

# The Freethinker

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## CHARLES BRADLAUGH: CENTENARY TRIBUTE TO "A TRULY EMINENT VICTORIAN"

"Many of the leading figures of the great Victorian age may be judged by the way they dealt with Charles Bradlaugh", declared Michael Foot, MP, at a meeting in the National Liberal Club, London, on 30 January. It was organised by the National Secular Society on the hundredth anniversary of the death of its founder, the great parliamentarian and England's leading atheist.

"He was a giant himself; only the pygmies could not see it", said Michael Foot.

"It was Bradlaugh who first described Gladstone as the Grand Old Man. Gladstone had troubles enough to face in the Parliament of 1880. Bradlaugh's views on religion were detestable to him, and at first he was slow to grasp the issue of principle. but once he did, what titanic exertions he made in a cause offering him and his party no political profit.

"Heretofore, another inventor of the Grand Old Man sobriquet has been thought to be Bradlaugh's fellow Member, Henry Labouchere, 'the Christian Member for Northampton', as Labby was fond of calling himself. Labby might indeed deserve to be sent to the Clock Tower more than Bradlaugh. He could be offensively or flippantly blasphemous; he dismissed parliamentary oath-taking as so much mumbo-jumbo. But somehow Victorian England did not comprehend his accent.

"Bradlaugh on the other hand, was one of their own, a mighty evangelical orator, a massive amateur self-made forensic brain, an exponent of rationalism, who emerged from the wilderness with an aura of locusts and wild honey.

"He was in earnest, and the pious nation trembled

at what works of the devil he might perpetrate if once he took his seat in the Commons. The issue, said the Lord Salisbury of the time, is 'whether the State shall be atheistic or not.'

"Not that all Bradlaugh's enemies were quite so sombrely devout. Lord Randolph Churchill disguised himself as the Victoria conscience, but managed to combine this mission with a more secular aim - to upset 'the old goat', Sir Stafford Northcote, the Tory leader in the Commons who showed himself so feeble in assailing the 'evil and moonstruck' Gladstone. This was Lord Randolph's moment, and it is fascinating to observe how much he owed to Bradlaugh as his foil.

"However, Bradlaugh and Gladstone could have dealt with Randolph all right. Bradlaugh dismissed him as 'a rowdy and drunken nobleman' and Gladstone remarked that 'real vulgar abuse invariably emanated from scions of the higher aristocracy'. Lord Randolph at the head of the party of landlords and brewers could hardly have led an effective Christian crusade against Gladstone for long."

Most politicians at the time did not realise that a more formidable surreptitious force than the "rowdy and drunken" Lord Randolph Churchill was ranged against Bradlaugh.

"The real history of those times", said Michael Foot, "shows that it was the vote of the Irish Nationalists in the House of Commons which was thrown against Bradlaugh and which dictated the long-drawn struggle. History confirms also that even the proud Parnell was forced to abandon his

(continued inside back page)



# The Freethinker

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Vol 111 No 2      CONTENTS      February 1991

CHARLES BRADLAUGH: CENTENARY TRIBUTE TO "A TRULY EMINENT VICTORIAN"	17
NEWS AND NOTES Nicolas Walter	18
God in the Gulf; Sacks Attacks; Rushdie Recants	
CHARLES KNOWLTON'S <i>FRUITS OF PHILOSOPHY</i> Ellen Winsor	22
ROBERT TRESSELL, FREETHINKER Ruth Blewitt	24
BOOK REVIEWS	26
Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness Reviewer: Daniel O'Hara	
Stick it up Your Punter! The Rise and Fall of the Sun Reviewer: Ted McFadyen	
Words as Weapons Reviewer: Colin McCall	
MISCELLANEOUS Freethinkers and the War: Humanist Peace Council Formed, 21; Letters, 28; Islamic Rapist Jailed, 29; Videos a Threat to Godliness, Says Rabbi, 30; Obituary, 30	

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# GUEST NEWS

## GOD IN THE GULF

The Gulf War which finally broke out on 17 January is being fought on both sides by more than a million men (and women). It is also being fought on both sides by God, or rather a trinity of gods — Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. A similar phenomenon during the First World War prompted John Squire to write a little poem called *The Dilemma*:

God heard the embattled nations sing and shout:  
*God strafe England!* and *God save the King!*,  
God this, God that, and God the other thing —  
"Good God," said God, "I've got my work cut out!"

Things are even more difficult for the god(s) of battles this time. The Middle East today resembles the situation in the *Iliad*, where every clash between Greeks and Trojans is accompanied by a debate on Mount Olympus between rival factions of deities, or in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the fighting waits for the human commander to consult the divine military adviser. This is fun for gods and fine in myths, but it is quite another matter for human beings in the real world.

The Muslim world has long been torn apart by religious as well as national and personal rivalries. The Wahhabis who rule Saudi Arabia and the Shi'ites who rule Iran have shown all too clearly what good old-fashioned religious fanaticism can do, and various fundamentalists are wreaking havoc from Algeria to Pakistan. The Ba'athists who rule both Syria and Iraq were originally secularist as well as nationalist and socialist; but the Iraqi regime invoked Islam during the long war with Iran, and Saddam Hussein now pretends to be not only a political but also a spiritual leader and attempts to make this not only a political but also a religious war, with Allah fighting on his side. The Palestinians and many other Arabs agree, but the Alliance against Iraq includes many Muslim states — not only Saudi Arabia and the Emirates but also Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and so on — so Allah is also fighting on the other side. Jordan is squeezed between the two, and Libya and Iran are looking on from outside. Saudi Arabia, which bans the practice of all non-Muslim religions, including Christianity —

# S AND NOTES

NICOLAS WALTER

as described by Govind Deodhekar in the January *Freethinker* — finds itself in the awkward position of being threatened by a Muslim army and defended by predominantly Christian armies. Just to confuse the issue further, there are many Christians in Iraq even among Sadaam's supporters, so their God is also fighting on both sides.

The effects of this situation are likely to be catastrophic throughout the Muslim world. They are already serious in Britain, where many Muslims have divided loyalties and are now facing the prospect of choosing between their adopted country and their religious brethren under attack from it. Many Muslim organisations and individuals here have openly opposed war on religious grounds, and at the same time there have been more attacks on Muslims in several places. One effect of the war in this country, as in so many others, is going to be deeper racial and religious division.

The Christian world — still able to point to Northern Ireland if anyone accuses it of religious indifference — is witnessing a huge growth of Protestant fundamentalism in the forms of mission activity overseas and of Charismatic and Evangelical revival at home. The main Evangelical figure in the English-speaking world is the American preacher Billy Graham, who has been the unofficial chaplain to successive born-again Christian Presidents of the United States. So it was no surprise to hear that George Bush spent the last night before the attack on Iraq with Billy Graham. Their joint prayers must have been as remarkable as those of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger on the day of Nixon's forced resignation. God can certainly move in mysterious ways.

Bush and other American leaders have repeatedly emphasised the religious dimension of the war. Even much more moderate Christian leaders have caught the war fever. In this country, for example, the "Thought for the Day" item in the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme on the morning the war began was given by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who said it is a just war; the same item on the following morning was given by the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Basil Hume, who also said it is a just war. Many other leaders from many denominations have agreed. To be fair, though, some others have disagreed —

including the Pope himself. So not only does the Christian God — like Allah — fight on both sides in the war, but he also opposes it. Some religious and political leaders have called for a national day of prayer, like the ones held in the two world wars — surely an unfortunate precedent. No wonder some Muslims have already said the Gulf War is a Crusade — how soon before some Christians say so too?

As for Israel, which hasn't openly joined the Alliance against Iraq but has been attacked by Iraq, the war presents potentially the most critical phase in the Jewish struggle to recover the whole of the homeland promised by Jehovah in the Bible, at a time when the Palestinian struggle to recover part of the same homeland is intensifying and when an increasing number of Jewish immigrants are arriving from the collapsing Soviet empire. But even Jehovah isn't quite sure about the war, since many ultra-Orthodox Jews oppose the use of force to establish Zion — so he may favour restraint, at least for a time. Meanwhile some ultra-Orthodox Jews are reported to have laid a divine curse on Saddam Hussein with spells from the Cabbala!

The prospects in this situation are not promising for either gods or men. Lebanon, which tried to survive by balancing all the Muslim and Christian and Jewish and other rivalries, has been virtually destroyed by them, and its fate seems all too likely to be followed by the rest of the Middle East. Some Christian fundamentalists still believe in the final battle between good and evil which will destroy the kingdoms and bring the end of the world. Let us remember that "Armageddon", the place chosen by the Book of Revelation for this event, is Megiddo, a town in northern Palestine, or southern Lebanon, or greater Israel or Syria. Let us pray, indeed — or rather, as Jehovah says in the Book of Isaiah, "let us reason together".

## SACKS ATTACKS

The December *Freethinker* commented briefly on the first Reith Lecture by Johnathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi Elect. The six lectures were broadcast on BBC radio during November and December, and were published in the last issues of the *Listener* and then in an expanded form as a book, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age* (Weidenfeld, £9.95).

Sacks presents several theses: that this is still a religious society, despite the process of secularisation, because our "moral ecology" derives from

from biblical doctrine; that the decline of religion has led to a "demoralisation of discourse", because morality must be based on agreed values which only religion can provide; that the family is the basis of social morality, because it alone stands between the individual and the state; that pluralism is a new and dangerous doctrine, because it erodes the common values of a society; that fundamentalism is not the answer, because it fails to recognise the inescapable changes in the modern world; and that surviving religion is the basis of the "community of communities" in the modern world.

All these theses are open to obvious objections, and there were occasional voices of dissent in the press (including letters in the *Listener* from representatives of the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association), but there has been no proper debate on Sacks' fallacies in any medium — only a typically unsatisfactory discussion on Radio 4 on 27 January. In the context of current debate about "impartiality" on radio and television, as manifested in the Broadcasting Act of 1990, it is notable that impartiality still doesn't extend to religion and that the BBC still preserves the primacy of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

## RUSHDIE RECANTS

On Christmas Eve (of all days) it was announced that Salman Rushdie had signed a statement prepared by "moderate" Muslim leaders who have been trying to mediate in the *Satanic Verses* case, in which he acknowledged the basic doctrines of Islam, apologised for the offence caused by the book, and agreed that there should be no paperback edition or further translations of it.

This must be seen as a victory for the Muslim fundamentalists who have campaigned against the book and also threatened his life, and as a defeat for the various people who have defended it and him; but comment has generally been muted by a recognition of his terrible predicament, living in hiding under police protection from the death sentence for nearly two years — though one member of the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie (Francis Bennion) publicly resigned with the bitter comment that Rushdie "isn't worth defending". Daniel Easterman (another member of the Committee) contributed an eloquent article to *The Independent* (31 December), defending Rushdie, attacking his persecutors, and concluding: "The Rushdie issue has passed beyond the bounds of a debate about free speech. It has

become a test for the freedom of the individual conscience itself."

The episode painfully recalls the forced confessions and conversions of the bad old days of religious tyranny — though at least Rushdie hasn't actually withdrawn his book — and future developments may be even more unpleasant.

The International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie held an emergency meeting on 2 January and renewed its support for his continued right to express his opinions, whatever they may be; and this will be the position of most freethinkers. But we can't help regretting his move — both in theory, because we repudiate Islam as much as any other dogmatic religion; and in practice, because we doubt whether it will do any good. Rushdie used to say that he has a "God-shaped hole", which must have been uncomfortable; he now seems to have a hole-shaped God, which can't be much comfort. And his enemies immediately repeated the death sentence on him and demanded the complete withdrawal of *The Satanic Verses*; Nicolas Walter, writing on the subject in the *Times Literary Supplement*, quoted Rudyard Kipling's poem *Dane-geld*:

And that is called paying the Dane-geld:

But we've proved it again and again.

That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld

You never get rid of the Dane.

Incidentally, as part of the moves preceding his conversion, Rushdie had said on television (in the BBC2 *Late Show* on 26 November) that he favoured the replacement of the blasphemy law with a law against incitement to religious hatred. Again, he has the right to his own opinion, but he is surely wrong. As he added, such a law wouldn't apply to *The Satanic Verses*; and it is hard to see what it would cover in theory and how it would work in practice, or indeed what good it would do — any more than such a law has done in Northern Ireland since 1970.

Christian fundamentalists are not the only potty religionists. In Saudi Arabia the cross sign is so offensive to the Islamic faithful that the authorities destroyed a series of school books because of the title, *Arithmetic + Algebra + Geometry*. In one area it was decided that signs indicating a crossroads should be replaced by others warning of a roundabout. This has resulted in more accidents than before a sign of any kind was displayed.

# Freethinkers and the War: Humanist Peace Council Formed

Of course freethinkers disagree about the Gulf War, as about most issues, the most pacific being appalled by Iraqi tyranny and aggression and the most belligerent being concerned about the risks of the fighting spreading; but the prevailing view so far seems to be one of opposition to military action by either side, and many humanists have been taking part in the frequent protests and demonstrations against the war.

In this context the Humanist Liaison Committee (including representatives of the National Secular Society, the Rationalist Press Association, the British Humanist Association, the South Place Ethical Society, and the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association) issued a statement opposing the drift to war on the eve of the deadline of 15 January. A Humanist Peace Council has been formed by active humanists involved in the opposition to the Gulf War in order to express the views of the many people who oppose war on humanist grounds. Its members include leading figures in national and local humanist organisations and magazines, but they are all acting in their individual capacities, and it makes no claim to represent the views of any other organisation or indeed of the humanist movement as a whole.

The HPC issued a statement on its aims and attitude to war and peace. An extract is given below.

"Humanists are not necessarily pacifists, and they disagree about war and peace as about other issues — as all political and religious groups do. Most of us recognise the violence can often be the only resort, and that war is sometimes inevitable and may even be justifiable. But a large number of active humanists are strongly opposed to the present war, and indeed any war which is fought with modern weapons on a large scale and which is almost certain to make a situation worse rather than better.

"Our opposition to war is based on pragmatic rather than dogmatic grounds — the logical argument that means should be proportional to ends, the utilitarian argument that actions should increase general happiness rather than general unhappiness, and the consequentialist argument that actions should be judged by their probable consequences. We have the right to die for our principles but not to kill for them, and certainly not to kill thousands or millions of people and risk destruction of the world. It is hard to think of any recent or likely war which has

done more good than harm.

"Our opposition to the present war does not mean that we are anti-British or anti-American or anti-Zionist; nor do we favour the victory of Iraq or the survival of Saddam Hussein or any other dictator; nor do we reject the authority of the United Nations or the world community. It means that we prefer diplomatic negotiation to the use of force, economic sanctions to military action, local solutions to the risk of world war, talking to fighting.

"The Humanist Peace Council will attempt to voice the specifically humanist opposition to war in general and to the Gulf War in particular, by gathering facts, seeking options, joining discussions, issuing statements, supporting appropriate actions, and circularising its members and supporters. It will act so far as possible in cooperation with the existing humanist organisations and the many other organisations involved in the peace movement, it will avoid negative sectarianism, and it will pursue positive solutions."

The Humanist Peace Council is open to humanists who oppose war and to opponents of war who have no religion. It welcomes members (who will be named) and supporters (who will not be named) and also donations. It is run by a small informal committee, which held its inaugural meeting on 4 February 1991.

Humanist Peace Council committee members include Nicolas Walter, c/o Rationalist Press Association; Meredith MacArdle, c/o British Humanist Association; Terry Mullins, c/o National Secular Society; Norman Bacrac, c/o South Place Ethical Society. They may be contacted via their organisations or the editor of *The Freethinker*.

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Tony Cabaleza, leader of a group of religious fanatics in the Philippines known as the Family of God, has been killed in a gun battle with the police. They were trying to arrest him after he had beheaded a man who refused to join the Family.

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Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs is faced with a delicate and expensive problem. It has to find £2 million to pay for the circumcision of Soviet Jews who have arrived in the Promised Land with their willies intact.

# Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*

ELLEN WINSOR

A gravestone in Sheffield General Cemetery records the deaths of Margaret Green, aged 45, on 31 December 1869, and her ten children. They were John, died 16 February 1846 aged three years and eight months; Harriet, died 24 September 1848 aged seven months; George, died 25 October 1849 aged five years; Thomas, died 13 February 1851 aged thirteen months; Sarah Ann, died 13 December 1851 aged six weeks; Mary Ann, died 17 January 1854 aged seven years and nine months; Ada Blanche, died 15 April 1863 aged nine months; Albert Victor, died 11 February 1866 aged one year and eleven months; Rosetta, died 28 April 1866 aged five months; Augustus, died 17 April 1867 aged six days. It was in an environment of mass ignorance and in face of persecution by Church and State that the (mainly secularist) pioneers laid the foundations of the birth control movement in Victorian England. In this article, the first of a series on Birth Control Tracts of the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century, Ellen Winsor recalls the prosecution of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant for publishing and selling a modestly-priced work on contraception.

The present writer has argued before that freethinkers need to take care of their history. The truth is that those who promote the unpopular ideas of one epoch find that these ideas have become acceptable (or even commercial) a few generations later. The story of freethinkers' involvement with the dissemination of birth control literature at the end of the nineteenth century, makes this point only too well once we recognise that we now live in the age of television advertisements for the condom.

Yet where is the recognition for this pioneering work? I would suggest that readers will have to travel far to find it. I have seen important work by Marie Stopes in the inter-war years alluded to from time to time. But in fact much of the spade work had been done by then, and whilst Stopes's respectability may have been questioned, her liberty was secure. Less was true of the small band of secularists who, in the last years of the nineteenth century, risked their incomes, their liberty and much else too in the attempt to promote knowledge of contraceptive techniques amongst the masses of the British population.

Charles Knowlton (1800-1850) was an American deist who took his medical degree in 1824. The first American edition of *Fruits of Philosophy* was

published in 1832 and appeared in many subsequent editions in both the United States and the United Kingdom. It was first published here by James Watson, the radical publisher, in 1833. For the next 44 years it achieved steady, if unspectacular, sales.

*Fruits of Philosophy* is divided into four chapters. The first is concerned with the "political and social" reasons for limiting population growth. Knowlton includes some awesome predictions of future population growth and cites Malthus's doctrine of population. The second chapter forms the greater part of the pamphlet and is entitled "On Generation". It deals with the process of conception, description of the female organs, menstruation and the development of pregnancy. The last two chapters, "On Promoting and Checking Conception" and "Remarks on the Reproductive Instinct", were the most controversial because they included descriptions of the various methods of contraception. These are "entire withdrawal"; the baudruche, consisting of "very delicate skin" used by the male; and "introducing into the vagina, previous to connection, a very delicate piece of sponge, moistened with water, to be immediately afterwards withdrawn by means of a very narrow ribbon attached to it"; the latter more effective if "moistened with some liquid which acted chemically upon the semen." It emerges that Knowlton's own favoured method is "syringing the vagina immediately after connection, with a solution of sulphate of zinc, of alum, pearlash, or any salt that acts chemically on the semen."

By 1876 the plates for the pamphlet were in the hands of Charles Watts, secularist publisher and one of Charles Bradlaugh's closest co-workers. It seems that he was handling about 1,000 copies a year and his retail outlets included that of one Henry Cook, a Bristol bookseller. Cook's role in the affair is frequently confused, if not ignored. It seems that on taking delivery of copies of *Fruits* he altered them by adding his own title page and including some further "interesting" illustrations. These "improvements" led to a price rise from sixpence to one shilling and eightpence. For the previous sale of similar materials Cook had already served two years in prison. On 8 December 1876, Cook was summonsed, and immediately wrote to Watts asking for advice and money, but failed to mention the alterations he had made.

Watts determined to assist Cook and travelled to Bristol for the trial. Cook was convicted and sentenced to two years and Watts discovered the true nature of his operation. Cook's conviction was followed by Watts's arrest. At this point Charles Watts seemed to determine on a tactical retreat on the grounds that this unprofitable and out-dated pamphlet was not worth the trouble and the risk to what was a flourishing publishing business, allied to the National Secular Society which was in its heyday. He had already suspended sales and now informed Charles Bradlaugh, President of the NSS, and his co-worker Annie Besant, that he intended to withdraw it from publication. A furious argument ensued, which was to split the freethought movement for many years. In February 1877, Watts pleaded "in point of law guilty", and was discharged on £500 recognisances. He eventually escaped with having to pay only £25 costs.

While Watts retreated Bradlaugh and Besant decided to test the legality of publishing Knowlton's work. They established their Freethought Publishing Company and purchased premises at 28 Stonecutter Street, just off Fleet Street in London. They reprinted and published their own 56-page edition of the work and included their own preface stating their reasons for doing so. They also informed the police that at a specified time they would attend the shop and sell the pamphlet in person. There were crowds in the street when they opened and 500 copies were sold in the first twenty minutes. The customers included a number of policemen. Bradlaugh and Besant were duly arrested and summonsed and their case came to court in June 1877, three months after the launch of their edition. In the meantime, no fewer than 125,000 copies were sold.

The trial began at the London Guildhall, but after a couple of days Bradlaugh convinced the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Cockburn, that the questions of whether *Fruits of Philosophy* was a scientific work, or an obscene publication, ought to be decided by a judge and special jury. It was thus transferred to the Court of Queen's Bench and was tried before the Lord Chief Justice himself. The essence of the prosecution's case was not to deny the truth of what was written in the pamphlet. Rather it was to dispute whether *Fruits of Philosophy* was suitable for publication in a sixpenny pamphlet which anybody could read. To quote the Solicitor General: "I say that this is a dirty, filthy book, and that the test of it is that no human being would allow that book to lie on his table; no decently educated English husband would allow his wife to have it."

Bradlaugh and Besant both conducted their defence ably; and although Cockburn's summing up was very favourable to the defendants, the jury arrived at an ambiguous verdict: "We are unanimously of the opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motives in publishing it." Annie Besant understood this as: "Not guilty, but don't do it again".

A week later the defendants came up for judgement and insisted that they would continue on their sales. They were each sentenced to six months' imprisonment, fined £200, and ordered to enter into recognizances of £500 for two years. Execution of sentence was stayed pending an appeal which was heard in February 1878. This was on purely technical grounds and concerned the wording of the original indictment, but it was allowed and gave Bradlaugh and Besant what they wanted. They successfully sued the police for the return of the copies of *Fruits of Philosophy* which had been seized. These copies have an appeal in that the words "Recovered from the police" are stamped across them in red. The publication and sale of the pamphlet continued and although it seems that there may have been some risk from further prosecutions, based on a correctly worded indictment, this never occurred.

The case of *Fruits of Philosophy*, and Bradlaugh's and Besant's involvement with it, is thus vitally important in the history of the birth control movement. Their publication of the pamphlet, and their defence of the right to do so, ensured publicity for their cause and a huge circulation for the pamphlet. They also cleared the way for the publication and sale of subsequent and better literature on the same subject, in the new era of mass literacy. However it is worth noting that the pamphlet continued to be published by various freethinkers throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The last English edition I can find any record of appeared in 1898 although this included a new appendix containing observations on "modern developments".

Bradlaugh's and Besant's achievements were not without their price. They were both to be regarded as notorious amongst some sections of society and were marked down for special attention in the future. Charles Bradlaugh's persecution over his struggle to enter Parliament and Annie Besant's failure to retain custody over her daughter Mabel, when her estranged clergyman husband brought this issue to court, can both be viewed in this light.

# Robert Tressell, Freethinker

RUTH BLEWITT

Robert Tressell died 80 years ago, aged 41, alone and in acute poverty. Today, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* — his only novel — is chiefly valued for its social and political thought. It also includes much of interest to freethinkers and humanists.

At the time he wrote *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (RTP) Robert Tressell was living and working in Hastings, the Mugsborough of the novel. He worked as an ordinary housepainter, albeit one with many skills and great artistic talent. The book gives a graphic account of the conditions of working people, especially those in the building trade, during the early years of this century. Tressell wrote in the preface: "The work possesses at least one merit — that of being true. I have invented nothing. There are no scenes or incidents in the story that I have not either witnessed myself or had conclusive evidence of." The characters in the book are drawn from people he knew and his daughter, Kathleen, said that two of them, Owen and Barrington, "were a composite picture of Robert". Apart from a few recollections of family and friends, RTP is the only source of Tressell's thoughts and opinions; he left no other writing.

In one sense Tressell was not an ordinary working man who accepted the *status quo* without thought and who "knew his place". Indeed, he had read many influential writers — Dickens, Swift, Wendell Holmes, Ruskin, Morris and Blatchford among others. He pondered on the misery and injustice of his situation and understood the causes of privation and inequality, while analysing the structure of society and the place the established churches had in it.

Tressell rejected conventional religious teaching and, like many freethinkers before and after him, found it impossible to believe in a personal, all-powerful, all-loving and all-knowing god. He knew of the "inconsistencies, impossibilities, contradictions and absurdities contained in the Bible." Nor did he accept the Christian view of God the creator.

"If God didn't create the world, 'ow did it come 'ere?' demanded Slyme (a well-named, born-again Christian). 'I know no more about that than you do,' replied Owen. 'That is — I know nothing. The only difference between us is that you *think* you know... In fact, in the excess of your humility you think you know all about it. But really you know no more of these things than any other human being does; that is, you know *nothing*.'"

Tressell's daughter, Kathleen, who became a committed Christian in her late twenties, said: "He was an agnostic but surely lived the most Christian life I have ever come into contact with. He hated sham and hypocrisy and he loved children and all weak and helpless creatures. He suffered agonies when he contemplated their probable futures and his inability to alter them."

Tressell's view of himself was perhaps a little more forthright. Another well-named character, Crass, the under-foreman, declared: "Then there was that rotter Owen; there was a bright specimen for yer! An Atheist! Didn't believe in no God or Devil or anything else."

But Tressell's thoughts were not all negative and he had a fine humanist instinct. He valued frank discussions as a means of clarifying thought and, through talking with his fellow-workers, tried to instil a sense of human dignity and self-esteem. Although he understood that their schooling had not equipped them to think for themselves or to question their pathetic situation, he was rather impatient with his colleagues' lack of vision and their self-abasement. Owen says: "In the so-called Christian schools ... they were taught to order themselves reverently towards their betters and ... they had a vast amount of consideration for their betters and for the children of their betters but very little for their own children, for each other or for themselves."

In his biography of Tressell, *One Of The Damned*, Fred Ball wrote: "Such people as Robert, of course, challenge the very structure of class society simply by insisting on being treated as human beings." And by such insistence Tressell became known among employers as a trouble-maker.

Tressell had particular contempt for the social structure which condemned the destitute to the degradation of the workhouse and he felt great pity for the inmates. He dreaded ever being consigned to one himself. "Workhouses," said Fred Ball, "were a disgrace to the nation, to the Christian churches and to the medical profession." And Tressell, tragically, died in just such a place.

In RTP, there are many instances of kindness and compassion shown by Owen and Barrington — to the poor, the infirm, the unemployed, the abused and the misunderstood. For instance, on one occasion Owen found a poor, half-starved apprentice cleaning out paint pots in a freezing cellar. He was so enraged by the boy's condition and appearance that



he lit a huge fire of waste wood and then marched off to tell his employer just what he thought of him, thus risking his own dismissal.

Then there is the delightful and sensitive account, in chapter 53, of Barrington's meeting with a group of ragged children and how he played "Santa Claus" to them. Kathleen said of her father: "He was the kind of man who would give away the clothes off his back." And a friend added: "He would never watch anyone go without if he had anything and would help workmates laid off or having a rough time." As he had one of his characters say: "Don't do no 'arm to nobody. If you see a poor b... r wot's down on 'is luck, give 'im a 'elpin' 'and. Even if you ain't got no money you can say a kind word."

Tressell told a workmate that children should always be told the truth and Fred Ball wrote: "He (Tressell) remarks in the book (*RTP*) upon the almost unanimous opinion that whether it were true or not religion was a nice thing to teach children. He despised this dishonest attitude." In addition, Tressell ridiculed cant and smug piety such as: "I knows in my 'cart as all my sins is hunder the Blood" (whatever that may mean!).

Because he did not conform, Tressell met prejudice and some discrimination which he disliked, particularly when his daughter was affected. This is reflected in the novel.

"The indignation of the neighbours was increased when it became known that Owen and his wife were not Christians; then indeed everyone agreed that the landlord ought to be ashamed of himself for letting the top flat to such people... All he (the landlord) cared about was money; although he was a sincere Christian, he would not have hesitated to let the top flat to Satan himself, provided he was certain of receiving the rent regularly."

Tressell had no time for snobbishness or bigotry; he was no bigot himself in spite of the impression he may have given with some of his trenchant comments. One of his good friends was a Roman Catholic priest with whom he shared a "sentimental attachment to Ireland" and a love of languages. In *RTP*, chapter 45, where Barrington gives a description of his visionary Co-operative Commonwealth, he said: "Everybody will be perfectly free to enjoy their own opinions and to practise any religion they like; but no religion or sect will be maintained by the State." It seems that while regarding Jesus as in no way supernatural, Tressell valued much of the teaching in the New Testament. In the preface to *RTP* he wrote: "It will become evident that no attack is made on sincere religion." What he did attack, and in no uncertain

terms, was the hypocrisy and self-seeking of many who called themselves Christians.

However — to digress for a moment — one example of his own lack of prejudice was the love, care and patience he lavished on a huge mural which he was commissioned to design and paint, in his spare time, in a Hastings church. Ironically it was, perhaps, his (artistic) masterpiece. Fred Ball said: "The whole gave a marvellous effect of an illuminated manuscript, 20 feet high by 40 feet round the chancel."

While writing gently about those who sincerely tried to follow the teachings of their religion, Tressell was bitter about the hypocrisy of the employers who, while professing to be Christians, were both callous and condescending to their workpeople, whom they piously called brethren. They paid no attention to the men's working conditions but drove them and exploited them — Tressell's own artistic talents were often exploited. "These self-styled followers of Christ (who) made the accumulation of money the principal business of their lives" and who were not above lying, stealing and cheating their customers. The clergy were no better — Tressell regarded them as "loafers". "It was not necessary for (the Reverend Mr Belcher) to take his coat off; his part in life was not to help produce but to help devour the produce of the labour of others."

Tressell scornfully denounced the self-congratulatory way in which these "Christian wolves" made inadequate attempts to organize charity for the poor during the winter months, instead of addressing the causes of poverty. At a time when wages were depressed, particularly for building workers (all hourly paid) because of bad weather and few daylight hours, they humiliated the needy with all sorts of means tests and with "many quotations of Scripture and very little groceries." They sanctimoniously claimed to follow the doctrines of care and consideration to those in need and of duty to children, etc. But "they went to church and to chapel glittering with jewellery, their fat carcasses clothed in rich raiment and sat with smug smiles upon their faces... meantime all around them, in alley and slum... the little children became thinner and paler day by day for lack of proper food and went to bed early because there was no fire."

Robert Tressell was, without doubt, a courageous, humane and thoughtful man. The pity is that he did not live longer, in better health and easier circumstances. How much more he might have written.

**HOLY HORRORS: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS MURDER AND MADNESS**, by James A. Haught. Prometheus Books, £13.50

My first impression of this book, which runs to 233 pages, is that it is over-produced. With a maximum of 28 lines of print per page and an average of seven words per line, with 20 completely blank pages and as many with only a few lines of print, the layout resembles a volume of poems from a vanity press more than a serious offering from the world's largest humanist publisher.

Turning from form to content, one's impressions are confirmed by what turns out to be a very superficial survey of religious murder and atrocities, covering not only the Crusades, the Reformation and counter-Reformation, the Inquisition and witch-hunting, the religious wars of the European late Middle Ages, but also Islamic Jihad, the Shiite massacre of Baha'is, and modern religious massacres in India, Sudan, Lebanon, Ulster, Armenia, Russia, and elsewhere. The book contains 45 black-and-white illustrations; these include medieval woodcuts of Catholics burning Jews, reproductions of engravings and paintings of martyrdoms and massacres, photographs of piles of Jewish corpses at Buchenwald and those of followers of the Rev Jim Jones, over nine hundred of whom drank Kool-Aid laced with cyanide at their leader's command in the People's Temple commune at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. Apart from the recent photographs, most of the illustrations are rather dark and ill-defined.

The stories told in this book very much need to be told. But they need telling in a way which explores the psychology of religious fanaticism, something the author scarcely attempts. The Bibliography refers readers to works in which the themes of the 28 short chapters are more fully dealt with (and from which, it appears, the author derived his information). As a catalogue of religious murder and madness, *Holy Horrors* has its value. But a list of facts, often without any significant historical background and with no attempt at analysis, becomes tedious, and my final verdict on this book is, sadly, that it is pretentious and unsatisfactory. As a cheap pamphlet, it might have been justifiable. As it stands, however, I have to advise potential readers to save their money for something more worthwhile.

DANIEL O'HARA

**STICK IT UP YOUR PUNTER! THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SUN**, by Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie, Heinemann, £14.99

If you happened to glance out of your window one day in early November and noticed a number of people standing in the street, facing roughly in the direction of the Channel and bawling schoolboy insults at the French, you might have wondered what was going on. I have serious doubts whether anybody actually did this, but it would not be for lack of trying by the *Sun*, who attempted to set up this lunatic exercise as part of their characteristically deeply analytical and subtly diplomatic anti-French campaign, launched under the page one banner headline "Up Yours Delors" (the final "s" is presumably pronounced in true chauvinistic Sunpeak).

"We want you to tell Froggie Common Market chief Jacques Delors exactly what you think of him and his countrymen," cajoled the *Sun*. "The car-bashing from our millions of readers will wake the EC President up to the fact that he will *never* run our country."

You don't believe it? I assure you it's true, unlike many of the "stories" the *Sun* itself has printed over the years. (I have a copy of that day's issue to prove it.)

Readers of *The Freethinker* will not need reminding of the range of insidious prejudices enshrined in the pages of the *Sun*. You might then be forgiven for thinking that any book which sets out to chart the expression of these sentiments would be either unpleasant or boringly predictable. In fact it is nothing of the sort. *Stick it up Your Punter!*, though at times it reads rather breathlessly, is entertaining, highly readable, and gives all the indications of having been thoroughly researched, bearing in mind that much of the evidence was obtained from past and present *Sun* staff who — not surprisingly — "would only talk on a non-attributable basis."

For this reviewer, the most interesting chapters are those that deal with the *Sun*'s role in politics, and in particular the part it played in the last three general elections. From the beginning, proprietor Rupert Murdoch was well aware that the *Sun* was potentially very powerful politically. He and its first editor, Larry Lamb, were quick to identify the emergence of a new type of voter — the C2s —

# REVIEWS

fairly young, largely belonging to the skilled working class, primarily concerned with problems of housing, coloured immigration and prices, but not interested in international affairs.

Although they didn't know it, these C2s had been marked down, by the mid 1970s, as the new key to political power in Britain. As Chippindale and Horrie point out, "they were discovered to be overwhelmingly concentrated in about 80 constituencies, many of which were marginal. The classic examples were southern or Midlands light engineering towns like Banbury, Stevenage and Swindon. It was quickly realised that a small shift among the C2s could deliver a parliamentary majority to the party they favoured."

Who else was shrewd enough to recognise this fundamental political change, and the possible part the *Sun* might play in exploiting it? No prizes. It was our glorious former leader (what bliss to write that word "former"), Mrs Thatcher. At that time the *Sun* was located in an old building in Bouverie Street, just off Flect Street. The authors describe the "horrible conditions" in which people worked — "the building was cramped, dingy and smelly ... facilities were rudimentary. The toilets were foul and swarmed with bluebottles in the summer. The canteen was filthy and infested with rats ..."

But in the months leading up to the 1979 General Election, one regular visitor to this squalid milieu was — so the authors allege — Margaret Thatcher. The book paints a fascinating picture of the Tory Party leader, then in opposition, accompanied by Geoffrey Howe and the patrician Nicholas Ridley, dropping in on Larry Lamb's discussion sessions after the first edition had gone away in the early evening. Her courtship of Larry Lamb was masterly: "When the hacks asked questions Mrs Thatcher would answer inconclusively, or descend into deep and puzzled thought ... finally she would turn her eyes upwards towards Lamb and in a quiet, concerned voice ask: 'What do you think, Larry?' Lamb would puff up with pride and begin pompously expounding his thoughts on the country's problems. 'You know, that's marvellous,' she would say finally. 'If only I had people like you who really know how to communicate.'"

If the book has a fault, it is that the authors do not address themselves, with any thoroughness, to the question of whether the Tory tabloids actually have any lasting impact on people's attitudes. Did

the *Sun's* stridently jingoistic treatment of the Falklands campaign, with its historic banner headline, "Gotcha", actually influence its readers' feelings about the war? Are people more monarchistic as a result of the *Sun's* sycophantic treatment of selected Royals? For years academic researchers have given the opinion that the effect on most readers is negligible, that they look on these diversions as no more than entertaining fun.

But certainly as far as politics is concerned, a recent piece of research carried out by William Miller of Glasgow University, reported in the *Guardian* (which *Sun* editor Kelvin MacKenzie endearingly refers to as "the world's worst") indicates that this may not be so. In a book entitled *How Voters Change* (Clarendon Press), Miller and his team of researchers argue that the tabloids' role in a political context is "conversion", rather than "reinforcement not change" which had been previously supposed.

If this is true of political attitudes, then it may well be true for the other assumptions and "values" which the *Sun* and other tabloids eagerly attempt to promote. The implications are chilling. The *Sun* boasts a current circulation of just under four million, and a readership of 12 million. It is the biggest selling daily paper in the English language (well, a sort of English).

Chippindale's and Horrie's remarkable book is sub-titled "The rise and fall of the *Sun*." They give no convincing explanation of their use of the tantalising word "fall"; indeed, in spite of a few recent setbacks, circulation remains stubbornly high, although advertising revenue, as for most newspapers in the current recession, is declining.

But there is some hope on the horizon that the *Sun* may not last for ever. Rupert Murdoch's vast empire, News International, is in trouble. The past eighteen months have shown us that even apparently impregnable empires can collapse.

Here's hoping!

TED McFADYEN

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WORDS AS WEAPONS, by Paul Foot Verso, £9.95

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In December 1986, Paul Foot announced in the *Daily Mirror* that he was sending Christmas cards to thirteen people who he believed had been wrongly imprisoned. They were the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four and the three men convicted in 1979 of the murder of the newspaper boy Carl Bridgewater. And he stated the cases for their

innocence.

This is one of a number of essays on injustice in *Words as Weapons*, the aptly titled selection of his writings over the last decade, mainly from the *Socialist Worker*, the *London Review of Books* and the *Mirror*.

While political subjects dominate, with sections on Them (the Tories and the Establishment) and Us (Socialists), there are pieces on William Godwin, Shelley (from Foot's splendid book *Red Shelley*), Olive Schreiner (atheist feminist author of *The Story of an African Farm*), George Orwell, Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg. And there are tributes to Blair Peach and Ruth First.

There is a connection between the first three names. Godwin was Shelley's father-in-law, and Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) was greatly influenced by the poet. As the heroine of another of her

novels, *Undine*, says: "I used to read Shelley's poems. It was wicked, but I used to wish I could have seen him."

Of particular interest to freethinkers is "The Freedom to Ridicule", where Foot argues against the extension of the blasphemy laws to cover other religions, and pays tribute to Charles Bradlaugh and G.W. Foote, citing the latter's "magnificent three hour speech on behalf of free thought". And Paul quotes from his near namesake: "If a church cannot hold its own against such argument, let it go down...To prosecute us in the interests of a church is to prostitute whatever is sacred in the name of religion and to degrade what should be a great spiritual power into a mere police agent, a haunter of criminal courts and an instructor of Old Bailey special pleaders."

COLIN McCALL

## LETTERS

### AGREEING TO DIFFER

In a recent letter (*The Freethinker*, November 1990) Paul Pfalzner questions the intelligence and/or the motives of humanists who call Humanism their "religion", and in particular, of those who moved and passed the resolution on this subject at the International Humanist & Ethical Union (reprinted in Harry Stopes-Roe's letter, *The Freethinker*, June 1990). The Pfalzner letter represents just the kind of divisive baiting of other Humanists that the IHEU resolution was intended to try to end, and it had the support of all IHEU voting members except the organization which Mr Pfalzner represents.

He goes on to say that "Canadian humanists do not accept the notion that Humanism can in any way be considered a religion." I would wish readers of *The Freethinker* to know that Mr Pfalzner does not speak for all Canadian humanists, as he implies, whether they be members of his own organization or are among the vastly greater number who are not. Many like myself also avoid using the word "religion" but for different reasons, and would not wish to be associated with the arrogance and intolerance with which he questions the emotional basis of the humanism of others he does not understand.

This is not merely a linguistic dispute. At its root is the fact that human beings differ temperamentally, and like the rest of the population, individual atheists and freethinkers differ widely in the meaning they derive from their life experiences, not only in rational but also in emotional terms. Thus, for example, there are tens of thousands of non-theistic humanists in the Unitarian fellowships across North America, including Canada, many of whom are atheists who choose to call themselves "religious". Liberal organizations such as the American Humanist Association recognize a wide spectrum among their members on this issue, focusing instead on the essentials they have in common — foremost among which is a naturalist rather than a supernaturalist position as the basis for living.

Should not humanists also have in common a capacity

for the kind of tolerance among ourselves that we advocate for everyone else in the open societies towards which we strive?

DON PAGE, Editor International Humanist, Ontario, Canada.

### WRONG TARGETS?

I feel that *The Freethinker* fire should be directed against dogma and practices rather than the individual — against organisations such as the "pro-Life" lobby who see no contradiction in condoning preparations for mass extermination by nuclear weapons; and those who prosper financially by preying on the gullible.

One has the uncomfortable feeling that Mary Whitehouse is a convenient target for the porn merchants and media folk who think they should be free to propagate any material that makes money without irksome interference from anyone.

Attitudes towards soft and hard porn or whatever are not exclusively defined by religious faith. Rationalists closely concerned with human development have ethical values — often deeply felt — and are critical of the quality of medical productions as they affect social and cultural levels. I would wish to see differences of opinion on these matters freely discussed — by the consumers rather than the producers.  
HELEN YATES, London SW16

### A GROWING THREAT

1991 begins the decade of evangelism. As I understand it, this is a period during which the churches intend to do all that is in their power to recruit more adherents and thereby attempt to win back for themselves some of the influence that they enjoyed in past centuries.

Although we continually poke fun at Christian movements, we should not underestimate them. The Jews, the universal victims, have already seen the danger and can be heard preparing their defences. Islam has not been targeted. One may think that the churches lack the resolution to offer their "good news" to the followers of the Prophet for fear that such action might provoke unintended results. This

may be so; but I suggest that the Church's reticence has a more sinister origin. Some recent pronouncements on the Gulf crisis by Church leaders imply that Islam is seen by Christendom today not as an enemy nor even as a competitor for the soul of man but as a potential ally in the fight against materialism.

We in the secularist movement are in the direct firing line; and it is well that we fill our ammunition pouches now, for much that was won by our predecessors over the past two centuries is at risk. Above all we must present a united front. My particular worry concerns those among us who speak on many issues with the same voice as the bishops and would thus seem to be ripe for conversion. I would ask them in particular to be more assiduous to justify in secular terms what they are saying. By doing so they may succeed in convincing those that disagree with them. If not, they will at least provide a basis for discourse.

GLYN EMERY, London N1

### RELIGIOUS BLASPHEMERS

As far as I know, no one has drawn attention to the unquestionable fact that amongst blasphemous books, the Koran is blasphemous of Christians — particularly those of Roman Catholic persuasion — and to many Jews. The Koran is opposed to much of the Apostels' Creed, which has been described as the cornerstone of Christianity. Muslims specifically reject the Holy Trinity, claiming that the term, God the Father, is blasphemous, since to say that God is a father implies that he must have a wife. The Koran also denies the Resurrection, and explicitly rejects that the Crucifixion took place. The denigration of the role of the Virgin Mary is most upsetting to Catholics.

Other books such as the *Book of Mormon* and Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health* have been reviled by Christians and Muslims alike, but without death threats to the authors. The pseudo-democratic pleas for the widening of blasphemy laws to include all religions would therefore open an intractable can of worms which the proponents have never envisaged.

BENJAMIN BENSLEY, Sydney, Australia

### MASONS IN HIGH PLACES

I notice with interest that Chris Mullin, the Labour MP, says that Freemasons should be forced to "expose themselves" when applying for positions such as magistrates, police officers, etc.

I couldn't agree with him more. During the seven years I worked as a Magistrates' Clerk's assistant in a Magistrates' Clerk's office in the north of England, there were three different chairmen of the Magistrates' Court's Committee. All of them were Freemasons, as were all of the local solicitors and most of the high ranking police officers.

CHARLES STEWART, Crawley, West Sussex

### A THOUGHTFUL DEITY

Barbara Smoker's reference to "an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth" reminds me of the late Hesketh Pearson's story of a Eucharistic Conference in Dublin in the 1930s, at which a hellfire and brimstone preacher threatened his audience with this prospect, whereupon a little old lady plaintively asked: "How can I gnash my teeth when I haven't got any?" "Make no mistake about it", the priest bellowed back at her: "*Teeth will be provided*".

ANTONY GREY, London NW2

## Islamic Rapist Jailed

A senior leader in Britain of the Islamic Chistiah sect has been jailed for eleven years after a two-week trial at the Old Bailey. Gulaam Chisti, of Southall, west London, was found guilty of eight rapes and three indecent assaults.

One of his victims, a 15-year-old school girl, was taken to the high-ranking priest for "spiritual guidance" by her devout parents. The court was told that by performing a simple conjuring trick, Chisti convinced the parents that he could perform miracles.

Chisti said that the girl has a stomach sickness and must come to his home, which was also used as a mosque, for healing sessions. She was raped on the sixth visit. She did not wish to return, but her father insisted. He also arranged for her to take a holiday job with Chisti who committed further sexual assaults.

During the trial it was stated that as a Muslim priest Chisti was regarded as having spiritual powers and an ability to foresee the future. He could command total obedience and respect from his superstitious followers.

Chisti's activities were exposed when the girl told the deputy headmistress of her school what had happened.

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A politically influential and ultra-Orthodox rabbi has caused a furore in Israel by claiming that the massacre of Jews by the Nazis was God's punishment for breaking the Sabbath and eating pork. Rabbi Eliezer Schach told a group of seminary students: "Because of sins, the Almighty may bring another Holocaust upon us. The Almighty keeps a balance sheet of the world, and when sins become too many, he brings destruction. We don't know how long his patience holds out."

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America's National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces is facing a crisis because of rivalry between Chaplains of various denominations. The Rev Ralph Monsen, president of the NCMFAF, admitted that differences over religion are causing "a heck of a row". A recently retired chaplain told the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper: "The new corps of fundamentalist chaplains are publicly preaching intolerance, trying to recruit others to their faith and damning people to hell for not believing as they do." As in Britain, taxpayers in the United States foot the bill for chaplaincy services.

## Videos a Threat to Godliness, Says Rabbi

Rabbi Henock Padwa, leader of the extremely religious Union of Hebrew Congregations, has published an open letter instructing his flock to get rid of videos and video recorders.

The letter, which was published in an Orthodox newspaper, declared that the holding of videos "opens the way for untold damage to godliness and to the education of our children. We are joining the call of rabbis in Israel and abroad ...

"From now on no one will use a video camera at weddings. Houses without videos will prosper and have blessings and bring about the redemption of the whole of Israel."

Most of Rabbi Padwa's followers are based in the Stamford Hill area of north London. Some of them have criticised him for being *too liberal*.

## End the Indignity of a Living Death

A committee of doctors and lawyers from the Institute of Medical Ethics has called on medical organisations to make a public statement that severely brain-damaged children and accident victims should be allowed to die. Dr Elliot Shinebourne, a member of the committee, says: "By making a forthright statement, we hope it will help doctors who face this decision for the first time."

The Institute estimates that around 600 "vegetative patients" are born or result from illness and accidents every year. There can be up to 1,500 hospital patients who are capable of little activity other than breathing. Feeding by tubes can enable some to survive in this condition for up to thirty years.

The committee says it is difficult to see how prolonged survival in a non-sentient and undignified state can be in the best interests of the patient. It is particularly distressing for the patient's relatives and friends.

The religious "life at any price" lobby has expressed strong opposition to the committee's proposal.

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A Rossendale, Lancashire, manufacturer of black pudding has been told that he cannot supply it to servicemen in the Gulf. A spokesman for the Gulf Help Line said: "Black pudding contains pork and that might offend Muslims."

## OBITUARY

GEORGE VALE

George Vale, who died at his home in Burgess Hill, Sussex, last month, was a dedicated and active worker for the secular humanist cause. Aged 67, he had been ill for several years, but nevertheless participated in activities until recently.

He was a member of the National Secular Society and a warm supporter of *The Freethinker*. But George Vale's main sphere of work for the movement was in the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Over the years he held virtually every office in the Group, including those of vice-president and honorary treasurer. For three years he served on the Advisory Council of BBC Radio Brighton.

He faced his last illness with much fortitude, cared for with great devotion by his wife Florrie, who shared his interest in the secular humanist movement. There was a large gathering of relatives, friends and former colleagues at the secular committal ceremony which took place at Woodvale Crematorium, Brighton, on 25 January.

*Professor James Sang, president of Brighton and Hove Humanist Group, writes:* George Vale's last official duty for the Group was as chairman of the annual dinner in November. Although in considerable pain, he made this happy, cheerful occasion as he had so often done before.

At these events George told his outrageous jokes and took great pleasure in reading his annual "letter to Mrs T" in which he pointedly exposed her lack of humanity and the absurdity of her market economies as they affect ordinary people. That piece of jesting reflected his serious commitment as a socialist and trade unionist, as well as his humanist sympathies.

The Brighton and Hove Humanist Group will miss George's acute contributions to their meetings and his willingness to put the humanist cause to outside bodies, including appearances on radio and television. The committee will also find it hard to replace someone who did so much detailed work for the Group during the past quarter of a century or so, all with enthusiasm and a wholehearted commitment.

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.

# EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 3 March, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. A speaker from the Campaign Against Repression in Iran.

**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.

**Leeds and District Humanist Group.** Swarthmore Education Centre, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Tuesday, 12 March, 7.30 pm. Alistair Mason: The Psychology of Religious Relief.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 28 February, 8 pm. Public Meeting. Subject: Religious Education in Lewisham.

**London Student Skeptics.** Room 3c, University of London Union Building, Malet Street, London WC1. Monday 25 February and Monday 11 March at 7.30 pm. Public meetings.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 21 March, 7.30 pm. Ruth Blewitt: Robert Tressell and The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists.

**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, 13 March, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Robert Bridge: Humanism in Europe.

**Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

Speakers include

BARRY MORSE  
COLIN McCALL  
BARBARA SMOKER

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

Saturday, 13 April, 6.30 pm for 7 pm

Tickets £17.50. Vegetarians catered for  
(advance notice essential)

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



(continued from front page)

original pro-Bradlaugh sympathies by the power of the Irish hierarchy — a melancholy case of ingratitude, since Bradlaugh has been a champion of Irish freedom.”

Michael Foot told the meeting that Bradlaugh remains a truly eminent Victorian.

“He won real victories for freedom, creating for the purpose an atmosphere of free debate which would rarely be allowed to penetrate radio and television today.”

Renée Short, Labour MP for Wolverhampton North-East from 1964 until 1987, said that Charles Bradlaugh was, with Annie Besant, “a campaigner for a measure very close to my heart, namely the availability of free contraception.

“It is thanks to him and to another battle he fought and won that I and others have been able to affirm on taking our seats in Parliament instead of taking the oath and swearing on the Bible, that my husband could affirm when he was appointed a Justice of the Peace and that witness in Court can affirm.

“Though not a rabble rouser, Bradlaugh roused enough people to make him politically memorable. He dared to defy the Government and the elite of his day. And ‘he was an atheist, who if he did not shout his unbelief from every housetop in the realm, certainly used most of the Town Halls and market squares’, to quote from the biography by David Tribe. This was unforgivable

“His campaign for birth control, of course, stirred up bitter enmity from the religious groups and even among his freethinker friends. He became the victim of probably the most notorious obscenity prosecution of the 19th century. Attacked in the law courts and in the press, he was not deterred and defended himself skilfully.

“His public advocacy of contraception began in 1860 when he was just starting publication of *The National Reformer*. He said that as long as men were poor they could not know what civil and religious liberty is.”

Mrs Short said that Bradlaugh’s interest in the need for birth control “was one of real practicality.

“The overcrowded homes, the enormously high infant mortality rate, the lack of real health care for the working class and the effect on women of all these factors, the nefarious campaign for late marriages as the answer for large families, together with the problems of prostitution — all engaged his

attention.

"He proposed the formation of a Malthusian League to promote the discussion and recognition of the Malthusian doctrines. This stirred up great opposition and caused a breakaway from the Secular Party. What strikes me very forcibly is that Bradlaugh, like most reformers, was always plunged into one row after another with prominent figures of the day."

Recalling the trials of Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant and Edward Truelove for publishing birth control pamphlets, Mrs Short said these trials "made an electrifying impression on the public and spread information on contraception. Millions of people learnt about methods of contraception.

"Looking back on this remarkable man's remarkable career, on his campaigns against the sweat shops, for widows, for many of the casualties of life, the drug addicts, alcoholics and cripples and of course for contraception, there are very few of his political passions and aspirations that are not still relevant, Secular education, penal reform, affirmation instead of the oath, sex education, devolution, a multi-racial Commonwealth, equal rights, for women, family planning and abortion — all are relevant today.

"I shall never forget him, for it was largely thanks to him that I was able to introduce — albeit unsuccessfully — a Bill to Amend the Abortion Law soon after I was elected to Parliament and later to serve on the Standing Committee that placed the 1967 Act on the Statute Book."

Renée Short said Bradlaugh is significant for our generation still, "above all for his campaign for freedom of speech and freedom of assembly without which no political campaign can succeed. Let us never forget him."

Jim Herrick, editor of *New Humanist* and a former secretary of the National Secular Society, described Bradlaugh as "the greatest 19th-century, working-class freethought campaigner.

"Two of his nicknames were 'Thorough', written on his grave, and 'Iconoclast', which he used as a pseudonym during the early part of his life. He was combative, energetic, forceful, litigious and determined.

"He was also a powerful orator, an indefatigable editor and a persuasive writer. Through his journalism, litigation and parliamentary career, he brought secularism before a wide number of the public.

"How clear he was on the right to challenge

religion, 'the right and duty of individual thought and judgement'. Also how clear he was that freethinkers, contrary to criticisms, do not claim to know everything."

After a long struggle to take his seat in the House of Commons as the Member for Northampton, Bradlaugh was worn out physically and mentally.

"But during his remaining five years", said Jim Herrick, "he was a very active parliamentarian, taking up the rights of labourers, miners, the Irish and the Indians, becoming known as the Member for India.

"Why do we celebrate him today? We should not forget the continuing need to criticise Christianity in an age of increasing evangelism, and remembering that President Bush spent the evening with Billy Graham before starting the Gulf War."

Jim Herrick concluded by quoting Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* article in defence of atheism against those who said it was negative:

"Tell the backwoodsman, who, with axe in hand, hews at the trunks of sturdy trees, that this is destructive work, and he will answer: 'I clear the grounds that plough and reaping-book may be used by and by.' And I answer that in many men — and women too, alas! — thought is prison-bound, with massive chains of old church welding; that human capacity for progress is hindered, granted in by prison bars, priest-wrought and law-protected; that the good wide field of common humanity is over-crowded with the ranks of vast creed frauds, the outgrowth of ancient mythologies ... Atheist, without God, I look to humankind for sympathy, for love, for hope, for effort, for aid."

Professor the Earl Russell (Conrad Russell) spoke of Charles Bradlaugh's pioneering work as an advocate of birth control. He also referred to the importance of his campaign for the right of affirmation.

The audience included a number of Bradlaugh's descendants. Basil Bradlaugh Bonner read tributes to his great-grandfather by contemporaries such as Bernard Shaw, Moncure Conway, T.P. O'Connor and Annie Besant.

Barbara Smoker, president of the NSS, was in the chair.

Earlier in the day, the Mayor of Northampton, Councillor G.P. Howes, commemorated the centenary of Charles Bradlaugh's death by placing a wreath on the statue of the town's most distinguished Member of Parliament.