

# The Freethinker

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## SPUC NASTIES THREATEN TO PHOTOGRAPH YOUNG BROOK CENTRE VISITORS

Plans to open a Brook Advisory Centre in Belfast are proceeding, despite a campaign of threats and vilification by churches and religious pressure groups. The contraception and counselling service for young people is being set up by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in an attempt to reduce the high number of illegitimate babies born to teenagers.

Brook representative Alison Hadley said: "The vast majority of our work is preventing unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. Young people in Northern Ireland are clearly sexually active, which is demonstrated by the level of teenage pregnancies."

The anti-Brook campaign is being led by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) and the Rev Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church. Dr Margaret White, vice-president of SPUC, told a meeting of a "secure way" to stop the Brook clinic from operating. She advised SPUCites to "have a regular rota of people with cameras to photograph those who go in".

Another anti-Brook lobbyist suggested that photographs of young clients should be displayed in shop windows. This tactic, widely used by anti-abortion fanatics in the United States, was described by Alison Hadley as "shameful".

Stella Cunningham, who is Brook manager in Belfast, said it was disappointing that young people seeking information so they can protect themselves against unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases "are going to be harassed and abused by people who really represent nobody but themselves".

The Rev David McIlveen, of the Free Presbyterian Church, denied they would be harassing or abusing Brook clients. He admitted, however, that the church had two hundred volunteers ready to picket the clinic when it opened. This would be done on a rota basis, involving about ten pickets at a time. They intended to force Brook to close its Belfast Centre.

Although the Free Presbyterian Church will picket the clinic, the Rev Ian Paisley, its Moderator, has distanced himself from the Catholic-dominated SPUC and its tactics. He told a press conference: "We will not be taking photographs of anyone."

"We are saying to teenagers the way to solving your problems is not by breaking God's law."

There were rowdy scenes at a public meeting when the Health and Social Services Board confirmed its decision to provide financial backing for the Brook clinic. Opponents made a last ditch attempt to delay support for the clinic which a SPUC spokesman said "would undermine family life".

Dr Gilbert Scally, the board's director of public health, defended their decision to invite Brook to Belfast.

He said: "It is important to have such a service for young people. They have different needs to older people in terms of contraception. They need more counselling time. It is important not to have it in an institutional setting."

"You're not expecting young people to go into their local family planning clinic, because they may find themselves in there with their mother, aunt or other relatives. They are not happy in that environment because of the confidentiality issue."

"Brook Advisory Centres have a history of providing contraceptives and counselling services for young people, going back more than 27 years."

The first Brook Advisory Centre was opened in London in 1964. There are now twenty centres in seven areas.

Brook Advisory Centres is a respected counselling agency and a registered charity.

Whatever the outcome of the Belfast dispute, sex education and family planning in Ireland will have undergone a permanent change.

# THE FREETHINKER

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Vol. 112 No. 6 CONTENTS June 1992

SPUC NASTIES THREATEN TO PHOTOGRAPH YOUNG BROOK CENTRE VISITORS	81
NEWS AND NOTES Celibacy and the Clergy; Scriptural Terrorism; Cantuar Catches up; Origins	82
ECCLESIASTICS: ATHEISM IN THE BIBLE Karl Heath	85
PRIMITIVE MINDS Neil Blewitt	86
THOUGHTS ON THE MORNING AFTER T. F. Evans	88
BOOKS Free to Believe Reviewer: Charles Ward Eunuches for the Kingdom of Heaven Reviewer: Rona Gerber The Pagan Nature of Christianity Reviewer: R. J. Condon	90
ETHICS OF THE DUST Brian Donaghey	92
MISCELLANEOUS Religion, Dirt and Danger at Orthodox School, 87; Letters, 93; Obituary, 94; Trust in Monk "Misplaced", 95; Liquid Fiction, 95; Divorced and Dumped, 95; Pupils Advised to "Live Without Religion", 96; Sunday Threat to Trust, 96	

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# NEWS

## CELIBACY AND THE CLERGY

May was not a merry month for Holy Mother Church. In the Republic of Ireland, where the Church enjoys enormous prestige and is, in effect, the moral arm of government, faithful Catholics were shattered by the revelation that one of their bishops had been getting his leg over. But there was one consolation, the saints be praised; Bishop Casey of Galway and previously of Kerry, had not flouted the Church's ban on contraception. Consequently he is a father in both senses of the word.

Bishop Casey's fling with Annie Murphy captured the international headlines. The fact that he "borrowed" diocesan funds to make payments for the maintenance for their son, now 17, will cause deep, if unspoken, resentment among thousands of churchgoers who respond to constant financial appeals from the pulpit. Cardinal Cahal Daly said Church funds were audited by reputable accountants "and were subject to control and restrictions of Canon Law". He might have added that in Ireland the Church is a law unto itself and its hierarchy immune from civil law. And although it has been denied that some dioceses have a slush fund to pay for the upkeep of priests' offspring, a suspicion remains that the (now former) Bishop of Galway is not the only transgressor.

The Casey-Murphy affair will give grim satisfaction to reformers and sceptics in the Republic. The Church and its institutions have been relentless opponents of measures to liberalise the laws on divorce, birth control and, most vigorously of all, abortion. The hypocritical majority have defended and voted for the Church's line on sexual morality. Priests who have no experience of parenthood (officially) have laid down the law on how others should conduct their personal affairs. Together with other professional celibates, such as nuns, they are responsible for what is laughingly described as sex education. This latest scandal will not bring down the Church, unfortunately, but it will encourage growing numbers to make their own decisions and to face reality about the Church and its priesthood.

Bishop Casey has been accused by one feminist critic of sexually exploiting a young woman and thereby abusing his position of trust. There is an element of truth in this charge. But Annie Murphy was not a starry-eyed and vulnerable teenager when she embarked on an affair with Bishop Casey. She was a divorcée in her late twenties and well aware of his priestly status.

# AND NOTES

It should be remembered that potential priests are sometimes earmarked — particularly in large Irish families — while very young and even without their knowledge. Social, family and Church pressure makes them the victims of edicts passed by long-forgotten, sex-hating theologians.

The first (unsuccessful) attempt to impose celibacy on the clergy was made at the Council of Nicea in 325. In succeeding centuries puritans with a strong aversion to sex became increasingly influential within the Church so that by the 12th century celibacy was imposed on the clergy. Priests already married were commanded to abandon their wives and children. This also enabled the Church to keep the clergy disciplined and controlled.

Although celibacy was imposed by the Church, that did not prevent many of the clergy, particularly those in the higher reaches of the priesthood, from satisfying desires of the flesh. Pope Alexander VI had a bastard son, Cesare Borgia. But Baldassare Cossa was probably the most licentious pontiff in the Church's history. He was eventually deposed by the Council of Constance after a trial at which, as Edward Gibbon recorded: "The more serious charges were omitted, and the Vicar of Christ was only found guilty of rape, piracy, murder, sodomy and incest."

There is little doubt that Rome will be compelled to abandon compulsory celibacy which has already caused many to leave the priesthood through "a definitive act", which usually means they have married. Many of those who remain, for whatever reason, are finding a way around the celibacy ruling, just as their flock are ignoring the prohibition on contraception and abortion. When Pope John Paul II departs this vale of tears, it is likely that liberal and reforming elements will come to the fore.

Meanwhile, the former Bishop of Galway is reported to be in South America where, according to a Church source, he has "taken up some missionary position".

It is to be hoped that he will not be preaching Vatican policy on contraception to those who also, for a different reason, adopt the missionary or whichever position they prefer.

**Cinemas in South Africa will be allowed to open on Sunday in future. The ban on Sunday opening was imposed many years ago in response to demands by the Dutch Reformed Church.**

Education Secretary John Patten's expression of concern that "fear of eternal damnation" is disappearing caused judicious church leaders some embarrassment. As if they haven't enough problems with dwindling congregations, women clamouring for ordination instead of getting on with arranging the flowers, gay clergy, and priestly celibacy, a prominent Roman Catholic politician goes and reminds the nation of Christianity's most obnoxious doctrine.

The Rt Rev Crispin Hollis, Roman Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth, endeavoured to tone down Mr Patten's fire-and-brimstone message by describing the prospect of eternal damnation as "an absence of goodness and an absence of God in a world where there is no love". Such waffle may console liberal believers and doubting deists. But it does not impress Christians of the "everlasting bliss or blisters" school who would regard their faith as a cold affair if they thought that Hell is not a real place with real flames, the final destination of waverers, heretics and unbelievers.

Mr Patten and those of his outlook have tradition and biblical teaching on their side. And the doctrine of eternal punishment is still preached and believed even as we approach the 21st century.

Moreover, it is not just Bible-thumpers on street corners and shopping precincts who proclaim warnings of the wrath to come. *The Herald* newspaper, in Glasgow, recently published an article by John MacLeod, Scottish Journalist of the Year, who seconded Mr Patten's lamentation over the demise of belief in Hell. He, too, deplors the way in which "our national churches have abandoned historic doctrine", and goes on to denounce churches and churchmen, Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants who are uncomfortable with the subject of eternal damnation.

Unlike the Secretary of State for Education, Mr MacLeod is not a Roman Catholic. He describes himself as "very Highland, and very Presbyterian". So it is not too surprising that the Scottish Journalist of the Year believes "as a matter of plain fact, that there exists a state of conscious and everlasting misery beyond death for all who die in their sins; that is, for all who live out their lives without God and conclude them without Christ".

Unlike "liberal" and "modern" Christians who indulge in word-spinning and endeavour to explain away the historic meaning of Hell, Mr MacLeod is brutally honest. "Hell flows logically from the teaching of scripture", he writes. "The terrible end that awaits the ungodly is stressed from Genesis to Revelation: as much part of the New Testament as the Old. Indeed, Jesus in the Gospels refers more often to Hell than anyone else in the Bible. He believes in it in sober earnest; after all He created it."

Mr MacLeod echoes the Christian terrorists whose ravings about eternal damnation have blighted the lives of millions. He states "there can be no one reading this column who has never been bereaved. To face the possibility of Hell as our final end is at present enough; to realise that many — any — of out loved ones may be there already is to know true horror."

The most perceptive comment on the Highland Presbyterian's article appeared in the *Herald Letters* page: "It would be difficult to find a more stark, appalling warning of the profoundly perverting and psychologically abusive effects of a rabidly fundamentalist upbringing."

## CANTUAR CATCHES UP

Although expressed in mild terms, the Archbishop of Canterbury's comments on the Roman Catholic Church's implacable opposition to artificial birth control were significant. These were widely publicised shortly before the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, at which Catholic countries tried to prevent discussion of problems relating to population growth. And it is encouraging that Dr Carey does not appear so ready to kow-tow to Rome as were some of his recent predecessors.

In the course of his *Daily Telegraph* interview, Dr Carey said that Anglicans "don't have any problems about contraception". More accurately, they no longer have problems about contraception. For it is not so long since Canterbury and Rome held precisely the same view — the only permissible purpose for sexual intercourse was conception.

Early advocates of birth control in Britain faced Anglican opprobrium much like that directed at the present time by the Vatican at those who support legalisation of abortion. A Bishop of London, A. F. Winnington-Ingram (died 1946), spoke for a large section of the Church of England when he described contraception as "this gigantic evil" and added: "The Roman Church, all honour to it, has never wavered in condemning such prevention of conception as sin."

The 1908 Lambeth Conference resolved that it "regards with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family, and earnestly calls upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare." The Anglican bishops affirmed that deliberate prevention of conception was "repugnant to Christian morality".

It was not until the 1930 Lambeth Conference that the Church of England officially changed its mind, by 193 votes to 67, on the subject of artificial contraception. In effect the Anglican bishops approved what was

already being generally practised. The pioneering work had been started in the previous century, very largely by freethinkers, to educate and enlighten people on how to control their fertility.

## ORIGINS

Christians in Derbyshire have been kicking up a fuss over a circle of stones which have been erected at the new Severn Trent Reservoir at Carsington. A vicar and other local objectors claim that the sculpture is a celebration of paganism. Landscape architect Lewis Knight agrees that holes pierced in the stones are aligned to catch the rising sun of the summer and winter solstices. But he says it is nothing more than a bit of monumental fun.

It is very likely that critics of the Carsington stones participate in Derbyshire ceremonies that are distinctly pagan in origin. Best known of these is the well-dressing ceremony which is held in a number of villages every year. The custom goes back to pre-Christian times when flower petals were scattered on wells and streams either to thank or placate water deities. Like so many rituals and ceremonies, it was taken over by the Christian church which proceeded to conceal or remove all traces of paganism.

Nowadays well-dressing displays are elaborate affairs which attract large numbers of viewers. Ornate floral displays feature biblical scenes and texts and the ceremony usually includes a religious service conducted by the vicar or even a bishop. How many of those who participate in the ceremony are aware of its origin?

## Freethinker Fund

There has been another good response by readers to the appeal for financial support. Our thanks to all contributors who help to bridge the gap between income and expenditure.

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Total for April £247.90 and \$25.

# Ecclesiastes: Atheism in the Bible

KARL HEATH

The Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Dialogue With Non-Believers receives The Freethinker in exchange for its quarterly journal. It would be interesting to learn the Vatican's current view of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and also that of Anglican and other clergy.

Some years ago I climbed the hill on the small Greek island of Patmos to visit the cave where St John the Divine was reputed to have written his Revelation or Revelings. This book is comparable with Ezekiel ("flying wheels with eyes"), although nothing can compare with God's cookery recipe (Ezekiel chapter 4, verses 9-15) which led Voltaire to comment that anyone who admired Ezekiel should be compelled to dine with him. After the fairy tales of Genesis and Exodus, God's genocidal orders in the Book of Joshua, the violence and obscenity in Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, what a relief it is to turn to the calm rationalism of Ecclesiastes.

As a sacred text, what a strange book is the Holy Bible — the Word of God, but written by scores of people about hundreds of other people, many unsavoury, some criminal and some insane. It is also an anthology, which means that human editors over the centuries have disputed among themselves about which books to include as "canonical", or to exclude as "apocryphal" or "pseudepigrapha". How strange, therefore, that Ecclesiastes should have been accepted for more than two thousand years. I am not sure whether it appeared in the Hebrew "Masora" texts. It is supposed to have been included in the Alexandrine Greek translation, the Septuagint, of the third century BC, although some scholars claim that it was written later. It seems to be one of the Books of Wisdom of Hebrew tradition. When St Jerome compiled the first complete Bible, the Vulgate, about AD400, he included Ecclesiastes and wrote a treatise on it. The Church of England officially accepted it when the Thirty-Nine Articles were promulgated early in the reign of Elizabeth I.

We all know some of it. *A Time to Dance*, the title of Melvin Bragg's novel, recently televised, comes from Ecclesiastes. So does "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity", "Cast thy bread upon the waters", "No new thing under the sun", "Eat, drink and be merry". Here the author echoes Isaiah: "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die", said by the ancient Egyptians at their banquets. They also introduced real skeletons to remind the guests of their mortality — hence the expression, "skeleton at the feast".

But Ecclesiastes is much more than catch-phrases; chapter 3, verses 18-21 reads "the sons of men... might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which

befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth so dieth the other; yea they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast; for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?"

In chapter 9, verses 5-6 we read: "For the living know that they shall die; but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing which is done under the sun."

Not only do these passages reject life after death. They repudiate an essential tenet of Christianity, namely that man is a Special Creation, made in God's image, possessing an immortal soul and promised eternal life. Ecclesiastes is Darwinism: man belongs to the animal kingdom. They should see themselves as beasts, and who is to say that the spirit of man goes up, and the animals down?

True, there are references to God, but these are perfunctory and without much relevance, much as, when someone says "Good Heavens" they are unlikely to be contemplating the celestial regions. Even Bible scholars have acknowledged the possibility that some pious tamperer, shocked by Ecclesiastes, may have bowdlerised it.

This is Ecclesiastes — no miracles, no magic, no fantastic visions, no murders, rapes or fornication, no burnt offerings, no sacrifices, no vicious punishments, no massacres, no floods, no plagues, no divine retribution, no threats, no rewards, no scape-goats, no sacrificial lambs, no Hell, no Satan, no vicarious atonement, no salvation.

Not that all is admirable. There are passages of obscurity, and, in chapter 7, an unexpected piece of misogyny. Speaking of righteousness, the author says: "One man among a thousand have I found, but a woman among all these have I not found."

One also has a sense of that extreme self-consciousness and egoism which seems sometimes to afflict those, including some Humanists, who appear to feel naked, vulnerable and exposed when they have lost the cosy cocoon shelter of the religious community. This may be expressed in resentment at the blue sky continuing after one's death, Mahler's "Das Firmament blaut ewig", or Omar Khayyam's "The Moon of Heaven is rising once again. How oft hereafter, rising, shall she look through this same Garden after me, in vain." Or it may take the form of secular rituals to ease consciences, or Pharisaical gestures, or postures like "life stances".

# Primitive Minds

A. B. Lever talks of ancient gods to NEIL BLEWITT

Glad I've bumped into you, Neil. Can't stop long though. I'm on my way to the cathedral, but I'm simply bursting to tell somebody about a book I've been reading. It's all to do with the ancient Egyptians and their religion. You'd never credit the things they believed. Some of their stories are so bizarre I can't understand how they ever came to dream them up in the first place, never mind accept them as true and then perpetuate them for thousands of years afterwards.

You take their god Ptah, for example. Do you know they believed that he impregnated a virgin heifer with celestial fire and, as a result, was born himself as a black bull? Or Horus. They thought that his mother conceived him without being impregnated with anything. In fact, her husband was dead at the time. Ludicrous, isn't it? And yet nobody ever questioned it as far as I can make out.

And what about Osiris? When he was born, a mysterious voice called down from the sky that he was to be known as the Universal Lord. I suppose they thought he was entitled to that because he turned out to be a god himself. Of course, Universal Lord wasn't his only name. He had hundreds of them, like all the other gods. It was the fashion apparently. But it must have been terribly confusing; not just for the people but for the gods themselves. They must have found it difficult to remember who they were supposed to be at times.

One of Osiris's ancestors, by the way, was believed to have created the world out of nothing and then made all the humans and the animals of mud from the River Nile. How about that? But he proved to be not quite so clever after all, because among the things he'd created was an evil serpent which spent its whole life trying to eat him. You can't get much more stupid than that! Mind you, that wasn't the only creation story. There was another in which an ibis — really a god in disguise — laid an egg and the world hatched out of it. That must have been another source of confusion to the people. How were they to know which creation story was the right one?

Then there was a god called Khons. He went about exorcising devils and healing the sick with miracle cures. Nothing too spectacular about that, you might say, except that he had statues made of himself and then gave them the power to cure diseases as well. And everybody believed in them. They used to pray to them and bring them presents.

I must say the illustrations in the book are jolly good. There are pictures of all the gods. Not that I should like to have met any of them on a dark night. You see, they weren't entirely human. Like Heket, for example. She had a woman's body but a frog's head. Then there was

Sebek. He had a crocodile's head. Amon had a ram's. I think they worshipped him as the Ram of God. It really is absurd when you sit down and think about it.

One thing they had in common was that they always carried about with them a little cross with a looped handle to it which they called the ankh. The book said it was a symbol of life but I'd have said it looked more like a sort of talisman.

There were so many gods and goddesses, all with different functions, that I lost track of some of them after a while. They used to be worshipped in groups of three called Triads. I can't see what the point of that was, frankly, and the book doesn't really explain it; but it was reckoned to be a very important aspect of their religion.

Anybody could become a god it seems. There were several humans, like Imhotep and Amenhotep, who wound up as gods — not to mention the Pharaohs. I think with them it was one of the perks of the job.

But I must come back to Osiris. He became something of a favourite with me and he occupies more space in the book than any of the other gods. Mainly because some chap, who fancied himself as a writer, collected all the myths about him that he could find and wrote them down; and he did it in such a way as to make people believe they were true.

Well, as I said, Osiris was a god but, in spite of that, he came down to earth to tell everybody how they should behave and how they ought to worship the gods. And when he was quite sure that they understood, he went on some sort of missionary journey throughout the world; and he told his lieutenants that they had to go as well and preach to the heathen. Apparently there were a lot of heathens about at the time.

But all the while this was going on, there was an evil spirit plotting against him. Not the same one that plotted against his ancestor who created the world. He was called Apep; this one was known as Set, or Seth, or Sutekh. Confusing, I know, but he had hundreds of names as well because, originally, he was a god himself who got thrown out of heaven for some misdemeanour or other. There's a picture of him in the book and I can imagine how the Egyptians may have been frightened by him. He had the features of a weird beast, with a long and curly snout, square ears and — would you believe it? — a forked tail!

Anyway, he was always plotting against Osiris and eventually he captured him and had him sealed up in a huge chest. But he got out of that, so Set caught him again and this time he cut him into fourteen pieces and scattered them all over Egypt. His wife, though, who was a goddess in her own right and in one of those

Triads I mentioned, found them all and put him together again. Well — not *quite* all. She found only thirteen pieces; the other one had been eaten by a crab. I won't go into details as to which part of him it was, but I'll just say this: it was as well the crab ate it while Osiris was dead, because if he'd got his claws into it while he was alive it would have brought water to his eyes, to say the very least.

But, to cut a long story short, after his wife had put him together he came to life again and went up to heaven — minus the piece eaten by the crab which, of course, he hadn't much further use for anyway. Once there, he became the Judge and the Redeemer, and the souls of dead Egyptians were brought before him to have judgement passed on them. They were weighed in a balance against a feather — which was really a goddess in another form — and if it showed equilibrium, the souls were sent away to enjoy eternal peace and happiness. But if they were found wanting, they had to be eaten by a monster called the Devourer. There's an obvious flaw in all this; I mean — how could anybody know what went on up there? No one had ever come back to report on it.

But there it was. Everybody believed in Osiris. And so much so that they used to hold festivals at certain times of the year to commemorate the most important events in his life. There would be processions in the streets; and priests and priestesses would act the stories of his death and resurrection in the temples. The book doesn't say if they trained a crab to take part in the plays; I should have thought the priests would not have been too keen on that, though it might have given the priestesses a laugh. But they made it all as life-like as they could. There was hymn-singing and there were bands playing a variety of musical instruments. They had flutes and castanets and a peculiar thing called the sistrum. It was like a tambourine from what I can make out. They used to jangle it — not only to add a bit of colour to the music but also to drive away the evil spirits. It was reckoned to be pretty good for that.

Well, I can't stop any longer, Neil. But I *am* glad I bumped into you. I know that you're interested in religions even though you're an atheist; and I've been dying to tell somebody about the book. I know it's just a collection of what amounts to little more than fairy tales, but it made fascinating reading. And we shouldn't laugh at the ancients really, although I must admit I did so several times while I was going through the book. It isn't fair, is it, to look back with a pair of twentieth-century eyes on people with primitive minds and ridicule them for what they believed. They didn't have any of our advantages.

Anyway, as I said, I must away. I've a rehearsal at the cathedral in five minutes. Busy time for me, you know. I've been chosen from our congregation to be the

crucifer in the Corpus Christi procession and I'm also acting in a revival of a medieval mystery-play. Our priest is producing it and it's being presented in the cathedral on Trinity Sunday. I'm playing the voice of Jehovah in one scene, the Devil in another and St Paul in a third. And we've managed to get the Salvation Army band to provide the music. It promises to be a good evening. Why don't you come along? You might learn a thing or two.

## Religion, Dirt and Danger at Orthodox School

Because of "cultural sensitivity", Hertfordshire social services department has been unable to take action against a residential school which is described as a death trap. Council officials believe that the Yeshivas Torath Cheses School, in Great Offley, is unfit for habitation. The building is a former home which accommodated twenty children. It is now occupied by around a hundred.

The school is run by Rabbi Sandor Stern and the pupils are from families belonging to ultra-orthodox Hassidic Jewish communities. They come from New York, Canada, Belgium, Hungary and Britain. The school is a registered charity.

The administrators have ignored directives by county education and health departments, the Health and Safety Executive and fire service. In addition to unsatisfactory education standards, there is concern about sanitary conditions and food hygiene. One pupil has been treated for hepatitis.

Social workers who visited the school in January were shocked by the scenes they encountered. One said: "The kitchens were in a terrible state. The bathrooms were disgusting."

In February the fire authorities issued an order prohibiting the use of all but parts of the building except the ground floor. A spokesman said: "There were no fire doors on the staircases or corridors, poor means of escape and no means of fighting a fire. We gave them a list of repairs that need to be carried out but they haven't done anything."

Rabbi Avraham Pinter, headmaster of a Jewish school in Stamford Hill, north London, described Rabbi Stern as "a decent bloke trying to run a school on a shoestring". He alleged that Jewish schools get no help from the Government.

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**Members of the Manx parliament are to discuss a change in the law on abortion. Every year over two hundred women travel from the Isle of Man to mainland Britain for a termination of pregnancy.**

# Thoughts on the Morning After

T. F. EVANS

"Thank God for Britain! Thank God for Mid-Muddshire!" cried the victorious candidate as the result of the poll was declared in his constituency, early on that Friday morning in April, when the future destiny of the country was decided. It is not exactly clear what God had to do with either Britain or Mid-Muddshire. His name did not appear on any nomination paper nor in the manifesto of any of the political parties. Of course he was strongly suspected by some of having clear political sympathies. Patriarchal, anti-feminist and authoritarian, he would have no difficulty in knowing where to put his cross — a symbol in which he could claim some special proprietary interest — when it came to the point. But, as far as is known, he did not have a vote in any constituency. In fact, and rather surprisingly, he was not called on very much during the campaign. Only one serious reference to his preferences, if that is what it was, received any prominence.

The distinguished Dame Barbara Cartland, eminent novelist and adviser to the young on the virtues of chastity and restraint (well-known characteristics of the British aristocracy with which she has close connections), discovered that the leader of one of the political parties had stated he was an "agnostic". This led Dame Barbara to issue a statement declaring that a vote for his party would be a vote against Christ. A failure to understand the precise meaning of the word "agnostic" is not surprising in a writer who includes among the many hundreds of her novels one with the arresting title, *A Virgin in Mayfair*, a work which was first taken to be science fantasy. Fantasy is clearly connected very closely to political analysis in Dame Barbara's mind. She might be better advised to return to her often proclaimed twin loves, romantic fiction and royal jelly.

It is rather strange in some ways that God and religion did not figure more prominently in the long drawn-out election campaign. (There was the occasional sign of divine intervention. An example was the statement by the Bishop of Durham, long known as a traitor to his cloth and a scourge of the Almighty, who make it known that he had ceased to be a "Leftist".) Moreover, in a conflict between right and wrong, or, at least, between the practical and expedient, it is odd that the deepest feelings and convictions, which must mean religious beliefs and practices, of those concerned should not be brought into the light of day and be loudly invoked on the field of battle. An awful thought crossed the mind from time to time that those with strong religious beliefs, whatever their parties, felt it either proper or desirable to keep those beliefs in the

background.

There could have been several reasons for this. First, it might be thought by the devout believer that, important as his religious convictions were, they had a special and, indeed, limited place in his life, but should not be introduced into the realms of politics where they could have no serious relevance. Secondly, he might have thought that although his religious convictions were important to him, as important as he always professed them to be when he was actually in church, say, perhaps the effect of proclaiming them in his election address or on the hustings could alienate the sympathies of some potential supporters and, indeed, bring about the one conceivable disaster in an election campaign — the loss of votes.

It is hard in this connection not to think of the exchange in Bernard Shaw's play, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Lady Cicely Waynfilet, an intrepid explorer, is proposing to go on an excursion to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. She is warned against the project by her companions, one of whom, a Scottish missionary, tells her of the dangers from the natives: "Every man of them believes he will go to heaven if he kills an unbeliever." Lady Cicely replies with all the assurance of her class: "Bless you, dear Mr Rankin, the people in England believe that they will go to heaven if they give all their property to the poor. But they don't do it. I'm not a bit afraid of that."

The implications of such a gulf between doctrine and practice are not on one side of the argument alone. At times in the election campaign there was something of a struggle between those who spoke of the politics of greed and those who spoke of the politics of envy. If these thoughts had been pursued, we might have been subjected to the unseemly bandying about of scriptural texts. Thus, those who were accused of the politics of greed might have countered with references to the parable of the talents. Against this, those accused of the politics of envy might have had, numerically at least, the better of the argument by citing the number of times that Jesus expressed inconvenient thoughts about the poor being fed and cups of cold water being given to them, and other highly questionable advice. (It has to be remembered that it was, in a way, all very well for Jesus to speak so often on these lines. He never had to fight an election in his life.)

Leading religious thinkers and teachers have, on the whole, kept well clear of practical politics. There was one great exception. A well-known clergyman, very distinguished in his way, was Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, in the early part of the



eighteenth century. Swift took a very great interest in the politics of his day. His best-known work, *Gulliver's Travels*, is generally thought of as a story book for children. It is, in fact, a work of very acute satire, much of it political. It is all the more impressive and incisive because Swift keeps a straight face throughout and it is not difficult at times to take his ironic inversions for quite sober statements. This is not so with his description of the great schism dividing the different factions in the realm of Lilliput. There was much conflict between two parties, according to the high and low heels on their shoes by which they distinguished themselves. In this way, Swift mocked the working of the party system in which the King had, at the time, "determined to make use of only Low Heels in the Administration of the Government and all Offices of the Crown". (In the field of international affairs, there was a war going on between the country which believed that the right place to break into an egg was the larger end, whereas their enemies thought the right place was the smaller end.)

It is, of course, totally impossible to apply the satires of a clergyman so long ago (an Irishman at that, and one whose sanity was called into question anyway) to the way in which we conduct our affairs today. They clearly cannot apply to the intelligent and balanced methods by which we reach conclusions through the ballot-box at the end of a campaign, when the important issues have been put forward carefully by the political leaders and considered no less carefully by what is sometimes called the most sophisticated and politically best educated electorate in the world. This method of deciding upon our country's destiny cannot be called into question by the news that one political leader wears his underpants outside his shirt rather than inside; that another has no hair but plenty of freckles; that yet another will tell us, apparently with a straight face, that he once sorted potatoes with his bare hands — this to help prove that his Eton education and the private education he gave his children did not mean that he was not in favour of a "classless" society. And some newspapers, zealous always in their task of keeping the reading public well-informed, left nobody in any doubt that one political leader regularly ate babies for breakfast, among his other enormities, even if the actual words were not used.

Some electors, understandably disillusioned by past experience, would declare to anyone foolhardy enough to solicit their vote that they did not support anyone, that all "politicians" were exactly the same and it did not matter who won. Sometimes they would declare their intention of voting for candidates who, however worthy or not, had no hope of being elected. There are also those who argue ingeniously that the one thing which cannot be relied upon to bring about political

change is anything by way of political action. (The distinguished economic theoretician, Professor Friedrich Hayek, was one of that number, but it did not prevent his being adopted as something of a guru by active members of one political party.)

There are others who believe that the way in which to bring about one desirable end is to work for something that is, on the surface, at least, exactly the opposite. An excellent example of this is the theory of the "trickle-down" effect. This, stated crudely, means that if you intend to raise the standard of life of the poorer section of the community, you will not achieve this by throwing money at them, as it is sometimes expressed. Instead of putting money into the pockets of the poor, therefore, you add to the wealth of the rich, secure in the knowledge that this will, in time (no time limit is ever set) trickle down through society to benefit those at the lower end. There are, unfortunately, several objections to this. The first is that the lower orders, who do not understand the refinements of the working of economic laws, do not see how giving money to those who have plenty already will benefit them. The second is that, if it works at all, it takes so long that the people originally intended to benefit will have died before the "trickle-down" actually trickles in their direction, or will be too stupid to understand what has really happened when the benefits begin to accrue.

Of course the principle can be seen sometimes to work in reverse. No matter how much might be given by means of additional benefits to the poor, there seems to be a "trickle-up" effect by which the rich become richer while the poor remain at the bottom of the pile as always.

Let us return to our old friend God. If the High Heels, say, to take a purely hypothetical case, were to win four elections in a row, would that prove they were inherently more virtuous than the Low Heels, or in some other way more deserving of the warmth of the Almighty's smiles? Not even the most fervent member of the High Heels party would advocate this with any conviction (we are speaking of serious politicians, not Dame Barbara Cartland).

When God is considered in relation to the practical things of life, it may be best to find what solace one can in the parable told in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. An indignant customer, incensed at the time taken by a tailor to produce a pair of trousers that he had ordered to be made, expostulated: "In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the World. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!" The tailor is scandalised and replies: "But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look — (*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*) — at the world — (*pause*) and look — (*loving gesture, proudly*) — AT MY TROUSERS!"

**FREE TO BELIEVE**, by David Jenkins and Rebecca Jenkins.  
BBC, £12.95

Bishop of Durham since 1984, David Jenkins has been stuck with the image the media have given him, that of a controversial, unbelieving bishop of the Church of England. A caricature, undoubtedly, as he says.

This book (written actually by his daughter though with his full approval and collaboration) is an attempt to portray his true thoughts. "I am a simple believer", he insists. "I do not deny any basic Christian doctrines." Furthermore, "I can, with an open mind and a clear conscience, recite in a church service a Creed." The Church's creeds appear to him as symbolic and poetic.

This will be reassuring to "modern" Christians who, like himself, find consolation if not total satisfaction in some reinterpretation of Christianity which to some extent accommodates contemporary knowledge. To others whose religion is of a more traditional sort, it has seemed alarming or outrageous. By the sceptical it might be deemed hypocritical.

That, I think, would be an unfair judgment. Hypocrisy involves conscious pretence. This genial, earnest, morally sensitive and thoughtful ecclesiastic gives me no impression of that. A strong will-to-believe is obviously present.

"All the points I made", he says with reference to the religious television programme which started the "media distortion" of which he complains, "were in the mainstream of Christian theological discussion and had been so for over seventy years."

While that is true, we should remember that such discussion occurs mostly in academic circles. It is unlikely to be found in popular newspapers or in television shows whose presenters are aware that viewers may have their fingers on the remote control. Unguarded remarks, especially if made to sound provocative, are the order of the day.

During the interview, Jenkins, then a Professor of Theology, expressed opinions now repeated in the book: "Literal belief in the Virgin Birth or the Empty Tomb are not basic Christian doctrines"; "Believers have to stop expecting the Bible to be as literal as our modern journalistic reports."

"The approach of critical scholarship to the Bible", he avers, "does not destroy its validity". By "validity" he is not alluding to its historical and literary importance, which in a general sense no scholar would dispute. He is revealing his own uncritical acceptance of a typical attitude to "Holy Scripture". While admitting that "the biblical texts are rich enough to allow anyone to read

almost anything into them", he follows the usual line of presuming a necessity for "an overall pattern or direction of interpretation".

The overall pattern, of course, simply amounts to a "mainstream" consensus of what Christianity is, moderated by what he is personally disposed to believe is true. "I do not believe in Hell", he confesses, for example, but substitutes the idea of extinction for those who "persist in moving in the opposite direction" to what "God" wants.

He writes (or his daughter does) a shade more lucidly than he speaks, and frequently with an abandon sure to arouse the interest of any browser, rationalist or not. Readers of *Free to Believe* are told: "Guaranteed and necessary orthodoxy is not only a myth, it is also a menace"; "There is no infallible Church... no infallible Book"; "Looked at coolly, it is plain that, on the basis of their record so far, religious people and institutions are strong and persistent contributors to the case for atheism"; "Believers should spend more time examining their assumptions about God"; "Christians must re-think very deeply and painfully"; "There has to be a new way forward."

The browser could be excused for imagining that passages like these indicate a bold, adventurous spirit coming to grips with the logical consequences of unbiased research. I regret being obliged to dispel that expectation. (It is just possible that a bold spirit is trying to get out.)

Interlaced with intriguing observations like "the various fantasies of the religious" and "religion... as some sort of cosmic anodyne" are many others having a depressingly familiar ring. For instance, "taking the Bible seriously as a source of revelation about what God is like and how things really are"; "I am quite clear that miracles occur"; "What Jesus tells us about God"; "Jesus died for sinners"; "God demonstrated His will and power... by raising Jesus from the dead"; "What our faith does offer is the assurance and certainty that there is no such thing as total failure." Despite much criticism of dogmatic certainty, that religious imp is not expelled!

The bishopric's present incumbent has had to endure a considerable amount of misunderstanding and abuse. A fire at York Minster a few days after his "enthronement" in that fane was a godsend for the tabloid press and fodder for the superstitious. "A family favourite" among the "hate mail" directed at the unfortunate cleric was a letter ending "may you rot in hell" and signed "a true Christian"!

A need for "some public self-explanation" led to the book being written, not — needless to say — on

# REVIEWS

account of the thunderbolt but because his views were being misrepresented. "The Bishop of Durham might have been responsible for triggering an explosion but the explosive material had been collecting for a long time...practically everybody at my level of the Church knows perfectly well that these questions have to be faced."

His intentions are good but unhappily they are qualified by his religious loyalty: "I believe it to be my calling to face these issues openly and honestly, in the simple conviction that this is the way of faith and of mission."

In the final chapter the word "unthinkable" is used in allusion to political and economic questions. But the book comes to an end with no mention made of the question which Christians really find unthinkable — namely, the demise of Christianity. The assumption is always made that, despite all criticisms which justifiably may be levelled against it, Christianity has to go on in some form, as if there were no sensible alternative.

The dust jacket blurb says that the bishop "reanimates traditional ideas". Now that *would* be a miracle, but Christians won't admit that it is time for a post-mortem. As for an explosion, this book, I regret, is no more than a colourful squib.

CHARLES WARD

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**EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND SEXUALITY**, by Uta Ranke-Heinemann. Penguin, £6.99

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This book, by a German theologian who lost her academic chair in New Testament and Ancient Church History for interpreting Mary's Virgin Birth theologically, not biologically, should give pause for thought to those who believe that religion buttresses and promotes morality. It constitutes a massive indictment of traditional Roman Catholic attitudes towards sex, which are characterised by fear and rejection of physical pleasure so extreme that they twist and distort the way the Church views every aspect of morality, not simply sexual aspects. Illicit sexual pleasure (and what sexual pleasure avoids this description in the eyes of the "sexual pessimists" of the Catholic Church?) can result in the production of woefully handicapped children; and such injustice on God's behalf is represented as righteous. Indeed those born deaf, as well as suffering in this world, were considered by some to be doubly doomed. Uta Ranke-Heinemann records that a whole series of theologians maintained that the deaf and dumb were excluded from

faith and therefore damned to Hell.

There is also a strong strand of misogyny in traditional Catholic thought, as the writer amply demonstrates. Even Mariology is, in her view, essentially anti-feminine, since the vision of Mary as the eternal and unsullied Virgin deprives her of all truly feminine attributes. She is not allowed to be the mother of her children, except for Jesus who was not conceived by ordinary sexual means. Even in giving birth, her hymen had to remain intact. This glorification of virginity on the part of the brotherhood of celibate priests implies that all sexually fulfilled relationships are inferior to celibate ones — which in turn implies that, although male friendships are strongly approved of, physical homosexuality is resoundingly condemned and was (in the past at least) subject to cruel punishments.

A further logical consequence of the Church's attitude towards sexual pleasure is, of course, its notorious condemnation of birth control. This, in a world threatened by a population explosion of terrifying proportions, is clearly the most damaging of all its prohibitions.

All this Uta Ranke-Heinemann deplores as heartily as the Church's severest critics. Indeed the whole book seems to be a sustained and closely argued attempt to persuade the Catholic theologians that their interpretation of the scriptures, and particularly of the original words of Jesus, is wrong. Towards the end of the book she actually describes Catholic moral theology as "a folly that poses as religion and invokes the name of God but has distorted the consciences of countless people."

But suppose the interpretations and inferences of the theologians were correct. Would this make the practices and attitudes Uta Ranke-Heinemann deplores any more justifiable?

Indeed, my one reservation about this book is that the author seems set on retaining some belief in the goodness and value of the original Christian message. Thus her emphasis on its contamination by theologians leaves unexamined the possibility that there is no original, pristine gospel which is wholly admirable and free from moral perversity and which is also factually true. Perhaps not even Uta Ranke-Heinemann confidently believes that there is; but the reference in the last line of the book to the *false* doctrine of the Virgin Birth seems to suggest that, on the whole, she accepts that the gospels refer to real and spiritually significant events which the Church has woefully misrepresented.

Nevertheless this is a splendid book, which anyone interested in the blighting effects of Catholic moral outlook throughout the centuries, and in the contemporary world, should read for the light it sheds on the evolution of Catholic moral thought.

RONA GERBER

One of the great selling points of Christianity is the alleged uniqueness of Jesus. That the gospel hero is no more than one among many virgin-born dying-and-resurrecting Saviours seldom occurs to churchgoers, and is not all that familiar to freethinkers. The latter may readily accept as historical those parts of the old, old story which are at any rate possible.

In *The Pagan Nature of Christianity* the entire Jesus legend from his conception and birth to his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension is laid bare — there is nothing in it that was not pre-extant in pagan mythology.

Christian ceremonies and symbols such as baptism, the eucharist and the cross are equally borrowings from earlier cults. The later Church Fathers, as ignorant as their flocks, could only account for the similarities by assuming that Satan, being a clever devil, had created imitations of Christianity before the original!

The notion that the entire Christian scheme of things is no more than an astronomical allegory is not new. With some researchers it is not popular either, despite so many religious festivals being held on or close to the dates of their pagan counterparts, which were frankly sun-worship. Wright declares emphatically that Jesus Christ is nothing but the sun.

In books such as this there is always a danger of claiming more than the evidence warrants. Some of the sources cited were written more than a century ago, and like all pioneers they made mistakes. For example Wright, following Kersey Graves (1875), has Krishna in his list of sixteen crucified gods. Graves in turn relies on *The Hindu Pantheon* of Edward Moor (1810), but the crucifix pictured there, goodness knows why, is a Christian one as Moor admits. Hindu figures in the Pantheon have what might be nail holes in hands and feet, but they are not shown crucified. However, Krishna does have many points in common with Jesus — see J. M. Robertson's *Christianity and Mythology*.

The book under review has more misprints and spelling errors than one cares to see, together with the occasional eyebrow-raising statement, for instance the description of John Allegro's *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* as an "exposition of the mythicist position", which it most certainly is not. Allegro is completely outside the general run of mythicist scholarship.

Dr Wright, again following Kersey Graves, confuses "immaculate conception" with virgin birth. The term simply means that a person so born is free from any kind of sin, "original" included.

But these are minor irritations. The value of this book lies in the immense amount of information the author

has packed into his 71 pages, culled from authorities difficult to get hold of and in many cases long out of print. A useful introduction to its subject, it deserves to run to a second edition — suitably amended.

R. J. CONDON

*The Pagan Nature of Christianity* is obtainable from G. W. Foote & Company, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

## Ethics of the Dust

BRIAN DONAGHEY

No, not the piety of Ruskin, far from it. Amongst the more momentous events commemorated in 1992, let us spare a thought for its marking also the sesquicentenary of the birth of Ambrose Bierce, the footloose Bohemian American writer and journalist. He was born on 24 June 1842 and lived to be at least 71 years old, but it was typical of the man to cause inconvenience to would-be biographers by disappearing, in 1913, into the revolutionary wilderness of Mexico. If he died then, he might have been grateful for missing the reports of the Great War, which would only have confirmed his misanthropic attitude.

He produced a considerable quantity of work of variable quality, and despite his deficiencies, and his unconventional ending, still merits attention. Born into a poor and large family, and lacking much formal education, the future seemed unpromising for him when he was caught up in the Civil War. His experiences in that bloody period, at so young an age, helped to shape the tone of cynicism, and the cultivation of the sardonic, which are salient features of his output; in that respect the position he reached by the 1890s was appropriately complemented by the vision of the futility of war in his younger contemporary Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Between them they engendered a stream of anti-war writing that has persisted in both American and European literature, and which, after a century's growth combined with the experiences of innumerable wars and conflicts, may at last be beginning to have an influence.

After the war, Bierce ended up in San Francisco, to embark on his journalistic career. In between turning out a good deal of hack work, he married in 1871, but the next year took his wife to London, where they stayed until 1876. Though he managed to provide for himself and a growing family, by developing a cutting style of journalism, his health problems forced their return to San Francisco. It is one of life's little ironies that Bierce was eventually employed there, between 1887 and 1896, writing for the *Sunday Examiner*. He was given free rein to castigate millionaires and

politicians, in a paper owned by the rising megalomaniac capitalist entrepreneur, William Randolph Hearst, reputedly the subject of Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane*. This period in the exercise of his vitriolic pen seems to have been the height of his journalistic life, during which his opinions had great local influence.

But from there on his fortunes waned. He found confined domestic life irksome: his older son was killed in a petty brawl in 1889, his wife left him not long after and later divorced him, and in turn the younger son died of alcoholic excess in 1901. He struggled on in old age and illness until that fateful day in 1913 when he decide to go "South of the Border" to a less than romantic Mexico. It is interesting to speculate whether he met José Guadalupe Posada, Mexico's greatest graphic artist of pessimism and savage satire, just before his death in the same year, being exactly ten years younger than Bierce. It would be nice to think that Bierce lived at least long enough in Mexico to observe the Day of the Dead (2 November), the annual festival to whose imagery Posada contributed so much, and whose grim humour Bierce would have relished.

Why should we commemorate the life of this embittered man who chose an obscure disappearance as an exit from that life? For those who have been led

to a more cynical view of the world, Bierce is a prime exponent of the wry and sardonic style. Ideologically he anticipated, even if he did not influence directly, the nihilistic and existentialist position of writers like Sartre; as a stylist, and in the choice and narration of his plots, he has in his best work the ironic vision and understatement of a Saki, with whom he shares the preference for the short story form. Nowadays he is probably best known for *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), containing his deadliest witticisms and most philosophical epigrams, arranged alphabetically, which continues to be reprinted. However, the essential Bierce is rather to be found in his collection of *Fantastic Fables*. Nearly a century after their creation they are still fables for our time, in their mordant wit and concentrated, economically expressed exposure of hypocrisy, self-interest, double-think, cunning and verbal deception, and standards movable by expediency. Anyone with a touching faith in the guiding power of organised religions, or a belief in the perfectibility of humanity through the objective adherence to a system of ethics, should be subjected to the scepticism, and even misanthropy, of Ambrose Bierce as a corrective. He shows how people try to throw the dust in our eyes in the name of ethics.

## Letters

### GENES AND SEXUALITY

Glyn Emery would be well advised to get his own arguments right before accusing others of a "logical gaffe". If his knowledge of genetics extended even to "O-level" he would know that there is nothing unreasonable in suggesting a genetic basis for homosexuality. Has he not heard of recessive genes or of numbers of genes having different effects when in different combinations? It is perfectly possible for genes in some combinations to be beneficial but in other combinations to be deleterious. The classic (and simplest) example being the sickle cell gene. When in combination with the corresponding normal gene it confers immunity to malaria with little adverse side effects. In combination with another sickle cell gene it kills.

It is not difficult to imagine a multiplicity of genes influencing, amongst other things, sexuality. On their own, or in certain combinations, they may confer benefits that natural selection can act on ensuring their survival. In other combinations homosexuality may result, the resulting loss to the species of fertility being balanced by whatever benefits are conferred. Nor is it difficult to imagine scenarios in which homosexual behaviour actually benefits the species. "Lesbianism" is commonplace in some bird species where it arises for well understood reasons (*Nature*, 13 July 1989, p. 101).

Professor Emery may be bisexual but I am not and nor are millions of others who are exclusively one way inclined or the other. I don't know what makes him write such codswallop as the statement that we are all bisexual, that gays "choose to emphasise the less usual side of their bisexuality" or that they seek "special treatment" rather than just equality. He is certainly arguing against strong and growing evidence. The identical twin study Terry Sanderson mentioned (*The Freethinker*, March) is not the only one. A survey of 85 pairs of twins (40 identical) in which at

least one of each pair was found gay that for identical twins the other was invariably gay too but for fraternal ones the chances of the other being gay was no greater than for ordinary siblings (*New Scientist*, 11 Jan. 1979, p. 90).

There are plenty of other arguments for a genetic basis for sexuality (whether homo or hetero) and against environmental causes but lack of space prevents me going into them. However, I would caution Professor Emery against writing on a subject he clearly knows little about. I would also caution others that proof of a genetic basis for homosexuality would be no cause for rejoicing. It would certainly cripple the arguments of the Christian "ex-gay" brigade but it would only be a matter of time before the "gay genes" were identified. Once this happened it should be a simple matter to screen foetuses for such genes and for prejudiced parents to abort those found to be carrying them. We must be on our guard against such a nightmare scenario.  
STEPHEN MORETON, Warrington

### STAR-GAZING SECULARIST

I am a committed Secularist but I must take issue with you about astrology-freaks, because I am definitely one. Now why do you believe there is nothing in it? If the sun and the moon have a powerful influence on our planet why should not the stars and other planets also? If you study astrology at all, you will find that it is remarkably true in its character delineations, and if you get a good astrologer, he or she will be able to tell your birth sign very quickly. I take no notice of the daily predictions given by the newspapers — they are mostly rubbish — but take it seriously, study it, and you'll find it has truth.

And there's something else. Why is the Earth the only inhabited planet in our solar system? I mentioned that fact to my son and my niece (both in their forties) and received an angry refutation in both cases. It was as if they were frightened by my statement.  
DORIS DEAN, Ludlow, Salop

# OBITUARY

## John L. Broom

John Broom was born in 1925. He had had a severe stroke in late 1989 and, by dint of his own courage and perseverance as well as the devoted care of the NHS in Orkney, he made a remarkable recovery. He was found, having died suddenly, in his home on 8 May. He was cremated at Aberdeen on 13 May.

While John was well known by name and for his opinions by the readers of an enormous variety of Letters pages, there are but few of us in organised secularist circles who had the privilege of knowing him personally. I am one such and I shall miss him sorely.

He died free of very close relatives; he was, I think, an only son and he never married. His roots were in West Lothian. His father was a strict adherent to the Kirk, and John inherited a family timber business in Bathgate and — let us be as frank as he was — drank himself out of it. He long since freed himself of addiction to alcohol.

He became successively a Roman Catholic and a Unitarian; in this latter stance he qualified to be ordained as a Minister but never actually became one. He was a *de facto* humanist and also, that rarest of people, a card-carrying Scottish nationalist without the sentimental romanticism and the fatuous political pretensions that are the hallmarks of the contemporary SNP (37 MPs and independence in January 1993!).

John had a great knowledge of the cinema of the inter-war years and also a sensitive appreciation of literature — of poetry in particular. His ability on the stage was very well known; a one-man show (written for him by his friend George Mackay Brown) about the life and work of the Orkney based poet, Edwin Muir, will be remembered by many.

Around 1970, John came to Orkney, became the Public Librarian in Stromness and acquired an interest in (and subsequently ownership of) Orkney's one and only proper bookshop (as opposed to tourist-bait gift shops cum stationers who sell books). He finally retired both from employment and from business in the middle 1980s.

He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible and caused no end of a fuss when he broadcast a "Thought for the Week" on BBC Orkney in which he described some parts of the Bible as sublime truth and some parts as morally degrading in the extreme. I have a tape of this which I treasure.

Recently John had provoked a furore in the letters page of *The Scotsman* by his candid admission to addiction to "soft porn" and his robust questioning of its alleged ill-effects on people less morally durable than oneself. We do have fun in our Letters page!

We have reason to regret the death, at the relatively tender age of 67, of a valuable contributor to our thoughts. John was the sort of man of whom it is often said "they don't make them like that any more." This fear is fortunately quite unfounded — informed and fearless iconoclasm with integrity is always with us. To that extent, John L. Broom is one of the immortals.

ERIC STOCKTON

## Ronald Fletcher

I first got to know Ronald Fletcher when he was at Bedford College, London. Shortly after our meeting he was appointed professor of sociology at York, but he disliked the bureaucratic side of the job and didn't stay long. Later he held similar posts as Essex and Reading, and remained at the latter university until his retirement.

He wrote a number of important works in his own discipline, but reached a wider readership in his Penguin on *The Family and Marriage*, which went through several editions and printings; he contributed to the *New Humanist*, and his *Ten Non-Commandments* was published as a *Freethinker* pamphlet. I also remember reading the manuscript of a literary geography of Britain, which revealed a wide range of knowledge and research. He was an honorary associate of the Rationalist Press Association.

Ronald never shirked controversy, religious or otherwise, and most recently, in *Science, Ideology and the Media*, came to the defence of Sir Cyril Burt, who had previously been accused of falsifying his data on hereditary intelligence. Not having read the book, I cannot comment, except to say we may be sure that it wouldn't pull any punches. Everything Ronald wrote was stimulating.

COLIN MCCALL

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Archbishop Ramon Cascaete had apologised for an event that occurred in Spain five centuries ago. He was addressing a visiting group of American rabbis. In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen of Spain, issued an edict requiring all Jews to convert to Christianity or leave the country. Most of them left Spain at the time. The edict was not revoked until 1869.

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Two Right-wing Christians on a school board in Spring Valley, California, have voted against a proposal that the school should participate in a programme run by the Education and Agriculture Departments. Under the scheme, surplus milk, fruit, bread and eggs provide meals for poor children at a low price. Christian objectors say this "diminishes parental responsibility... and is one more example of Government interference in family life."

## Trust in Monk "Misplaced"

A Buddhist monk and "healer" has been jailed for three years for poisoning two men by treating them with arsenic and mercury.

Badhant Rakshat, who had neither medical qualifications nor a fixed address, charged patients up to £20 a month to treat eczema. Police told him to stop his "healing" activities after a 36-year-old London man was taken to hospital suffering from arsenical poisoning. Instead he administered dangerous levels of mercury to another man who also ended up in hospital.

As a result of the Buddhist's ministrations two years ago, the men are still suffering from headaches, loss of strength in their arms and legs, skin irritation and back pains.

Prosecuting at the Old Bailey, Richard Horwell said the accused belonged to a sect and called himself a Hakim.

He added: "In Indian culture it appears a Hakim can command a blind faith and trust in his patients. In this case, it is clear that the trust was grossly misplaced."

## Liquid Fiction

The superstitious faithful who arrived at Naples Cathedral last month expecting to witness the miraculous liquefaction of a substance said to be congealed blood of St Januarius were disappointed. On this occasion the "miracle" occurred before the scheduled time, but conveniently to coincide with a visit by the Scottish head of the order of the Knights of Malta.

Since the year 1389, a small phial with its mysterious contents have been displayed to worshippers by the Archbishop of Naples. After a session of prayers and imprecations, the clotted blood turns to liquid. Another "miracle" — and another boost to the Cathedral's coffers.

Sceptics have long claimed there is a rational explanation. However, the Archbishop asserted last year that "no chemist has yet been able to reproduce the phenomenon". He may now be regretting his rash statement. Two Italian chemists have produced a solution prepared from materials available in the 14th century when the phial appeared. Church authorities refuse to allow a scientific examination of the phial's contents. And after the Shroud of Turin debacle, who can blame them?

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.** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49a). Sunday, 5 July, 4.30 pm. Tea Party followed by Annual General Meeting and illustrated talk on Brighton's Freethought History.

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

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA).** Information from 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HD, telephone 0926 58450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

**Glasgow Humanist Society.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

**Havering and District Humanist Society.** Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 7 July, 8 pm. Adrienne Saunderson: Marriage Guidance.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 25 June, 8 pm. John Evitt: Beyond all Knowledge and all Thought.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 18 June, 7.30 pm. Jock Cameron: Religion and Repression in India and Pakistan.

**Preston and District Humanist Group.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 79829.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 8 July, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Bernard Soole: Christianity, Cultural Contraceptive of the West.

## Divorced and Dumped

Tammy Faye Bakker, whose televangelist husband, Jim Bakker, is serving a prison sentence for fraud and conspiracy, is planning a comeback. Although deeply involved in the Praise the Lord Ministry and the scandal which led to its collapse, Tammy still attracts a following of "born again" chumps at her church in Orlando, Florida.

"It's time for women like me to lead the church", says Tammy. She is negotiating with producers to present a God-and-glamour television programme. And as a first step she has shed the layers of make-up and mascara, plus 23 pounds of flesh.

A close friend says that a TV producer assured Tammy Bakker "that she can build her small, faithful following into a nationwide audience that would make everyone a lot of money".

Jim Bakker is due for parole in 1995. He figures in Tammy's plans only to the extent that she has started divorce proceedings. She says: "I don't need Jim the way I once thought I did. I have plans of my own."

## Pupils Advised to "Live Without Illusions"

"I used to be a Christian priest but am now entirely confident that religious beliefs are without real foundation", Daniel O'Hara, a member of the National Secular Society council and the Rationalist Press Association board, told pupils of Reed's School, Cobham, Surrey. He was participating in a debate on the subject, "Is God out of date?"

Daniel O'Hara said it was necessary to make a clear distinction between God and God-belief.

"God or the gods is or are hypothetical entities. We cannot know whether he, she, it or they exist until we know what we are talking about, and what would count as good evidence and good reasons for thinking God or gods in question did exist.

"While there is no doubt that belief in such a God is still held by some, if not the majority of people in this country, the existence of God-belief is not in any sense evidence for the existence of God. Belief in fairies or evil spirits is not evidence that they actually exist. Similarly, the existence and prevalence of religion are not evidence that the assumed object of religious belief, i.e. God, actually exists independently of that belief.

"I am an atheist because I am convinced that there is neither evidence nor a good reason for believing that there is any God or gods existing independently over and above the world. How and why did anyone ever come to think that such entities exist?"

"In primitive times the idea of God served a useful social purpose, binding people together, providing a commonly accepted code of laws and a sense of national or tribal identity. The God of the Old Testament, Yahveh or Jehovah, was the tribal deity of the Israelites. He was believed to have given them the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Mosaic Law, to have fought with them against the rival tribes and deities of Canaan, and to have bound himself by a covenant with his chosen people. Later on, the newly formed Christian sect believed that Jesus was the Son of God who had been sent to die to save people from their sins, and to rise from the dead to show them that both he and they were immortal."

Daniel O'Hara posed the question why so many otherwise intelligent and educated people indulge in make-believe and wishful thinking when it comes to the fundamentals of religion.

"The answer to that question is complex", he declared.

"In outline, religious belief is still relatively popular because it is taught by an ancient and generally respected institution, the Church, whose teachings are still to a large extent embodied in the great institutions of State. The monarch is head of the Church of England and is crowned in a religious ceremony at Westminster Abbey. Bishops of the Established Church sit in the House of

Lords. Religion has a privileged place in education and broadcasting. Hospitals, prisons, the armed forces, universities and many schools have paid chaplains.

"One has to be quite brave to take a stand against the prevailing ethos of the country to deny that religion is true. Though religion is declining, it still has a great deal of power and influence."

The speaker gave other reasons why religion survives. People often want simple answers to profound moral questions. Above all, people do not want to believe that death is final. They like to cherish the notion that they have immortal souls and that they will be resurrected after death in some eternal realm of blessedness. The Church encourages such illusions.

"I think it is better if we can manage to live without illusions", said Mr O'Hara.

"We must accept responsibility for our own actions. This, as I see it, is the basis of secular humanism."

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## Sunday Threat to Trust

Action by Sabbatarian narks could cost the National Trust £3 million a year. The heritage charity is being taken to the High Court in an attempt to prevent Sunday trading at its souvenir shops and garden centres. An unfavourable court ruling could force the Sunday closing of more than 160 centres.

The test case results from a writ issued by the Broadland District Council, in Norfolk. It concerns the sale of plant holders and clothes at the 17th-century Bickling Hall.

Mr Paul Dickson, the Trust's regional public affairs manager, said hundreds of people visited the shop and garden centre every Sunday, spending around £8,000.

"Our trading activities are providing a service to visitors and all the profit is ploughed straight back into conservating the property", he added.

"If the injunction did go through, it would have serious consequences for the Trust nationally."

A spokesman for the District Council made it clear that the local authority was unhappy about being compelled to take legal action against the National Trust.

He said: "The National Trust has been reported for trading illegally. The Sunday trading laws are still in force and we have to act on complaints."

The National Trust will continue to open its gardening centres on Sunday until the court hearing takes place in a few months' time. Like cathedral gift shops, they should do brisk Sunday business during the summer season.