE

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**A SATANIC AFFAIR: SALMAN RUSHDIE AND THE RAGE OF ISLAM**, by Malise Ruthven. Chatto and Windus, £14.95

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In *A Satanic Affair* Malise Ruthven seeks to answer a clutch of closely related questions: "How could a mere author, albeit an exceptionally gifted one, fill the streets . . . with thousands of demonstrators, many of whom would gladly have hanged him on the spot? Was the outrage genuine, or were Britain's Muslims being manipulated by foreign paymasters in Iran or Saudi Arabia? Could Salman Rushdie, with his Muslim background, have underestimated the impact of his words? Or did he deliberately provoke this rage in order to focus attention on the many crimes and hypocrisies committed in the name of Islam? Did he know what he was doing? Or was he, despite his literary sophistication, a political naïf?" In order to provide answers, Ruthven offers, amongst other things, an illuminating critical analysis of *The Satanic Verses*; a pithy history of the Islamic community in Britain, centring on the place of the crucial concept of honour, imported from Indo-Pakistani village culture; an account of meetings with leading Muslim spokesmen; and a disinterested assessment of the Qu'ran's authority and its world view. In all of this, Ruthven combines the journalistic acuteness on display in *The Divine Supermarket* and the scholarly scrupulousness which characterises *Islam and the World*.

It would be pleasing to report that, by the end of the book, a way forward emerges. None does, and it is in the nature of the situation as Ruthven writes about it that it is highly unlikely that one will. Rushdie, as Ruthven gloomily concludes, "is still in effect a prisoner in Britain — as much a hostage to

the militant wrath of Islam as Roger Casper in Tehran, and Brian Keenan, John McCarthy and Terry Waite in Lebanon . . . this is a scandal that cannot be rectified. . . It can be of little comfort for Rushdie to know that the *fatwa* which deprived him of his freedom might have saved his life. I have been told in earnest by more than one Muslim resident in Britain that, had Rushdie not gone 'underground' for his own protection, a member of the community would have knifed him sooner or later."

If Ruthven can offer no solutions, his book at least clarifies the motives and feelings of British Muslims on the one hand, and helps us to understand Rushdie and his work on the other. Of the latter Ruthven illuminatingly comments: "His novel is to Islam what *Portrait of the Artist* is to Roman Catholicism: a form of spiritual autobiography, an exorcism of the repressive, punishing faith in which he was brought up. He is charting the migrant's passage of faith to disbelief through the minds of his fictional characters."

Along the way, Ruthven throws out a number of useful comparisons. The similarities between the Ray Honeyford controversy and the Rushdie affair, for example, have not been sufficiently noted. Ruthven rectifies this. And his alertness to the unamusing ironies and paradoxes of the situation is acute, as, for example, when he remarks on the Muslim demand for equality in protection against blasphemy, which, of course, represents a back-handed compliment to Britain and its values.

In a sense, Ruthven's book is a contribution to cultural history: the Rushdie affair, he implicitly concludes, could have happened nowhere else but in post-imperial Britain. The contrast with America is stark: "Muslims in the United States know that nothing they do will cause *The Satanic Verses* to be withdrawn. Their campaign has dwindled accordingly, to the point where the paperback edition of the book appeared almost without protest."

The shockwaves set off by *The Satanic Verses* will resound for years to come. Meanwhile, untold damage is undoubtedly being done to race relations in this country. Ruthven encapsulates this in one chilling sentence: "For young Asians, 'Salman Rushdie' has become a new racist taunt, a weapon used by skinheads and lager-louts to beat them about the ears and other parts of the body."

If no resolution is in sight, this is not to say that thought must necessarily become paralysed. We need more reasoned and sensible analysis from the likes of Malise Ruthven to keep the issues fresh and clear in our minds: to give in or hope the affair will just go away would be a victory for Satan indeed.

JOHN FLORANCE

*Reviews continued on next page*

Like so many biographies, the recently published work on the great German conductor, Wilhelm Fürtwangler, by another conductor, Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, with a foreword by Yehudi Menuhin, is no exception to the rule that biographies of the eminent are all too prone to gloss over the subject's irreligious and sometimes ambivalent views, in efforts to concentrate on, say, the more titillating sexual *mores* of their victim. If the reader's preference lies in whiter-than-white heroes and heroines (or redder-than-red villains, of both sexes), then please step forward Miss Cartland and Mr Archer. Some of us can take it. But when we are in for more serious studies than figments of the popular imagination, then it behoves writers about the Great and the Good — and sometimes about the lowly geniuses in attics — to relate between fact and fiction. It happens all too often when bolstering up some specious case to resort to the omission of material relevant to the character under discussion. The biographer deserts temporarily biography for fiction, with the result that all too often smacks of haste and disregard for truth.

I was reminded of such matters when recently reading this new work on Wilhelm Fürtwangler. I could not find any reference to the famous conductor's interest in religion, not even in the index where such items as "interest in" might be expected to be found. However, I stumbled across the "rounded" portrait eventually, but only briefly, when, in an account of his son's "baptism" we are informed that his second wife, Elizabeth, felt that it was high time to have their 12-month-old son baptised. Fürtwangler objected: "But, dearest, we haven't even been married in church" and then his biographer goes on to say that as Frau Fürtwangler insisted, they were duly married in a little church in Montreux, and afterwards the baby was christened. Strong and powerful conductor — weak and powerless man!

On the same page the biographer opines that it is always difficult when discussing a great personality to talk about religion for *this is to enter the realms of the innermost self*. And he then provides a clue as to what he may truly have felt: "We know little about his mother's religion, but his father was a staunch Lutheran." This must be counted as flimsy evidence of the fact, when Hans-Hubert Schönzeler goes on to add that when little Wilhelm returned from Sunday School he was apt to be asked by his father: "Well, what lies did the parson tell you today?" And a bit later the revelation: "Fürtwangler was a deeply religious person. . . But he was no churchgoer, no conformist — spiritually he stood far above any organised form of religion. As with

everything in life, he saw things from a philosophical angle." But why weren't we told this state of mind earlier? Instead of which certainty, the "was he or wasn't he?" sentence ends up: "He never put his thoughts to paper, and we can only gather his ideas in a fragmentary way."

None of this should deter one from reading about a great and much maligned musician. Hans-Hubert Schönzeler tells his story in a sensible and useful manner. It is a considerable feat to enlarge the frontiers of sympathy, and for most of the book Fürtwangler's latest biographer does that.

PETER COTES

*Eupraxophy: Living Without Religion*, reviewed on page 90, is obtainable from the Rationalist Press Association, 88 Islington High Street, London N1 8EW, price £10 plus £1 postage.

## Humbug and Hypocrisy

"Christian sexual morality is largely humbug," declared Daniel O'Hara in a speech to the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association at its Spring gathering in Blackpool. "It leads to gross hypocrisy and causes untold suffering," he added.

The former Anglican priest said there was no doubt that Section 28 was the result of intensive lobbying by the Christian Right. Its main proponents, Baroness Cox, Lord Halsbury and Dame Jill Knight, MP, are staunch supporters of politically influential pressure groups.

Turning to the international scene, Mr O'Hara said that Christians in other countries were pressing for similar legislation. At a meeting of Council of Europe organisations in Strasbourg earlier this year, a Roman Catholic woman suggested that anti-homosexual legislation was necessary to prevent the human race dying out.

He pointed out that in the Irish Republic, "the all-powerful Roman Catholic Church strongly opposes homosexual law reform as it did, together with the Salvation Army, in New Zealand.

"In America, the RC Church, prompted by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has hardened its attitude to gay and lesbian Catholic groups."

Daniel O'Hara concluded by saying that what was needed is not a Christian ethic on sexuality which dictated that the only right use of sex was in marriage, but a rational, humanist ethic affirming that sexuality is an enormously important characteristic which finds many different kinds of expression.

"The way individuals express their sexuality should be a matter for them alone, always provided there is no coercion or attempt to involve anyone incapable of informed consent," he declared.

# Skeptics at Large

TOBY HOWARD

Do you believe that mediums are in contact with disembodied spirits? Or that the following exist: ESP, UFOs, dowsing, telepathy, spoon-bending, the Bermuda Triangle, the Yeti, the Loch Ness Monster, telekinesis, psychic surgery. . . If you don't believe in this catalogue of weirdness, you are very firmly in the minority.

With this thought in mind, Wendy Grossman, a writer and folksinger living in Dublin, decided one day that she had had enough of the one-sided presentation of all things "paranormal". She decided that something needed to be done to champion the cause of rationalism. So, there emerged, from a mountain of paper, ink, scissors, Letraset and Copydex what was at first a tiny voice shouting "Wait! Think!": *The British & Irish Skeptic* magazine.

That was more than four years ago, and since then the magazine has grown, diversified and improved, and attracted an eclectic collection of contributors and readers. Nowadays edited by Dr Steve Donnelly and myself, it is called, less tongue-twistingly, *The Skeptic*, and is a 32-page magazine published bi-monthly. The aims of the magazine are easy to state: to promote the cause of critical thinking, and to look at claims of the "paranormal" skeptically. The philosophy of *The Skeptic* is really two-fold. First, that to accept the truth of extraordinary claims, the evidence must be really extraordinary good. Secondly, that it is a Bad Thing for a large section of the population to unquestioningly believe in phenomena for which there is no hard evidence. It is not only bad for our culture, it is potentially very dangerous on a personal level. For example, the majority of those who peddle their psychic wares under the "New Age" umbrella are well-meaning and genuine: there is no doubt about that. But when they tell you that your aura is out of whack, or that your vibrations need tuning, they are contributing to a woolly pseudoscience that people confuse with real science. To many people, there really is no distinction between Astronomy and Astrology. People have died from experimenting with ill-founded "alternative" therapies in preference to traditional medicine.

The experience of all serious unbiased investigators of the paranormal — those who are not already *de facto* believers — is that there is no evidence which points to the need to search for explanations beyond the scope of accepted science. For example, there certainly *are* UFOs: there *are* some observed phenomena which remain unidentified. But to accept this need not involve extraterrestrial or spiritual hypotheses. Or crop circles: of course they exist, and no-one has ever seen, let alone filmed, them being formed (well, not that they've admitted!).

So where do they come from? Strange vortices of wind? Fungal growths? UFO exhaust pipes? Or cheeky chappies tramping the corn down with their wellies? At the moment, no-one knows for sure. But we mustn't jump to conclusions.

*The Skeptic* champions serious investigation of the paranormal: it shares the aims of the US Committee for the Scientific Examination of Claims of the Paranormal, and, closer to home, the UK Campaign Against Health Fraud. We have articles, regular columns, news and gossip, cartoons, book reviews, letters — and even humour! Please help us redress the balance towards rationalism, by writing to *The Skeptic* (Dept F), PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH. A sample copy costs £1.50, and a year's subscription (six issues) costs just £10 (UK only, overseas rates on request).

Nicolas Walter

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# LETTERS

## MAN AND MYTHOLOGY

I wonder what it is intended to achieve by pointing out the inconsistencies in the Bible and in Christian doctrine, as in Karl Heath's article, *Always an Atheist* (May).

Cannot we realise that we are not dealing with facts but with mythology; and when did mythology ever follow the rules of logic? Most countries and cultures have a rich mythology full of miracles and marvels and incongruities. Is it all to be dismissed as "rigmarole" and "fantasy" (to quote Mr Heath)? And Christian mythology has its main points of contact with earlier mythologies, as has often been pointed out by other contributors — the god who begets a child by a mortal woman, the slain and resurrected god, the judgment of the dead (to name but a few, as Monty Python would say).

In fact it seems a constant preoccupation of we humans to people the earth with creatures of our own invention, not only gods but angels, demons, fairies, leprechauns (the list is endless) and to endow them with whole histories and geographies. Undoubtedly it has helped the human race to come to terms with its problems, its dangers without and within, and in so far as it has achieved this it has been beneficial and even necessary. It only becomes harmful when the mythology is not only taken literally but is coupled with an arrogant desire to over-ride all other beliefs (and to do it, when the power to do it is there). This sort of thing certainly deserves your gunfire, whether it comes from Christians or Muslims. But don't let us deceive ourselves into thinking such arrogance is confined to the religious; an atheist Government in Russia suppressed dissent with great cruelty; scientific rigidity has institutionalised the horrors of vivisection; economic dogma has given us a world where millions of people starve while one man pays millions of pounds for a painting. Has religious dogma produced anything worse?

Less harmful, but none the less depressing to free-thinkers, is the upsurge in interest in the deliberately irrational, in fork-bending, ESP, telepathy and all stations to the occult; I believe there is even a chair in "parapsychology" in one of our Universities! Compared with much of this, belief in the Virgin Birth seems relatively rational.

E. M. KARBACZ, West Mersea, Essex

## CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

When is a freethinker not a freethinker? When he is so conditioned by long-standing and preconceived notions that he finds it unnecessary to look for Truth.

That is patently the case with your reviewer, David Tribe (April). His review of Jean Overton Fuller's biography of H. P. Blavatsky is less a review than an opportunity to express the prejudice he freely acknowledges in his first sentence. This prevents him from making any reference to the abundant evidence that might disturb his acceptance of the charlatan image he seeks to reinforce.

The motto of The Theosophical Society, "There is no Religion Higher Than Truth", is a charter for genuinely free thinkers. The last sentence of R. J. Condon's on page 55 — if it is the accepted stance of subscribers to *The Freethinker* — implies that free-thinking and rock-solid prejudice are synonymous.

IANTHE H. HOSKINS, General Secretary,  
Theosophical Society in England, London W1

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH

Ray McDowell (Letters, May) is quite right: arguments from religious experience prove nothing. What I was doing was putting my particular experience into a framework, which is that of orthodox biblical Christianity. That is why I suggested C. S. Lewis, who takes the Bible seriously, rather than someone like Don Cupitt, who seems to impose his own philosophy on it. Your readers may disagree; but I was asked to explain my viewpoint. I find Jesus's description of reality logical and his response to it compelling. Others take different views, particularly if they rely on clichés like "meek and mild" and "hellfire preachers".

Clearly sects and denominations have arisen because of disagreements. I imagine if Mr McDowell came across someone teaching that it was all right to put your hand in boiling water he might oppose such a viewpoint. Christians believe that even more vital issues than this are at stake. But to disagree or even oppose is a far cry from denouncing and despising. What I was saying was that denominational barriers mean nothing to individual Christians who love God. Sects are something else again, in that they believe something basically different.

I am sorry to have confused Martin O'Brien (April) by my reference to evolution. I was simply saying that I did not think man's successive discoveries and inventions necessarily bring us closer to truth and reality. Humanists tend to quote the latest scientific position as being the truth and the refutation of all that went before — except when they happen to agree with what went before. But time has nothing to do with it. A thing is either true or it is not.

The tragic examples that Mr O'Brien quotes do not prove anything other than that some people are unbalanced and that there is evil in the world. Neither Jesus nor his followers went round starving or burning people, and it is absurd to say that it results from his teaching. You might as well say that if someone drank poison to kill the germs that he was told were inside him, or cut himself to pieces in order to remove a cancer, then to teach that germs and cancer exist is evil.

The truth is important; it may also be dangerous. I can understand the desire to censor reality in case people get hurt, but I don't think it works in the long run, or even the short run. You could say that God is responsible for the tragedies that Mr O'Brien quotes, in that He created people in the first place, or didn't control them in the second; or you could say that the Devil was responsible, in that he distorted reality and deceived people. In the end we are responsible for our own actions, because we have free will and draw our own conclusions.

TIM LENTON

This correspondence is closed. — Editor.

## VICTIMS OF FANATICISM

Mr Sayed Quddus has suggested that Terry Waite's release might be secured by the "extradition" of Salman Rushdie to Iran. This idea is evidently a legal nonsense: the British authorities have no competence to extradite a British subject, who is incidentally charged with no offence in British law, to a foreign country with which he is quite unconnected except by having written a book deemed offensive by its rulers.

The suggestion is not merely a legal nonsense; it is an attempt to make a grossly immoral compact. The British authorities are being asked to exchange Mr Rushdie's life (he would be killed almost on setting foot in Iran) for Mr Waite's restoration to his own



## EVENTS

admiring and welcoming country. Even supposing that our authorities would stoop so low — and I like to think they would not — I am sure Mr Waite would not wish to buy freedom at such a price. Both are very courageous men. The one has risked captivity in seeking to retrieve hostages from the hands of brutal fanatics; the other has written a book in which, in part, he tries to expose the illiberal aspects of religion — those aspects that the brutal fanatics themselves personify so vividly.

The proposed exchange would only make sense if Mr Rushdie were an Iranian honoured in Iran who had been kidnapped by a group of English Anglicans or British Humanists. The sheer absurdity of that fantastic scenario is, itself, a comment on Mr Sayed Quddus's suggestion.

The plain principle is that whatever one's view of the Satanic Verses or whatever one's views of censorship, blasphemy or whatever, the writing and publishing of a book can never properly be capital offences; that is the firm ground in which all civilised people should dig their heels.

ERIC STOCKTON, Sanday, Orkney

## More Papal Bull

Pope John Paul's 70th birthday was marked by eulogies and tributes like the special supplement to the Catholic weekly *Universe*. Characteristically he was hectoring young Italians to breed more prolifically. Addressing a meeting of pastoral workers, he declared that refusal to have more children is "an evil worse than abortion and contraception". Unfortunately for the Pope and the compulsory pregnancy lobby, there is a growing realisation that influential and deliberately celibate religious leaders who urge others to have large families are cruel and irresponsible.

Ironically, as the Pope made yet another of his incessant appeals for increased breeding, the United Nations issued a report predicting major problems if the world population continues to soar. Environmental resources will be insufficient to meet the demand for food. The level of population growth over the next ten years "may decide the future of the earth as a habitation for humans", the report states. In the not too distant future we may "cross the threshold into catastrophe".

The Iranian Olympic Committee will not be sending swimmers to this year's Asian Games in Peking. The fundamentalist Islamic regime in Iran has imposed a strict dress code which forbids scantily clad male and female bodies to be in close proximity in case they should be tempted to sin.

The United States Supreme Court has upheld a "No Dancing" rule in the small Missouri town of Purdy. Fundamentalist Christians who dominate community affairs object to dancing because it is "scripturally prohibited, sinful and satanic".

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 8 July, 4.30 pm. Tea Party and Annual General Meeting.

**British Humanist Association.** Annual Conference at the University of Technology, Loughborough, Leicestershire, 20-22 July. Theme: A World Fit for Humans — Population and Environment. Varied social programme includes "private" showings of the banned video, *Visions of Ecstasy*. Details from the BHA, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG, telephone 071-937 2341.

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

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. 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.

**Haverling and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 2 July, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 28 June, 8 pm. Barbara Smoker: Impressions of Indian Society.

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

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 11 July, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. George Mephram: UNESCO and the International Literacy Year.

**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 071-831 7723 for details.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Friends House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

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# Censorship Props up "Secret" Society

The audience waited in vain for a speaker from the Off the Shelf Campaign to turn up for a debate on "Porn: to ban or not to ban?", organised by the Marxism Today Group in Haringey, north London, on 22 May.

Sue O'Sullivan, from the recently formed Feminists Against Censorship, put her case and initiated a lively discussion. She made it clear that there is significant feminist opposition to censorship of any kind as an effective way of dealing with pornography.

"Some of us ask whether sexually explicit, daring, or even disturbing representations of sex are in themselves anti-woman," she said.

"After all, who decides what is pornographic? Pornography does not, I would argue, cause women's oppression. None of the research on the links between porn and violence towards women is conclusive.

"Censorship in any guise props up a society where there is already too much that is censored, too much secrecy, official and otherwise."

Sue O'Sullivan agreed that women, quite understandably, are often upset and angry about the way pornography appears to confirm beliefs that they are always available for sex with men. But to change

this we must go to the roots of women's oppression and not get sidetracked into a narrow focus on porn.

"Censorship in any form is not the answer to women's oppression or exploitation," she declared.

"We still need far-ranging, fundamental changes in our society."

Off the Shelf campaigners, led by Labour MP Claire Short, who picketed and invade newsagents' shops demanding the removal of magazines they don't like, have suffered a setback at this year's annual general meeting of the National Council for Civil Liberties. Their call for the Council to set up a working group to consider what legislation could be enacted against pornography was defeated.

Speakers warned that censorship would not be confined to girlie magazines. In the present political climate, anti-porn legislation could be used to suppress gay and radical publications. It was pointed out that the Off the Shelf Campaign had enlisted the support of such eminent defenders of women's rights as Victoria Gillick and Dame Jill Knight.

Andrew Puddephatt, general secretary of the NCCL, said that pornography is notoriously difficult to define. It would be hard to formulate a Bill for legislation which did not infringe on civil liberties.

## "Right to Die" Rejected

Although an attempt in the House of Commons by Roland Boyes (Labour, Houghton and Washington) to "bring in a Bill to permit voluntary euthanasia subject to certain conditions" was defeated when the House divided, it attracted support by Members of all parties.

Mr Boyes told the House how he witnessed his mother's distressing last hours. The memory made preparing his speech to introduce the Bill had been very painful.

"I knew it would cause me pain, but my belief in voluntary euthanasia encouraged me to break down the pain barrier," he declared.

"I do not want my family to suffer the same experience should I become terminally ill, with no hope of recovery. I would want to talk to them rationally about many things while my brain was still active. I would want the privilege of being able to have my life ended when I made the choice."

Mr Boyes said the essence of his Bill was about individual choice and the right to die with dignity. He understood the views of those who disagreed.

He added: "But because euthanasia depends on the will of an individual, a decision freely taken, others should not deny that right to those who have chosen for themselves."

## Brawl at Mosque

"All hell broke loose," said a resident of Slough, referring to a fight at the town's House of Prayer between two Muslim factions. What started as a prayer meeting finished as a brawl over who should lead the proceedings. When police arrived they found around thirty of Allah's disciples engaged in a thump-up.

There has been a feud between the groups over the dismissal of an Imam. It was when he started to lead the prayers that fighting broke out.

A nearby neighbour said as a rule the only noise to be heard from the building was that of chanting. But on this occasion "there were screams and shouts. People were coming out with their faces covered in blood."

A spokesman for the Slough Islamic Trust refused to comment on the incident.

A recent survey has revealed that there are over six hundred religious sects in Italy. It is estimated that they attract around 100,000 away from Catholicism every year. The sects range in size, the smallest being the Ennio d'Alba Esoteric School. Its entire membership consists of Mr d'Alba, his wife, two children and mother-in-law.