

The Freethinker

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"CULTURE OF SECRECY" THREATENS PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM

"The key human rights issue in the United Kingdom today is freedom of expression", said Frances D'Souza, director of Article 19, when she addressed a Media Ban Rally at the Dominion Theatre, London.

She told a large audience of broadcasters, journalists and anti-censorship campaigners that during the last year "there have been unprecedented moves in the United Kingdom to limit freedom of expression and freedom of information.

"The list is long and frightening. It includes the controversial Broadcasting Bill which extends the Obscene Publications Act to broadcasting.

"The increased use of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 specifically against journalists puts them in the unenviable position of collecting evidence for the police.

"The Official Secrets Act no longer has any public interest defence under current legislation so that incidents such as the Colin Wallace affair could be investigated.

"The major steps towards preserving and extending the culture of secrecy which prevails should be challenged, because freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy and we let these rights slide at our peril."

There was also a seminar on censorship at the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Journalists spoke about the effects of restrictive legislation and pressures to present a less than impartial account of the news. These resulted from a combination of editing, sub-editing, self-censorship and almost unwitting participation in the culture of

secrecy.

The events coincided with publication by Article 19 of *Threats to Freedom of Expression in the United Kingdom*. It asserts that the definition of freedom of expression as an individual right, offered by Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has lost none of its urgency.

"After a year which has seen the continued erosion of press freedom and editorial independence, it could not be more relevant."

It is argued that in addition to a positive guarantee of freedom of expression, "Britain vitally needs, as an antidote to excessive secrecy, new legislation guaranteeing a public interest defence and the introduction of a right of access to information."

The Article 19 manifesto points out that the law of blasphemy has been at the centre of debate since publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* two years ago.

"One of the controversies arising from the Rushdie affair concerns whether the law of blasphemy should be extended to cover religions other than Christianity, or whether it should be abolished...

"The offence of blasphemy relates to comments about God, holy personages, or Articles of the Anglican faith, which constitute vilification, ridicule, or indecency. It is widely considered that a law protecting Christianity in a multi-cultural society discriminates against all non-Christian religions and also non-believers. Unlike the crime of libel,

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

HUMBUG AT BOURNEMOUTH

When they were not clamouring for the hangman's reinstatement, representatives at recent Conservative Party conferences have been calling for crusades in defence of the family and what they are pleased to call "traditional values". Last month's gathering in Bournemouth was no exception, with 28 motions and nearly a dozen fringe meetings on the subject. But the "party of the family", as it presents itself, is also the party of divorce, adultery, illegitimacy, deserted spouses and sex scandal. Its Members of Parliament, including Government Ministers, have a steamy record of extra-marital activity. The memory of a previous conference coinciding with the Cecil Parkinson and Sara Keays affair becoming public knowledge, still causes party managers to turn pale at the gills.

The influence of fundamentalist Christian "pro-family" pressure groups on the Conservative Party has increased since Margaret Thatcher moved into 10 Downing Street. They have been demanding more restrictive divorce law, recriminalisation of male homosexuality and virtual outlawing of sex education in schools.

One of the most prominent lobbyists on the religious Right is the prim and grace-proud Adrian Rogers, an Exeter GP and city councillor. He is also Consultant to the Conservative Family Campaign.

"The enemies of the Conservative Party are the enemies of the family", Dr Rogers told the faithful (and unfaithful) at Bournemouth. He warned that the Government is presiding over record levels of broken marriages — a rather undiplomatic statement to the only mainstream political party whose leader's spouse has been through the divorce court.

Dr Rogers went on to describe day care as "a modern obscenity". He was referring to the practice of children being left in the paid care of others while the parents are at work. The "family" lobby's ideal is the husband, as head of the family, earning enough to keep his wife at home looking after the children and carrying out domestic chores. But like so many ideals, this one is often unrealisable, thanks to the freakonomic policies of the "party of the family".

There is nothing "modern" about mothers, married or unmarried, seeking work outside the home, nearly



AND NOTES

always to balance the family budget. In the age of Victorian values, so admired by "pro-family" crusaders, working women were forced to leave their children in the care of minders, often aged and usually incapable. It is unlikely that they did so in pursuit of selfish pleasure, like working twelve hours a day in a mill or factory. They had to work in order to subsist.

Rather than castigating women for going to work and allegedly neglecting their children, those genuinely interested in child welfare should be campaigning for a massive nursery building programme. Attending a nursery is immensely beneficial to pre-school children, enabling them to meet and mix with others of their own age, instead of being confined to home. And few non-working mothers wish to devote all their time and energy to the needs of young children.

It is noticeable how Right-wing Christians direct their criticism at working women who leave their children in the care of others. They do not admonish the wealthy, Conservative-voting classes who employ nurses, nannies and *au pair* girls to look after their offspring, prior to packing them off to boarding school.

There is something thoroughly nasty about the way in which Christian bigots like the Conservative Family Campaign harp on about what they decree is a "normal" family; ie a couple and their two or three children conceived and born within marriage. This implies that there is something "abnormal" about those families which in Britain include over two million children who are born outside marriage, live with parents who are not married, or with only one parent. Until the (mainly secularist) birth control propagandists started advising people to prevent conception, families of a dozen children were regarded as "normal".

On another occasion Dr Rogers said that "the stigma of having a bastard baby needs to be reintroduced ... Life as a single parent is not nearly unpleasant enough."

In the "good old days" the stigma of illegitimacy followed a person from the cradle to the grave. Unmarried mothers, victims of ignorance and seduction (often by "their betters"), faced a bleak existence. Many ended up walking the streets or, even worse, dependent on Christian charity doled out by the likes of Dr Adrian Rogers.

WAR'S FADING GLORY

November brings the annual round of Remembrance Day parades and services, with routine renderings of "O God, our help in ages past" and offering of prayers for future peace. Each year there are fewer 1914-18 veterans taking part, while survivors of the 1939-45 war seem less keen to look back through the mist of nostalgia and sentiment. Perhaps there is a growing realisation of the futility, waste and hypocrisy of it all. Yesterday's allies became an "evil empire", while former enemies were rearmed and became our friends and trading partners.

History is a succession of wars, with religion a major factor in many of them. The churches fostered mindless jingoism, with the clergy acting as recruiting sergeants. Their role may now be changing in Britain, particularly since the Archbishop of Canterbury incurred the Prime Minister's wrath by refusing to allow the Falklands memorial services to become a display of crude triumphalism.

The present confrontation with Iraq is yet another example of western cynicism and double standards. Sadaam Hussein did not become "the beast of Baghdad" overnight. Governments now condemning the invasion of Kuwait had no qualms about selling arms to Hussein in the knowledge they would be turned on his own people or against neighbouring countries. Washington's new heroes, the despotic Emir of Kuwait and his parasitic brood, are not noted for their devotion to the cause of liberty and democracy. But there is nothing new about the United States supporting corrupt dictatorships.

Fortunately for world peace, Ronald Reagan has been put out to grass. If the "born again" Armageddonite were still in the White House, the situation in the Middle East would be far more threatening. True, at the first sign of trouble, President Bush urged Americans to go to their churches and pray for victory. But, unlike Reagan, he is not susceptible to the Christian Right who actually look forward to a nuclear war as fulfilment of their god's word.

Roy Hattersley, shadow Home Secretary, told the closing session of the Labour Party conference at Blackpool that a Labour Government would allow a free vote in the House of Commons on the abolition of blasphemy law. Difference of race, religion and culture should be welcomed and groups could profit from such diversity. "It must be a free vote on blasphemy law, and I shall be voting for abolition", he declared.

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Organisers of this year's "marches for Jesus" claim they attracted 200,000 participants, an impressive but quite unverifiable statistic. How many genuine converts (ie unbelievers who embraced the Christian faith) were made is another question.

If, as one version of the Bible tells us, the way of the transgressor is hard, the lot of marchers for Jesus is no bed of roses either. Just as they were preparing for their jamboree, a fire caused substantial damage to the March for Jesus office. It was reported that stock worth £12,500 was destroyed and the contents of the building were not covered by insurance. Perhaps it was deemed unnecessary that those who are "underneath the everlasting arms" should cough up for insurance premiums.

In an editorial, *Forward* ("The Magazine of Prayer and Evangelism") sorrowfully records that the conflagration "was the grand finale of a string of problems." It relates how staff "were praying desperately as we watched the fire spread along the roof space." But, glory be, "we sensed that God would do something wonderful" — nevertheless they called out the fire brigade.

Gerald Coates, a leading marcher for Jesus, detected a sinister force at work. "We see this event as a spiritual attack, believing that through the last three years' events and its part in the coming decade of evangelism, that March for Jesus turned something up", he declared. However, there is no reference in *Forward* to arson, nor is any evidence offered to support the "spiritual attack" theory. Gerald Coates has a singularly vivid imagination or an inflated ego.

Only thoughtful Christians are bothered by the flesh-creeping antics of the marchers for Jesus. Mr Coates is right when he says they have "turned something up". Stomachs.

RELIGION KILLS

Once again a social misfit who became involved with Noel Stanton's Jesus Army of pathetic dupes is the central figure in a tragedy, on this occasion three horrific killings. Peter Robak, aged 31, pleaded guilty at Reading Crown Court to manslaughter charges involving the deaths of Anthony Rawlings, his wife Barbara and their 15-year-old son Paul. He was ordered to be detained indefinitely at Broadmoor top security mental institution.

Paul Robak was a religious fanatic whose aggressive preaching got him into trouble on a

number of occasions. For a time he attended a High Wycombe Mormon church with his parents. But he became disillusioned with Mormonism and church members were irritated by his constant preaching.

He went to Northampton where he became a regular attender at Jesus Army meetings. Not surprisingly, his mental state deteriorated and eventually he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

Shortly after his release, Robak killed the Rawlings family. Anthony Rawlings was bludgeoned by a large bolt. His wife and son were stabbed to death.

In its newspaper, the Jesus Fellowship Church (Baptist), whose members are known as the Jesus Army, is described as "an orthodox Christian Church, upholding the full historic, biblical Christian faith. It upholds the doctrine of the Trinity and the full divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Three young members of the sect have died in circumstances necessitating an inquest.

Freethinker Fund

Increasing costs are a constant problem for publications like *The Freethinker*, for although postal charges went up last month it would be unrealistic to increase the cover charge. Thanks to the unpaid writers and generous readers, it has always been possible to balance the books. Continued financial support and an increase in circulation are essential if *The Freethinker* is to survive.

Our thanks to all contributors, the latest list of which is given below.

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Total for September: £331.60 and \$20.

Must Education Pay a Cash Dividend?

JAMES SANG

The British Association's autumn meeting usually provides the press with "silly season" material to fill the vacant paragraph spaces. This year the emphasis was different. The president, an ex-civil servant and Master of an Oxford college, attacked the Government's failure to finance the universities, especially in science, and emphasised that we are already lagging behind our continental cousins on every front. The Germans spend two-and-a-half times more on "the advancement of knowledge" than we do, the Japanese somewhat more than that. Sadly, in an appeal to Thatcherite economics, the case was made essentially on the grounds that our economy will suffer in proportion to the deficit. Of course this is undoubtedly true; but it is important to realise that the Association asked not just for improvements in science funding, but for a Royal Commission of Higher Education. The last decade of cuts in the financing of universities has destroyed Arts as well as Science, and we need to recover both and the balance between the two.

Just when this appeal hit the headlines, someone leaked a Public Accounts Committee report which showed that half-a-dozen Universities were on the verge of bankruptcy. The press (and the Government) implied that this was due to their inefficiency as "businesses", but the funds going to any individual university were determined by the University Grants Committee (and now by its replacement, the University Funding Council) which knows its precise financial position and must therefore carry the responsibility for any "business failures". They can plead, I suppose, that the Government never provided funds sufficient for the job. That is true, but the Committee never had the guts to resign, though I believe that, in despair, they once considered such a move.

Today the situation is worse: Polytechnics and Universities are taking in greater numbers of students than they can cope with or are funded for. By showing willing in this way each hopes to get more central support than their competitors in subsequent years. But the "excess" students cannot be taught at no cost, so it is now being suggested that each student requiring tutorials or practicals will have to pay extra for these services from his or her own pocket!

The Director General of the Institute of Directors has taken this free market philosophy a stage further. Existing State funding should be frozen and put directly in the hands of students. Higher education institutes should be free to set whatever

fees they like. Thus a free market will prevail, "with price mechanism and competition working freely to the advantage of students, staff, institutions and employers." Over two hundred years ago Professors stood outside their classrooms on the first day of term to collect course fees, except, if I remember correctly, in logical France where fees were paid only at the end of courses. Can I suggest that the Director General should learn from history?

There are signs that economic recession is forcing the political parties to review their support of education: trade needs skills. But it will take more than a decade to rebuild the structures which have been destroyed since 1979. Some can never be recovered, and among them are many liberal studies which distinguished the British education system of the 1950-60s. What is the market value of philosophy, or of studies of slime moulds, or of humanism? In any event, one cannot count on salvation on the strength of political promises. There is a battle ahead if we are to ensure that cultural values replace the current crude reliance on "market" criteria.

OBITUARY

MRS L. KERRAN

Lily Kerran, a National Secular Society member and *Freethinker* reader for many years, has died at the age of 96.

Lily Chris was unable to complete her formal education. But through sheer determination she endeavoured to improve her knowledge. A love of learning and searching for truth remained with her throughout life.

Her husband was Ferdinand Louis Kerran, a dedicated socialist who devoted his life to the British and international Labour movement. Mrs Kerran spent all her married life in Hampstead, north London, and frequently attended meetings and social functions.

At the age of 75 she started a new career teaching English to students from overseas. In 1984 she had a massive stroke which left her incapacitated. Although confined to a wheelchair, she showed great determination to overcome her disabilities.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Leatherhead Crematorium.

The Cult of Padre Pio

R.J. CONDON

There can have been few cases of religious mania to equal that of Francesco Forgione, otherwise Padre Pio. From childhood, when he was found scourging himself with an iron chain, to his death in 1968 at the age of 81, his life was one of continuous self-inflicted torture. His stigmata in imitation of the five wounds of the crucified Christ were almost certainly so caused. Behaviour that would normally get one put away is considered admirable in a "religious". The process for Pio's beatification has reached a critical stage and eventual sainthood looks certain.

Padre Pio has a considerable cult following, with 230 prayer groups in Britain alone. An extravagant mythology has developed around him, similar in some respects to the tales told about the first recorded stigmatist, St Francis of Assisi. Both had the gifts of prophecy and healing, including the ability to cure cancer. Both had powers of discernment, or knowing a person's character and history without being told. In real life both wept so frequently and copiously that their eyes were damaged and they eventually went blind. How St Francis smelt is not recorded — with his beggar's life-style he probably stank to high heaven — but Pio is said to have literally exuded an odour of sanctity.

These were minor achievements compared with Pio's ability to be in two places at once. He never left his monastery, yet people say they have seen and conversed with him all over the place, even after his death. He had his limitations, however — he once refused a request to walk on water.

It is doubtful if St Francis really had stigmata. The marks are said to have appeared shortly before his death in 1226. His biographer, St Bonaventure, writing a few years later, assures us there were many witnesses to the phenomenon. In those days, of course, edification was more important than accuracy. Professor Karl Hase of the University of Jena (*Francis of Assisi*, 1856) tells us the stigmata were the invention of the scheming Friar Elias, Francis' deputy and successor as head of the Franciscan Order. Elias took possession of the body and made sure nobody examined it before he secretly buried it. Hase says there is no proof that anyone saw the marks.

Having the example, real or supposed, of St Francis before them, it was only to be expected that later mystics and hysterics would copy him. Over the centuries more than three hundred cases of stigmata have been reported, mostly in women.

There are several possible causes of stigmata. They may be due to self-inflicted wounds, deliberate faking, accidental injury, psychosomatic factors or a combination of these. It is curious that the lance thrust appears on the right side in some stigmatists and on the left in others. The Gospels do not tell us which side it was with Jesus, so it is evident that the position depends upon the stigmatists' imagination of what the Crucifixion was like.

D.H. Rawcliffe (*The Psychology of the Occult*) considers several comparatively recent cases of stigmata. Louise Lateau, a Belgian peasant girl, developed the condition in 1868. Her wounds bled every Friday. The Italian girl Gemma Galvani, who died aged 25 in 1903, had deep wounds in her hands, feet and side, together with lacerations on her body in imitation of the scourging of Jesus. These were almost certainly self-inflicted, but the Church took another view and she was canonised in 1940.

Theresa Neumann claimed to have lived for years without food. This was proved fraudulent, so her stigmata need not be taken seriously. The same may be said of the earlier case of the nun, Lukardis of Aberweimar. This lady had long desired the stigmata, and she eventually achieved them by stubbing her palms with her finger nails and her feet with her big toes. She was seen to do so even after the wounds appeared, but this did not prevent her and others from regarding her stigmata as supernatural. Lesions of the skin self-inflicted by scratching are not unusual in neurotic or hysterical individuals.

Rawcliffe cites medical evidence for lesions produced purely as a result of psychosomatic or hypnotic factors, though he warns against premature acceptance of such claims. He writes: "Religious stigmatisation is mainly a hysterical syndrome from the psychiatric point of view, and the stigmata follow the usual trends observable in hysterical disorders." Of which, we might conclude, Padre Pio's was an extreme example.

Carl Lofmark

DOES GOD EXIST?
WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

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The Drug

CHARLES WARD

Religious believers - all sorts of them - keep telling us that we are missing out if we don't take what they have to offer. Don't you believe it! It is simply not true.

You may think that you need something of the kind. That is a different matter, showing, possibly, that you are addicted to belief.

You should kick the habit. It may not be easy, but you can do it.

Never mind the hype; it is merely aimed at hooking you.

Of course you want to be happy. Your life may need sorting out. You want to know the Truth. You may even want to be good.

Well, that's not the way. Not in my book. I've been.

What you are being offered is a rush. A short-cut to a "meaningful" life, to understanding, to ecstasy. A quick fix to beat the blues, to expand your consciousness (come again ?), to feel superhuman.

There aren't any short-cuts. It is all a great confidence trick. A faith-trick, if you like.

Mind you, it's so slick most of the contacts are gulled by their own spiel. Only the cynical exploiters - the rotten bastards - admit among themselves (not of course to the suckers) that it's all bunkum.

Oh yes, there are strange, and enjoyable, experiences to be had by using the stuff. Sometimes. For some people.

They don't get you anywhere. Except that you will keep wanting more.

Have you noticed how they always tell you about the highs? Rarely much about the lows. Yet they are inseparable.

And how they do go on about Truth, Reality, Inner Knowledge and the like.

So impressive, these capital letters. Looks like one hundred per cent sugar. You'll find out, maybe too late, that it's all adulterated.

That wonderful feeling - that impression of absolute certainty - can't stand being brought down to earth.

There is a price to be paid for it, a double price in fact. A constant wrestling with doubt and an unwillingness to accept opposing evidence.

To keep your faith, you have to keep asserting it. And, to get enough of it you may find yourself selling it to others.

It's a trap, but it's traumatic to admit it. That holy feeling is great - but there's so much pretence over what happens to your guilt, is it worth

it?

You want to stay in the luminous clouds. Of course you do. There are dark fogs on earth in which you easily get lost.

The clouds aren't always luminous, though.

So take another sniff, swallow the capsule, give yourself another shot.

Maybe it will be good this time. Maybe you can wallow in love and beauty and feel cosmic.

You are ruining your spiritual health, you know.

You will not miss out if you beat the craving for belief.

To find happiness, lead a purposeful life, be of service to your fellow-men, and all the rest of it, you don't need to believe anything in particular.

You need a cheerful, practical, helpful turn of mind and the energy to get up and go for your ideal.

If you depend upon something else to give you these, you have not discovered your own resources.

A trip into the twilight zone may give you an illusion of comprehension and power. Actually all the knowledge and strength you require lies right at hand.

In knowing the limits of your knowledge. In having the moral strength to be agnostic where no knowledge is to be had.

Religious beliefs are not knowledge. They consist, as they always have done, of assumptions and interpretations.

But believers shy from such a rational conclusion. That is cold turkey to them.

They hanker for the euphoria of faith.

And they will keep pestering you to join them. They'll try every inducement they can think of. They may offer you the stuff free.

That's taking liberties. It will enslave you.

Just say "No!"

Ann Rennick, a 53-year-old Belfast woman, turned into a "human fireball" when her nightdress touched a candle she had lit as a novena to St Martha. An inquest was told that Mrs Rennick and her family had observed the devotion for the past seven years.

The Pope has approved the ordination of two elderly married men in Brazil. But he has stipulated that they and their wives must live together as brother and sister.

"Nation Shall Speak Unto Nation"

BRIAN DONAGHEY

When the technology of broadcasting was in its youth, the prospect of mass communication created a vision of uniting peoples by making all cultures and modes of thought accessible to one another. Hence the noble motto of the BBC, which I have taken as the keynote of this article. Although two large-scale wars, a host of minor ones, and successive confrontations between major power-blocks have dented this ideal, it has not entirely been crushed. Indeed, from Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "global village" right up to the current concern with "one-world-ism", it has had a revival. Recent events have helped to change it from a vaguely formulated ideal into a practical necessity, since (rationalists may reasonably demonstrate with inexorable logic) humankind has landed itself in a predicament where a unified effort offers the only hope of survival. And if an urgently needed solution to world unity is to be devised, the tools for implementing it must be identified and provided.

One obvious resource is the human ability to generate, develop and use language as a basis for thought and action. Language is so fundamental to human identity that it has always been the primary feature distinguishing mankind from animals; and its role in categorising phenomena conceptually, so as to exercise control over them, was recognised long ago (in the Judaeo-Christian tradition) in the account of Adam naming the living creatures (Genesis 2:19-20). European thought, largely moulded in that tradition, has been influenced even more by the equally potent myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Even if it is plainly at odds with the information in the previous chapter (the dispersal of the tribes emanating from Shem, Ham and Japheth, already distinguished "after their tongues", among other things) this myth is archetypal in its simplicity. The punishment is a fundamental one: the confounding of language not only confirms the disintegration of order and unity human beings caused in their vanity, but also perpetuates it as a permanent inheritance constantly reminding us of our limitations. Although linguistic science since last century has demonstrated the absurdity of the myth, its implications are still powerful. Some people have therefore postulated: if the confusion of one language into many was a punishment upon humanity, then a human enterprise to create a new single universal language would be an attempt at self-redemption, a first step towards regeneration to abolish the evil forces of fragmentation and conflict.

The tribute paid in the February and April issues of *The Freethinker* to Sam Beer, whose contact with Esperanto was an essential part of his humanism, prompted a reconsideration of this subject. Esperanto may have the greatest claim to respect as a candidate for linguistic universality. Constructed by a Russian Pole, Ludovic Zamenhof, between 1878 and 1887, it has an honourable history of development and application, and still boasts a sizeable community of users. But the search for a world language has a much longer history. From the 17th century on, nearly six hundred proposals have been advanced. The early ones, springing from religious and philosophical motives, experimented in classifying human ideas (assumed as universal) into sets and subsets, and creating systems of connecting and communicating these *a priori* without recourse to living languages. After a loss of interest in the 18th century, the scientific, positivist side of the 19th revived the notion of constructed languages. The general preference, however, was for *a posteriori* systems, artificial languages constructed eclectically from elements of natural languages. Most of these are now forgotten, bearing names such as Volapük, Nal Bino, Bopal, Dil, Balta, Orba, Veltparl, Dilpok, Pantos-dimou-glossa, Pasilingua; with about fifty others in this century, the names of which, though not less fanciful, it would be too tedious to list. The most striking one is Interglossa, published in 1943 by Lancelot Hogben, who provides a full discussion of the linguistic issues. Others have sought to elevate some national language into a world one, often in modified form, or have blended existing languages.

Rationally considered, such projects, high ideals notwithstanding, can have very limited success. The linguistic facts are against them. First, almost all proposals are predicated upon an assumption of language as a homogeneous phenomenon; that is, languages share universal features readily transferable between them, hence some form of language could be adopted world-wide. Over the last two decades, however, linguists have questioned how extensive such universals really are, beyond an irreducible fundamental level of abstraction. The widest surveys take in no more than about a hundred (including historical examples) of the world's estimated four thousand languages; and they show that languages, in their structure and aspects, are as diverse as the cultures they serve. Structurally the differences between the various grammatical

systems are great, even where there are points of contact. As language and nationality are (erroneously) equated in the modern world, the adoption of a particular national language might therefore prove more divisive than unifying, by discriminating against all others. It would confer on native speakers an obvious cultural advantage and inclination to contempt of others and would help to reinforce national stereotypes - and we have recently seen what petty xenophobia those ancient myths lead to! Transference is not so difficult between languages related in "families", for example most of the European languages; between families the difficulties multiply because the syntactic and morphological principles will not correspond. As an illustration, it is perhaps a sobering thought that English, Welsh and Polish (all spoken in Britain) are closer to one another than any of them is to the languages of New Guinea, Polynesia and the American Indians.

The artificial languages fare no better. All, including Esperanto, whatever their virtues as regular, consistent systems, are composed of syntax and vocabulary derived from the European languages. This can hardly be due to linguistic naivete, Europe having had contact with non-European languages since the Middle Ages. Rather, it represents an implicit acceptance, perhaps even unconscious and unquestioned, of the "superiority" of the European languages as models of system. The grammar, the lexical fields, even the phonetic elements, are European-orientated. This might be understandable (if not excusable) during the period of colonial expansion and technical dominance by Europe, but in the contemporary world it exhibits monstrous arrogance and insensitivity.

Supposing, however, that these objections could be removed, the notion of a carefully structured artificial language still appeals to many. Ideally, a "fixed" system is needed, to obviate occurrences of ambiguity and imprecision. But languages do not operate this way. In real situations, living languages change imperceptibly every day: an artificial one must be adaptable too. Languages fulfil social functions of expressing emotion, attitude and persuasion as well as statement of fact, and they often use non-verbal cues (culturally engendered) as ancillaries: as forms of discourse, artificial ones are extremely limited in this respect.

But surely, in factual matters a universal language could at least deal with objective statement, and to that extent would be useful? Well, this objectivity is largely illusory. Facts (whatever they are) do not exist in vacuum, but in a socio-political matrix

where they always have some significance. They are adduced to be used, never merely recorded. Moreover, facts do not exist individually, but related to one another in category systems which we learn, refine and expand throughout our lives. And this brings us back to the subject of classification, where the story started in the 17th century (though they in turn look back to the medieval realists and nominalists). It is not always appreciated how much the classifications (or *taxonomies*) of human concepts and environmental phenomena which we take for granted are actually culturally transmitted. It is easy for us Europeans, through the weight of tradition, to accept as an axiomatic statement of the way the world is structured the classification scheme of "universal" concepts in, for instance, Roget's *Thesaurus* (over a hundred years old and still going strong). But modern improved techniques of linguistic and anthropological investigation reveal otherwise. One thinks, for example, of Benjamin Whorf, who in his field work among the Hopi Indians concluded that language uses people (in the sense that linguistic structures determine mental categories) as much as people use language. These observations have since been extended by others, not least by those interested in the problems of computer programming and machine translation. More recently, it is an anthropologist, Henry Burger, who has compiled a computer-generated *Wordtree*, a taxonomy of concepts helping to clarify more explicitly the mental processes involved in relating and defining ideas. It has many implications for the comparing and describing of languages. Clearly, mental categories are *not* universal, but variable, and "objective facts" are defined by reference to pre-conditioned ideas.

So, in retrospect, the problem is being addressed the wrong way round. No grand linguistic project, even if officially sponsored or enforced by governments, can unite the world; but it may be possible, if some other principle of concerted cooperation is found, to draw upon modern methods of linguistics, anthropology and sociology as aids to mutual understanding and toleration between cultures. That, realistically, is the most that can be hoped for.

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BOOKS

DOES GOD EXIST?, by Carl Lofmark. Rationalist Press Association, £4.50

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?, by Carl Lofmark. Rationalist Press Association, £4.50

Freethinkers have perennially been asked does it matter if people believe in God. Let them do so as long as it comforts them! The trouble is that, while the belief may comfort them, it gives a great deal of discomfort to others. The Salman Rushdie death threat may be extreme, but the actions of Mary Whitehouse and Victoria Gillick, in the name of religion, can have very harmful effects upon many people.

So, as Carl Lofmark says in his new paperback, *Does God Exist?*, the answer to the question is "important for our social and moral behaviour as well as for our understanding of the world around us".

The first problem, of course, is that of definition. What do we mean by God? The fair way is to ask the believers themselves. But that gets no further for "we are offered a thousand different definitions". Professor Lofmark therefore resorts to the Oxford Dictionary, where "a god" is defined as a "superhuman person (regarded as Masculine) worshipped as having power over nature and the fortunes of mankind".

In fact, very few believers, including Roman Catholics, seem prepared to leave their fortunes in the hands of God. And a fair question for the believer is: "How would the world be different if God did not exist?"

Carl Lofmark, however, considers the various religious arguments, from design, first cause et al, and finds them wanting.

And noting Aquinas' borrowing from Aristotle, shows it to be invalid. "For Aristotle the world never was created, because he thought the world was eternal... Aristotle's god is an abstraction, which by sheer existence causes things to move... in fact, the argument of Aristotle, if it is valid at all, cannot prove anything more than an intelligent principle lying at the heart of nature". Nothing to do with a God of love. Nor can such a belief be inferred from the orderly motion of stars and planets.

Indeed, as the Professor says, there is much confusion over the terms "design", and "order", and over "laws" of nature. What we observe in nature is not design, but order, pattern and symmetry; laws of nature are simply descriptions of the way things

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behave; they have no connection with social rules.

And Paley's watch argument illustrates the danger of drawing conclusions from parallels which are not really parallel at all.

Blake's awful question about the tiger,

"Did he smile his work to see?

Did he that made the lamb make thee?" epitomises the problem of the believer when he asserts divine creation. "If you are going to draw conclusions about God by looking at the world of nature then you will soon have reason to think that God must love pain and cruelty".

Every cause must have a cause, except the first one was likened by Schopenhauer to a cab which may be dismissed when it has carried us where we want to go, says Carl Lofmark, who is Professor of German at St. David's College, Lampeter, in the University of Wales. And Kant who dismissed the design, ontological and first cause arguments, concluded that the only reason we have for believing in God was our own morality. But Kant was "very cautious about this. He says that our moral nature makes it necessary for us to believe in God, but he avoids saying plainly that God actually exists, and he rejects the idea that our moral sense came from God".

In fact, as Professor Lofmark says, the idea of "good" cannot have come from God: "the very fact that we can describe God as good proves that we ourselves had the idea of "good" and did not get it from God".

Having dealt with the various traditional arguments put forward by believers, the Professor turns to some modern ideas of God: those of Rudolf Bulmann, Paul Tillich and Dr John Robinson and finds them equally wanting.

The only logical position, therefore, is atheism, as Carl Lofmark recognises. He will have nothing to do with the "polite euphemism" agnosticism and, as for the accusation of negativism: "To believe in a world without gods is not really any more negative than to believe in one that includes gods. It is simply to understand the world differently". And he commends Thomas Paine's great declaration of faith: "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good."

I am happy, in turn, to commend Carl Lofmark's little book to freethinkers new and old. While particularly intended for the former, it is an excellent refresher for the latter.

Carl Lofmark continues his efforts for the cause

REVIEWS

in *What is the Bible?*, dealing concisely and eruditely with the various books of the Old and New Testaments and their alleged authors.

"Neither the patriarchs, nor Moses, nor the great kings David and Solomon are ever mentioned in any early source independent of the Old Testament."

"We know nothing at all about any of these men [the four evangelists] and we do not know when, where or how they wrote their gospels. Even their names are uncertain, for we have no record of them before the late second century AD."

The fact that an author is unknown would not normally invalidate a work; but we are not dealing here with normality. These books are claimed to be the word of God or, at least, divinely inspired, and they describe many miraculous events.

"To say you trust God's word really means that you trust the person who wrote it down and said it was God's word", Professor Lofmark comments. So we must pose David Hume's question: "Is it more likely that the laws of nature really were suspended, or that the report of the events is false?"

The Professor gives examples of biblical contradictions and absurdities, including the absurdity at the centre of Christian teaching, that of divine self-sacrifices: "God's *justice* made him require the death of his *innocent* son in order to cancel human sin — sin which mankind *inherited* from Adam (whom God himself had made fallible and then allowed the Devil to tempt!)."

Of course there are "symbolic", "figurative" or "allegorical" interpretations of scriptural teaching, in which connection the Professor recounts Bertrand Russell's warning about turning the other cheek: "I have no doubt that the present Prime Minister is a most sincere christian, but I would not advise any of you to go and smite him on one cheek. I think you might find that he thought this text was intended in a figurative sense."

The thought becomes horrifying if you substitute she for he.

She, however, would no doubt recommend the bible's moral message, whatever that may be taken to mean. Whether she would approve its appalling disparagement of women, we don't know. Her behaviour suggest not. Nor has love of one's enemies been a conspicuous feature of Margaret Thatcher's prime ministership. Yet she'll probably be at church next Sunday — especially if the television cameras are there!

A passage will be duly read from the book that Thomas Paine called "a history of wickedness, that

has served the corrupt and brutalise mankind", and the congregation will pray to the god who threatened, not only punishment in this world but the threat of eternal damnation hereafter.

We are, as Carl Lofmark says, living in a time of crisis, when "cults and fantasies may be comforting because they offer the hope that things will be put right. But fantasies are dangerous because they blind us to reality" The Age of Reason, alas, remain a long way off and the rationalist's work is never done.

COLIN McCALL

MOZART THE DRAMATIST, by Brigid Brophy. Libris, £9.95

The nutshell this book might be put into takes the form of a single sentence, occurring on page 297: "Mozart's operas are literature written in music." But it is not an occasion for nutshells. As it happens, Brigid Brophy has a special gift for providing these — for being elegantly summary: if ever she is leisurely, it's the brisk sort of leisureliness. But at over three hundred pages this discussion is not one word too long.

I don't know anyone who makes following an argument more enjoyable, the detour into a footnote always being fun: and here, of course, the subject is itself deeply enjoyable. "The value of his operas to him, to his age, and to us", is the compendious subtitle. Much of her early attention is given to the age itself, from the virtues of the enlightenment ("One of the great discoveries of the eighteenth century was that intelligence is beautiful"; "In that most thoughtful of centuries, nothing was unthinkable") to its nightmares ("Although the enlightenment was intellectually convinced that nature, schooled by reason, was in fact adequate to holding society together, it was irrationally in dread of nature unschooled"). The nightmares arose, she argues, out of the "concerted attack on fathers" that was the very cause why it was an enlightenment. Mozart's relations with his own father enter here. In his last operas, *La Clemenza di Tito* and *Die Zauberflöte*, he was making posthumous amends to Leopold: in *Don Giovanni* his concern with the notion of a father's death led him to produce "a remarkable (and... not accidental) doublet to *Hamlet*".

But I am making, already, a muddled map of the complex landscape, this stream feeding into that, and all contributing at last to the broad river celebrating Mozart's existence, that Brigid Brophy charts with

such clarity. Everything is seen to run together. Here was opera itself, waiting for the appearance of a genius with exactly Mozart's gift (there was to be only one of them, of this size): the "unusual combination of word-fluency with music-fluency". He was of the scale of Shakespeare, and what Keats said of Shakespeare might be said for Mozart: "His genius was an innate universality." So in *Don Giovanni* (discussion of which is enriched by discussion also of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) he produced an imperfect masterpiece, an unconscious autobiography, in which he and his librettist da Ponte turned "a pre-enlightenment myth-figure" into "an enlightenment individualist asserting the Ego's right to pleasure against God, honour and society". Of *Figaro* they made a revolutionary document, rooted in the affection between Susanna and the Countess which is defiant of social convention. In *Così fan tutte* they debated, exquisitely, the problem of whom one might marry, and in *Die Zauberflöte*, this time with Shikaneder, Mozart proposed a solution to that problem. Only those who have not read his letters would believe he set to music any literary hackwork he was offered: he was always deeply anxious to have the best librettist available, and from opera to opera can be seen working the material provided into shapes of which he makes his own psychological uses. "In Mozart's hands" (another nutshell) "opera was carrying the psychologising burden of literature."

It seems to me an incontrovertible case. It is hammered out with uninterrupted elegance, but there is hammering; and, reading it, I was reminded of a smithy that, being as old as I am, I remember frequenting as a boy. The fun was in the hammering and the shaping: but it was also in the sparks flying through the scorched air. There are splendid sparks here. About, for example, Masonry giving Mozart the childhood he had been too precocious to have. About the question why someone known to have abhorred the flute should have not have conferred magic upon some other instrument. (It's because the flute is a transverse instrument. "Tamino has only to stand upright and play his flute and he becomes a loving and amusing rebus, a visible pun, exerting the magic and power of the Masonic Square.") About the folly of claiming that Beethoven, great as he is, was also of Shakespearean scale. "An artist whose work, though often hearty, shews not the first stirrings of either wit or comedy, cannot be a Shakespeare." (Alfred Brendel, one might remember, gave a lecture once in which he pointed to moments of wit and comedy in the piano sonatas: but the general point is taken.)

About Mozart's lack of love for the tenor voice, and how disconcerted that makes us when we find that Don Juan's family name (Mozart having made Giovanni a baritone) was Tenorio. About the sense of tragedy in eighteenth century literature (and in Mozart) being found in "declarations and manifestoes of the sex war". About the roots of that "deadly stalking of virgins" that was a mark of the century. About Cherubino in *Figaro* being "the last major manifestation in European art of Cupid, the boyish god of love", and about the phallic background to the famous uncertainty as to Cupid's (and Cherubino's) size.

And, my favourite of all the flying sparks, the perception that *Così fan tutte* is entirely in the manner of Jane Austen: all of her novels being schools for their heroines.

A splendid book, proffering and polishing a splendid argument.

EDWARD BLISHEN

TAXATION AND LIBERTY, by Anwar Shakh. The Principality Publishers, 4-6 Llantrisant Street, P O Box 918, Cardiff, CF2 4YP, £19.95

This work is colourful and stimulating. It is written by a British property developer of Pakistani origin who had a bitter 12-year dispute with the Inland Revenue which he eventually won, but at the cost of a heart attack. While recovering, he prepared this book and then established his own publishing company to get it printed.

Unfortunately the author does not include an account of his own experiences in the text. Instead he makes important general points, the main one being that for the State to deprive citizens of most of their income and capital, through large taxes, reduces them to slavery. He demonstrates that the freedom to spend one's own money on what one pleases is a basic human right.

Anwar Shakh also elaborates other significant observations. They include how politicians buy votes with promises of increased public spending, to be financed by confiscatory taxation of higher earners, and how accountants collaborate with Revenue Inspectors. He ably demonstrates the crying need for this country to have a written constitution limiting the arbitrary authority of Parliament and freeing it from Government control through separation of powers.

The book is full of interesting historical

anecdotes. One of the most striking is the story of the incident which allegedly sparked off the Peasants' Revolt, namely the forceable stripping of Wat Tyler's daughter by a tax collector to see if she had pubic hair and was thus old enough to pay the Poll Tax!

The vocabulary is very erudite if archaic (the author uses such words as chatoyance, cunctation, parvanimity and sauveolent). The style, however, is appalling. It is that of a low-grade tabloid, full of repetitive and incongruous similes and emotive rhetorical questions. The arguments are overstated in sensationalist terms and presented in a chaotic

way. They are illustrated by historical examples, exaggerated for effect, quoted unchronologically and without direct reference to the bibliography at the end of the book. There is no index.

It is regrettable that this self-indulgent tome was not drastically edited, especially as the author apologises for the fact that he writes in English although it is not his native language. If that had been done a thought-provoking book would have resulted, instead of an unscholarly polemic by a very widely-read man with original ideas.

TED GOODMAN

Thomas Hardy: a Reassessment

BET CHERRINGTON

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Thomas Hardy's birth. The great novelist and poet was a freethinking humanist who endorsed the work of Henry Salt's Humanitarian League and hailed the Rationalist Press Association's publications as "a powerful means of spreading scientific knowledge."

Essentially Hardy is still the great writer that he was in his lifetime. The creativity, the artistic sincerity mentioned in *The Times* tribute in 1928 capture and hold the reader's interest. The foreboding, compelling atmosphere he often creates; the attention to detail, the flashes of humour, some childlike, some gruesome, direct the reader at the author's whim. Hardy is unpredictable, inventive, masterful, elusive. He suffers as he writes, and we suffer with him.

How did he grow into this creative writer? There are some traits laid down very early. The son of a stonemason, brought up in a Dorset village, and with many relatives close by, he heard a dialect spoken, and learned two languages. He tried to distance himself from his humble relatives. At village weddings he used to play the fiddle from the age of nine, and his excellent ear helped him also in writing poetry of great flexibility and subtle rhythms.

Architecture was an early choice for a proposed career, and he soon won two prizes — more proof of his versatility and gifts. He longed to go to Oxford University, but was forced to admit that it would be impossible to do so because of the rigid class distinctions prevalent, a bitter realisation. He married twice but had no children. After his first

wife died, he wrote over fifty poems to her, but he had neglected her almost entirely before her death, being taken up already with a much younger woman who became his second wife.

His literary output extends to 20 novels, one play, a very long verse epic, *The Dynasts* and around a thousand poems, which were published after the novels, though many were written earlier. There are also some short stories. He lists his novels under the headings "Novels of Character and Environment" "Romances and Fantasies" and "Novels of Ingenuity." Of the first group there are three outstanding works, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Tess, the best known and best loved heroine, embodies Hardy's belief in the overwhelming powers of heredity and environment. Descended from a degenerate line of aristocrats, Tess has not the strength, physical or moral, to withstand the approaches of a rich wastrel. Jude again, has not the stability to gain the place he desires, in a University reserved for the Establishment, nor can he become a clergyman as he has lost his faith. Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge, cannot master his personal problems and gradually deteriorates, dying in a hut on Egdon Heath.

Hardy treats above all the great theme of love between the sexes. In the preface to the 1912 edition of *Jude* he says: "My opinion is now, that a marriage should be dissolvable as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties." He goes on to quote a German reviewer of the book who claimed that Sue Brideshead was the first heroine in fiction from the feminist movement, "the intellectualised emancipated bundle of nerves ... who does not recognise the necessity for most of her sex to

follow marriage as a profession, and boasts because she is licensed to be loved on the premises."

The clergy, however, disagreed, and copies of *Jude* were burned by a Bishop. "Sexual love was regarded as at its best, a frailty, and at its worst, damnation", says Jude of the religion he had hoped to serve.

Tess and *Jude* are the two novels which develop Hardy's views on religion and sexuality, doing as much or more for our sexual freedom and progress as D.H. Lawrence did later with *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Hardy did not provide a solution, but struggled with the problems of his day, being far in advance of his fellows in his quest for a better way of life. D.H. Lawrence remarks "The tragedy is always the same: the passionate, the individual, the wilful must die. The bourgeois will flourish." Perhaps it is worth mentioning that these themes are also handled by Ibsen very powerfully in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* at around the same period.

From an early stage, Hardy's poetic qualities, stylised bucolic humour and tragic power were recognised. After the publication of *Tess* and *Jude*, and the bitter struggle against the Mrs Grundys of both sexes, he turned to his first love, poetry. He had not succeeded in getting any poems published up to now, but his books were very successful, and with so much recognition he was able to bring out his *Wessex Poems* in 1897 and *Poems of the Past and Present* in 1901. Hardy hoped that these expressed more fully than prose "ideas and emotions running counter to the inert crystallised opinions hard as rock which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting."

Other small collections followed: ballads, miniature narratives, poems of feeling, satires; "Moments of Vision" of which Virginia Woolf writes, "these exactly describe those passages of astonishing beauty and force which are to be found in any book he wrote."

There has been much criticism of the language he used. In 1899 *The Saturday Review* described it: "Curious and wearisome, slovenly, slipshod, uncouth verse stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived and worse wrought." The criticism still goes on, but any petty lapses the critics may find do not derogate from his greatness as a writer.

The poems of Swinburne and Hardy make an interesting comparison; Swinburne pours forth a torrent of beautiful, alliterative rhythmic lines far removed from Hardy's tense, dense and economical

compositions which seem to set out to shock rather than soothe. But Philip Larkin writes: "At least one reader would not wish Hardy's *Collected Poems* a single page shorter, and regards it as the best body of poetic verse this century has to show."

Could we claim Hardy as a Humanist? He did not like to be pinned down. His own comment: "Positive views on the whence and wherefore of things have never been advanced by this pen as a consistent philosophy." But it is possible to examine the influences on him: Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill and others. In this connection he says: "I have no philosophy, — merely a confused heap of impressions, like those of a bewildered child at a conjuring show." "Half my time I believe not only in the things Bergson believes in, but in spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places, etc. etc."

The Times tribute of 12 January 1928 points out that he followed Schopenhauer and von Hartmann in seeing the life of man as the product of blind will, immanent in the universe but careless of human happiness or progress. He extorted respect for this view by virtue of a personal quality in himself, without cynicism or pedantry. His perception was tragic: he saw fortitude and nobility in the way people confronted the blows they received. This supports the view that his instinctual convictions were that the universe was informed by value. The values he embodies are those of feeling.

To conclude: Hardy's Protean qualities have proved hard to define: this elusive and secretive countryman deliberately outwits the critic. But his works maintain their esteem and popularity with young and old, and adapt to stage or screen. As a "good read" he is hard to beat, yet however far the reader edges up the literary scale, Hardy is there, the clever, brave and feeling man.

An incident which Hardy's love of the bizarre would find highly congenial — when he died his heart was cut out and placed in a biscuit tin prior to its separate burial at Stinsford in Dorset. His body went, of course, to Westminster Abbey.

Leaders of the Union of Jewish Students are concerned over anti-Zionist feeling in British Universities. They were reported to be "stunned" following a debate at Leeds, a UJS stronghold, which they won with a close vote. Dan Levy, campaigns organiser, commented: "On a national level this reflects the growing confidence of the anti-Zionist lobby."

LETTERS

HUMANISM WITHOUT RELIGION

People who call Humanism a religion, and their religion, either (a) are muddled thinkers, or (b) hanker after religion (in its commonly accepted sense) or, according to the International Humanist and Ethical Union resolution quoted by Harry Stopes-Roe in a recent *Freethinker* (c) are misusing the English language.

The IHEU resolution claims to speak on behalf of such persons and forces on them the odd claim that they are using the term "religion" without implying "any theistic or non-naturalistic realities". But if so, one has to ask why invoke a word dripping with supernatural and other repellent connotations? Is one not entitled to suspect other motivations for this usage rather than simply a linguistic preference?

Certainly Canadian humanists do not accept the notion that Humanism can in any way be considered a religion; to do so is clearly self-defeating for humanists. Just because the IHEU has been prevailed upon to agree to a resolution which abuses plain English does not make it right.

PAUL PFALZNER, Past President, Humanist Association of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

LIBERAL, DEMOCRATIC AND RADICAL

As a secularist and a Liberal Democrat I am immensely pleased to see that you have taken note of the resolutions on the repeal of the blasphemy laws and the disestablishment of the Church of England, passed by the Liberal Democrats at Blackpool last month. But I am not so happy to read the disparaging and incorrect remarks with which you chose to introduce the item.

The old Liberal Party (now non-existent) did not disentangle itself from the SDP. The two parties merged and formed a totally new political party, now influenced just as much by those who came from the SDP as those who came from the Liberal Party.

The media-hyped actions of a small minority who chose to follow Dr Owen into the political wilderness are unimportant, and in any case that story is now at an end.

I see no reason why we should suffer politically as a result of those motions. Indeed there is support within the Church of England itself for disestablishment and the need for the repeal of the blasphemy laws is recognised fairly widely now.

I would have thought that you would have been happier to find that there is a political party radical enough to support your way of thought.

BERYL SAMUEL, Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

MERCY OR MURDER?

I was very moved by the film, *Mercy or Murder?*, recently shown on Channel Four. It prompted the thought, "greater love hath no man than this, that he kills the person he loves because she has asked him to, and because society isn't allowed to show the compassion felt by most of its members." How does one cure the "slippery slope and thin end of the wedge" phobia? By infliction on those who suffer from it an intolerable and incurable illness?

It is ironic that in wars instigated by Governments, license is given to kill thousands of innocent and healthy human beings. Yet when an individual brings to an end the suffering of a loved one, the moral standard is oh so righteously held aloft.

VIVIEN GIBSON, London W5

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 December, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Brian Fitch: A Mayor's Year.

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, 4 December, 8 pm. Public meeting. Seasonal music and readings.

Humanist Holidays. Christmas at Weston-super-Mare. Information obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone (0242) 39175.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 29 November, 8 pm. Public meeting.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Swarthmore Education Centre, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 11 December, 7.30 pm. Peter Bennett: What is Morality?

Norwich Humanist Group. Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Tuesday, 20 December, 7.30 pm. Ramalingam Muthukamaran: Hinduism. (Amended notice.)

Preston and District Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 769829.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 December, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Bob Melbourne: How to Mislead With Language.

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.

The leader and one of two members (the other is his wife) of the Holy Order of God and Jesus is appealing against a tribunal ruling that he must pay poll tax. Ronald Norton, of Ratby, Leicestershire, who calls himself Ronald of Ratby, Blessed Father Abbot of the Order, says that his bungalow is a holy place. He and his wife meditate and say the Lord's Prayer daily. They may soon be joined in their devotions by the bailiffs.

BBC Foots the Bill for Whitehouse Slur

Mary Whitehouse, for over 25 years Britain's national prodnose, has landed the BBC with a hefty bill for damages and legal costs. Although the Corporation has been her *bête noir* since she started a "Clean up TV" campaign back in the 'Sixties, invitations to participate in programmes still wing their way from Broadcasting House to Mrs Whitehouse's abode in Essex.

Perhaps Auntie has learnt her lesson and invitations will be fewer following the *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* debacle. Mrs Whitehouse was Dr Anthony Clare's interviewee and in the course of their conversation mention was made of Denis Potter's widely acclaimed television play, *The Singing Detective*. It includes a scene in which a boy watches his mother having sex with a strange man in the woods. Of course the episode is known to the argus-eyed Mrs Whitehouse, who never seems to miss anything that is likely to offend her. It was included in a batch of "obscene" material she assembled for the edification of Members of Parliament.

Whilst she was "in the psychiatrist's chair", Mary Whitehouse said that as a boy, Denis Potter witnessed a similar incident involving his mother. The shock brought on a serious skin affliction from which he suffers.

Mrs Potter, now 80 years old, said that she had been faithful to her husband throughout their married life. She was deeply distressed by the slur.

A BBC legal representative told the High Court that the allegation, which reached a huge audience, was entirely without foundation. Mrs Potter was awarded damages and legal costs estimated at over

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blasphemy can be committed without intent."

Reference is made to refusal by the British Board of Film Classification to pass the video *Visions of Ecstasy*, "the first film to be banned for blasphemy in Britain."

It concludes: "The law on blasphemy, which has proved to be outdated, discriminatory and unworkable in a multi-cultural society, should be abolished without replacement."

Threats to Freedom of Expression in the United Kingdom is obtainable (free) from Article 19 International Centre on Censorship, 90 Borough High Street, London SE1 1LL, telephone 071 403 4822.



£20,000.

By way of explanation, Mrs Whitehouse said that the journey to Broadcasting House had been very stressful. She was exhausted, and during the interview she blacked out for a short time. It was after coming round that she made the defamatory statement.

"I am quite certain that in more normal circumstances I would never have made such a remark", she said.

Nothing daunted by the High Court ruling, Mrs Whitehouse has embarked on yet another of her crusades. This time it is the Campaign to Outlaw Pornography.

In one of her autobiographical works, Mary Whitehouse records that for many years she was associated with the Moral Re-Armament movement. One of MRA's four "Absolute" ethical precepts is "Absolute Honesty".

Youth and Religion

Two recent surveys show that Britain's young people are ambivalent in their attitude to religion.

Young Britain - a Survey of 18-34 Year Olds, carried out by MORI for *Readers' Digest*, found that although over half in that age group believe in God, only eight per cent attend religious worship. And while 54 per cent believe in heaven, only 34 per cent believe in hell.

Although 32 per cent believe that abortion is wrong, the proportion of those who are opposed to scientific experimentation of human embryos has fallen from 56 per cent two years ago to 31 per cent. Twelve per cent thought that euthanasia is wrong.

A survey at Birmingham University revealed that the proportion of students who believe in "knowing the importance of God" has dropped from 13 per cent to eight per cent in the last year. Christian Student Action found that seven per cent of female students prayed or read the Bible, compared to five per cent of males.

A CSU representative said, "From the survey it is evident that students do not understand and accept God's role."

The Pope has again urged Italians to breed more prolifically. He made this appeal during a pastoral visit to northern Italy.