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EPILEPTIC IN DROWNING TRAGEDY AFTER "MIRACLE CURE" AT CERULLO MEETING

The Morris Cerullo road show, staged in co-operation with hundreds of London churches, has moved on from Earls Court. There were many complaints about advertisements for his Mission to London ("Some will see Miracles"), particularly those illustrated by photographs of abandoned wheelchairs and broken white sticks. The Advertising Standards Authority rejected complaints. "We didn't believe anyone would take them literally," a spokesman said.

But eyewitness reports revealed that large numbers did take literally the promises of miracle cures through the power of prayer. Southwark Coroner's Court held an inquest on one of them.

Audrey Reynolds, a 25-year-old computer operator from Clapham, south London, was a devout Christian. She suffered from epileptic fits which were controlled by prescribed drugs. This necessitated taking pills three times a day.

Miss Reynolds attended the opening meeting at Earls Court and was prayed over by Cerullo and his associates. Convinced that the evangelist's prayers had wrought a miracle cure, she discontinued treatment for her congenital brain abnormality. She told her mother: "I have stopped taking the pills and I'm not sick."

Six days later, Mrs Reynolds returned from shopping and found her daughter dead in an empty bath.

Dr Richard Shepherd, a pathologist, said that Audrey Reynolds had died from drowning. The position in which she was found indicated that she had thrashed around during an epileptic fit and the bath plug had been pulled out.

Mrs Reynolds told the court that she had advised her daughter to continue taking the pills.

Sir Montague Levine, the Southwark Coroner, said it was a tragedy she went to the meeting. He referred to the danger of people believing they were miraculously cured of a serious condition.

But religious charlatans who make glib promises

about miracle cures attract the gullible and the desperate. They came in their thousands to Earls Court. Cerullo has a supporting cast of miracle-workers and fund-raisers. The latter strongly imply that God runs a celestial cash-and-carry supermarket, the number of cures on offer depending on the amount contributed to the Morris Cerullo World Evangelism Inc.

A Sunday newspaper journalist accompanied two disabled women to one of Cerullo's meetings. She reported: "On one side sat a well-dressed couple with a pushchair with a huge black bible underneath. Their little girl, pretty in pink and white, was severely handicapped. She could barely see and lay unresponsive and unaware, blond head lolling to one side. Her parents smiled bravely. Mr Cerullo had told audiences that week that 'awesome' events would take place."

At the end of the prayer everyone would be cured, Cerullo announced from the stage. Thousands prayed, wept, danced and spoke in tongues. As for the little girl: "The adults surrounding her held up her head but it repeatedly flopped back. An organiser told her hopeful parents that miracles were not always immediately obvious."

Cerullo and his team promote the idea that disability is a form of punishment for sin and satanic possession. People are healed by the power of God, he asserts. But those who came to Earls Court expecting a miraculous recovery, left just as disabled and a lot poorer than when they arrived.

Cerullo's toe-curling demagoguery will soon be televised throughout Europe, including Britain. Earlier this year the authorities granted his evangelical business empire a licence to start a satellite channel on Astra, the European Family Network. He promises prayer dedications, Christian pop music, personal appearances by celebrities and much more.

Morris Cerullo promised "awesome events" at Earls Court. He left a trail of disappointment and misery.

THE FREETHINKER

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NEWS

THE DAME AND THE DEITY

It will be recalled that prior to the recent General Election, Dame Barbara Cartland sent shivers down the electors' spines with her fateful proclamation: "If you vote for Kinnock, you are voting against Christ." Now the queen of the knee-tremblers — over five hundred romantic novels to date and she is still only aged ninety — has issued another dire warning to the nation through newspaper correspondence columns.

"I am appalled to learn," quivered the pious Dame, "that the British Humanist Association has sent copies of a video explaining their unbelief in God to five hundred schools." She was referring to the excellent *Humanism — the Great Detective Story*, produced earlier this year by the BHA and selling well at £10 a copy. Unlike Christian beliefs, BHA unbelief is not being legally imposed on pupils; teachers, including RE teachers, have found the video a useful teaching aid and a good general introduction to the subject.

No one will disagree with Dame Barbara's statement that children need love and security. But she goes on the say that for children of broken marriages "the only security that some of them have is a belief in a power higher than themselves, who will protect them. . . questioning the existence of God is to add to what so many of them are suffering at the moment." British children looking to some "higher power" in their unhappiness, is a notion that could be conceived only by a writer of fiction.

Dame Barbara repeats her assertion that, with the help of one (unnamed) newspaper, she was responsible for getting "prayers and religious education back into State schools". This modest claim will be something of a surprise to indefatigable religious indoctrinators in Christian pressure groups and at Westminster.

No doubt Dame Barbara's reputation as a romantic novelist ensures publication of her letters to the editors of the national press. And she must be gratified by the knowledge that her profound thoughts are being discussed throughout the land. But the great writer was on less familiar territory in a BBC Radio 4 discussion with the formidable Claire Rayner, who appears in the BHA video.

Claire Rayner argued her case firmly and coherently. Dame Barbara, on the other hand, flapped and fluttered like a fowl in a fit. One rather significant thought emerged when she exclaimed that "any god will do. . . the Muslims have an excellent god". Any god will do?

S AND NOTES

What a climb-down! In Dame Barbara's lifetime all gods but the Judaeo-Christian deity were held to be false. "The heathen in his blindness, Bows down to wood and stone", *vide Hymns Ancient and Modern*; while *The Book of Common Prayer*, referring to the said heathens, implored God to "fetch them home. . . to thy flock that they may be saved. . . and made one fold under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. . .".

So now, after centuries of despatching Christian missionaries to rescue the perishing, Dame Barbara Cartland says "any god will do" for the children. Such a turn around is more likely to undermine children's confidence and sense of security than being told that a substantial proportion of the population do not believe in "a power higher than themselves."

PETTINESS RULES

For over a century religious opposition has prevented or delayed reform of idiotic licensing laws. So while supermarkets can open all day on Good Friday, the sale of alcoholic drinks is restricted to Sunday hours which apply to public houses and off-licences. Chief Constables are for ever complaining about lack of resources and personnel to tackle crime. Yet an enormous amount of police time is wasted on investigating after-hours drinking.

One example of such nonsense comes from the north Yorkshire village of Drax, where the landlady of the local watering hole has been fined £1,200 for serving drinks after time. In order to secure a conviction for this heinous offence, undercover policemen — one of them drafted in from Scarborough, 56 miles away — dressed in jeans and leather jackets and on three occasions went on a binge at public expense. One of the crimebusters drank seven pints of strong bitter and fell flat on his back.

It is hardly surprising that Britain's licensing laws and other petty restrictions are a source of wonderment to tourists and visitors.

Fr Michael McKenna, a Roman Catholic guest speaker, told a Methodist Conference "worship workshop" that Irish priests have had to cancel their conference engagements this year. "They can't get the baby sitters," he informed the startled Methodists.

It has long been contended in these columns that the anti-abortion, anti-contraception "pro-life" fraternity are not just sex-obsessed busybodies. They are irresponsible and cruel fanatics, prepared to go to any length to prevent a woman exercising her legal right. There have been many examples of unscrupulous tactics by the "pro-life" lobby in the British Isles and the United States. Abortion clinics have been attacked, staff assaulted, patients already under stress harassed and photographed.

While evangelical Protestant groups are among the most vociferous of the "pro-life" campaigners, particularly in the United States, the Vatican and its front organisations spearhead the international movement. In countries where the Roman Catholic Church is still a powerful force, access to abortion is strictly forbidden — although not to the rich who can afford to go elsewhere for the operation — and Vatican roulette is the only approved method of birth control. Throughout the 1980s, ageing celibates like the Pope and non-Mother Teresa travelled the world urging others to breed and generally adding their voices to the "pro-life" clamour.

However, there are signs that things are not going so well for Holy Mother Church in this field of endeavour. Only the most myopic faithful fail to recognise that Vatican policy is largely ignored in Western countries, even by Catholics. And, ironically, the most serious blows have been inflicted on the "pro-life" lobby in Ireland, where until recent times the Church's authority was virtually unassailable.

Perhaps it was electing as president the liberal and reforming Mary Robinson that lit a fuse under the bishops. Earlier this year, many eyes were opened by the callous attitude of "pro-lifers" who wanted to prevent a schoolgirl rape victim having the resulting pregnancy terminated. Despite outspoken attacks on the Maastricht Treaty from scores of pulpits, the Irish people voted by a substantial majority for its ratification. And the revelation that Bishop Casey of Galway was a father in more ways than one did little to enhance the reputation of the hierarchy.

It now appears that a major scandal will hit the Irish "pro-life" movement and the Roman Catholic Church specifically. It arises from the death nearly nine years ago of cancer sufferer Sheila Hodgers in the Lourdes Hospital, Dundalk. (The case was reported in *The Freethinker*, December 1984.) Brendan Hodgers is bringing a High Court action against the hospital for negligence and withholding information about his wife's condition. At the time of her death he said: "Sheila had tumours everywhere, on her neck, her legs, her spine. They had run rampant for lack of treatment."

Although screaming in agony, Mrs Hodgers was denied pain-killing drugs because she was pregnant. And in the Church-run hospital, "sanctity" of a foetus took precedence over an adult human being's life. The baby died shortly after birth and Sheila Hodgers, denied drugs or even an X-ray to ascertain her condition, died two days later.

The Hodgers case has already highlighted the Church's role in running Irish hospitals. This is conducted through so-called "ethics committees", which always include priests and are packed with Church appointees. Rules governing the treatment of patients, particularly pregnant women, are drawn up by these committees, always with an eye to Church law. They have the power to veto treatment if it could cause even a damaged foetus to be aborted. Refusals or delays in agreeing to treatment can result in traumatic suffering by patients.

Although Ireland's "voluntary" hospitals are funded by the taxpayer, their guidelines are, in effect, laid down by the Church. And the Church has always resisted any move to establish an independent national health service in the country. Consequently there is often no choice but a Church-run hospital. The "pro-life" movement also resists any change to the system, although the Hodgers case may well prove to be the thin edge of the wedge for the Church's role in the hospital service.

In Britain the "pro-lifers" have been mourning one of their heroes. Albert Pierrepoint, the former public hangman, has died at the age of 87. The man who executed, among others, Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans, believed he was "chosen by a higher power for the task, put on earth especially to do it." Although he said executions "achieved nothing but revenge" and were no deterrent, consistent efforts have been made inside and outside parliament to bring back capital punishment. And every time the question is voted on in the House of Commons, "pro-life" MPs are in the vanguard of the hanging lobby.

The Rev Ernie Rea, head of BBC religious broadcasting, and his wife have separated. She claimed that her husband is having an affair with Gaynor Shutte, editor of BBC Radio Wales. Mr Rea, who is responsible for programmes like Songs of Praise, will stay in his BBC job which is worth about £50,000 a year.

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.

EFFECTIVE CENSORSHIP

Another writer has been silenced by religious terrorists. Mr Ahmend Osman, who has lived in Britain for 28 years, withdrew from a broadcast after receiving a death threat in a telephone call. The caller spoke in Arabic.

Detectives have been keeping a 24-hour watch on Mr Osman. He is the author of *The Valley of the Kings* (1987), *Moses: Pharaoh of Egypt* (1990) and claims that Jesus lived centuries before the Bible says he did. In June he took part in a broadcast discussion on his latest book, *The House of the Messiah*, which has offended Christians and Muslims. The late night discussion on Radio Sunrise, which is based in west London, was broadcast throughout Europe.

Mr Osman was invited to take part in another broadcast, but decided to withdraw following the death threat. He said: "I have a wife and daughter and cannot take the risk."

Freethinker Fund

People's readiness to hand over large sums to religious con artists and already wealthy churches is a constant source of amazement to rationalists. It has just been announced that a retired supermarket tycoon who has already donated large sums to the Roman Catholic Church (to which he does not even belong), is to leave half of his £250 million fortune to the archdiocese of Liverpool.

Are there any tycoons out there who will bankroll *The Freethinker* for the next fifty years? Probably not, although we are not in the least way prejudiced against tycoons. In the meantime, appreciation is expressed to those readers of more modest means who help to keep the paper on a sound financial footing, including the latest list of contributors to the Fund.

D. G. Mitchell, R. K. Prothero and R. B. Ratcliff, £1 each; E. A. Barrie, M. Kirby, R. W. Simmonds and J. E. Sykes, £2 each; S. A. Sheridan, £2.65; J. E. Westerman, £3; K. H. Bardsley, D. Clamp and P. McKenna, £2.50 each; D. Redhead, £4.20; K. M. Barralet and P. Kennedy, £4.40 each; G. S. Baker, N. A. Blackford, N. Blewitt, A. Chapman, A. L. Clarke, J. F. Claydon, L. Connelly, J. E. Dyke, G. W. Grahamshaw, J. Goldsmith, W. E. Harman, R. Hopkins, J. Lippitt, D. A. Macintosh, E. McFadyen, L. J. Ong, K. C. Rudd, P. R. Shakespeare, A. Smith, K. P. G. Spencer, B. J. van der Sloot, H. Wood and J. C. Wright, £5 each; R. J. Condon and F. M. Holmes, £10 each; B. L. Able, W. P. Curry and S. M. Jaiswal, £15 each; R. J. C. Fennell, £20; D. J. Williams, £21; J. S. Manley, £50.

Total for June: £310.30

Charity and Education

NICOLAS WALTER

The application of charity law in religious and educational matters has long been a subject of concern to freethinkers. A recent conference report focuses attention on some of the problems arising from the present situation of charitable status of schools.

The charity system in this country is a typical British combination of sense and nonsense. It makes sense that activities undertaken to give help to people rather than to make a profit from them should not be taxed and should be properly regulated; but the ways in which this is actually done in this country are mostly nonsensical. The historical background is the obscure tradition of gifts and trusts going back to the Middle Ages. The legal basis is an amazing muddle beginning with the preamble to a statute of 1601, interpreted in a series of cases culminating in Lord Macnaghten's judgement in the Pemsel case in 1891, and modified by further cases and Acts of Parliament down to one passed this year. The administrative superstructure is dominated by the Charity Commission, an equally amazing semi-governmental and semi-judicial organisation founded in 1853. It is safe to say that virtually no one outside the system fully understands its sheer confusion and that virtually no one inside it fully appreciates its sheer absurdity.

Freethinkers have been concerned with the charity system mainly because one of the automatically accepted charitable objects is the advancement of religion — any supernatural religion, regardless of belief or behaviour. The advancement of freethought doctrine, by contrast, has to be justified by other factors — the advancement of education or the wider benefit of the community, and the absence of political activity. At one time several freethought organisations were accepted as charities, because they had once been religious or were deemed to be educational. This policy was reversed by the authorities during the 1960s and 1970s, when the charity system was tightened up, but it has been restored since the 1980s — the South Place Ethical Society recovered its charitable status in 1980, not as a religious but as an educational and beneficial organisation; the British Humanist Association gained charitable status on similar grounds in 1983; and other freethought organisations have also been seeking charitable status either for themselves or for new trusts.

But freethinkers should also be concerned about the charity system because another of the automatically accepted charitable objects is the advancement of education — any education, regardless of aim or content. This means that virtually any school which is not a commercial business run for profit or a community school run by the local education authority can be a

charity, with all the financial advantages of tax and rate relief and access to various funds and trusts. It is generally realised that this applies to the so-called "public" and other independent schools which are mainly designed to provide superior education for the children of the rich, but not that this also applies to so-called "voluntary" schools — the religious schools which are largely financed out of rates and taxes, and which include no less than one-third of the publicly funded schools in this country.

In January 1992 the Directory of Social Change organised a conference in London with the title, "Schools and Charitable Status: New Ways Ahead?", which was attended by several hundred people involved or interested in education; and it has now published a report of the conference with the title, *The Charitable Status of Schools: What Needs to be Done?*. This is a well edited (though badly subedited) and well-produced large-format booklet containing the papers given at the conference, together with comments made at the time and much other relevant material. It is quite difficult to follow in detail, but well worth the trouble, since it is full of valuable information about a very complex situation.

Some of the items are included out of duty rather than for their value — such as a bland outline of the law by Robin Guthrie, the former Chief Charity Commissioner, who did much to reform the Charity Commission but couldn't say much of interest; thus he repeats the point that "the courts have said that any religion is better than none" without any serious comment. There are other purely legal or educational contributions which are too specialist to appeal to most outsiders. But there are several interesting items, both discouraging and encouraging. The former include characteristically self-interested contributions by representatives of the Independent Schools Information Service and of Anglican and Muslim educational organisations, the head of a "public" school, and a Conservative MP. The latter include a few really important contributions: by Brian Simon, the education historian, who describes the nineteenth-century conversion of charitable endowments for the education of the poor to finance schools for the middle class as "probably the biggest hijack of public resources redirected to private purposes in history"; by Ian Williams, author of *The Alms Trade*; who documents the ways the "public" and other independent schools appropriated their original endowments and the ways the left has failed to reappropriate them; and by Chris Price, the former Labour MP, who calls for charitable status to be granted to all schools. This call is a common note in many

contributions, though it is accompanied by a strong overtone of discomfort about the clear class bias in the present system, and a growing feeling that the enjoyment of charitable status by “public” and private schools — as by Oxbridge colleges and all sorts of other exclusive institutions — is a more and more scandalous injustice when public education is more and more scandalously underfunded.

One obvious omission from both the conference and the report is any critical discussion of the charity system’s double bias towards religious schools, with particular application to the existing private sectarian schools and “voluntary” schools, and to the growing demand by some of the former to join the latter. It is clearly unjust (if not illegal) for the authorities to deny Muslim and other extremist sectarian schools the public funding which was traditionally and is still legally given to Christian and other moderate sectarian schools, but it is clearly undesirable that an already obviously bad system should be made even worse. Freethinkers have generally agreed that the solution is not to reform but to abolish the practice of giving public funding to sectarian schools — that “pluralism” involves not

extending special privileges to all kinds of religious organisations, but removing both advantages and disadvantages from all separatist organisations. However, this conference and report remind us that the sectarian schools which don’t yet receive public funding given to “voluntary” schools do already enjoy the charitable status given to all religious and educational organisations; and this is surely alarming enough for serious discussion.

Most freethinkers would probably agree that the ideal solution to all these problems would be the total abolition or radical reconstruction of the whole charity system. But privilege and prejudice in religion and education are so deeply entrenched in this country that there are few prospects for reform in this area. It is all the more important for reformers to argue the case for it, and this publication contains plenty of facts and ideas for such arguments.

The Charitable Status of Schools: What Needs to be Done? edited by Anne Mountfield. *Directory of Social Change*, Radius Works, Back Lane, London NW3 1HL. £12.95 (plus £ 1.50 postage & packing).

Unfair to Voltaire

COLIN McCALL

“To read Berlin is to sit at an unlit window and see the landscape of European thought illuminated by a spectacular display of fireworks.” That tribute by Ian McIntyre appears on the cover of the paperback edition of *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Fontana 1991), the latest collection of Sir Isaiah Berlin’s essays, edited by Henry Hardy. And I must say it contains one cracker that made me jump. It comes in a long essay, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism”, published for the first time, though written thirty years ago.

Maistre (1753-1821) is usually regarded as a Catholic reactionary, “a fanatical monarchist and a still more fanatical supporter of papal authority”, whose works are “interesting rather than important, the last despairing effort of feudalism and the dark ages to resist the march of progress”. Sir Isaiah considers this popular assessment “altogether inadequate”. Maistre “may have spoken the language of the past, but the content of what he had to say presaged the future”. Hence the title of the essay.

One thing is certain. Maistre was the bitter enemy of the 18th-century philosophers who, although they had their differences, held certain beliefs in common, above all an approach to life which may be broadly termed rationalist. Maistre, in contrast, stood for darkness and unreason. “With remarkable brilliance and effectiveness, he denounced all forms of clarity and

rational organisation. . . He was a total believer, a violent hater. . .”

For Maistre, life was a great slaughterhouse. “The whole earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but a vast altar upon which all that is living must be sacrificed without end, without measure, without pause, until the consummation of things, until evil is extinct, until the death of death.” Human beings must be continually reminded of the frightening mystery behind creation and purged by suffering; and they must submit to the authority of Church and State — the Jesuits, incidentally, being the “only dependable educators”.

Sir Isaiah follows Maistre’s argument through: all power comes from God; all force commands respect; all weakness is to be despised. And, to summarise, “Maistre’s violent hatred of free traffic in ideas and his contempt for all intellectuals are not mere conservatism, not the orthodoxy and loyalty to Church and State in which he was brought up, but something at once much older and much newer — something which at once echoes the fanatical voices of the Inquisition, and sounds what is perhaps the earliest note of the militant anti-rational Fascism of modern times.”

No freethinker could disagree with that. Where then the cracker? Nothing less than Sir Isaiah’s equation of Voltaire with Maistre in “quality of mind”. According to Sir Isaiah: “Modern totalitarian systems do, in their

acts if not their style of rhetoric, combine the outlooks of Voltaire and Maistre; they have inherited, particularly, the qualities which the two have in common."

Now what are these "qualities", when the men are "polar opposites", when "Voltaire stands for individual liberty and Maistre for chains; Voltaire cried for more light, Maistre for more darkness. Voltaire hated the Roman Church so violently that he denied it even a minimum of virtue. Maistre liked even its vices, and regarded Voltaire as the Devil incarnate"?

Sir Isaiah has to strain to justify a gratuitous comparison which he may not have invented, but which he need not have adopted. Neither of the two "is guilty of any degree of softness, vagueness or self-indulgence of either intellect or feeling, nor do they tolerate it in others. They stand for the dry light against flickering flame. . . They are ruthlessly deflationary writers, contemptuous, sardonic, genuinely heartless, and at times, genuinely cynical."

Of course, Voltaire "defended neither despotism nor deception, whereas Maistre preached the need for both". But in what I think must be one of the least considered passages Sir Isaiah ever wrote, we are told that: "If the capacity for the uncompromising exposure of sentimental and confused processes of thought, for which Voltaire was so largely responsible, be combined with Maistre's historicism, his political pragmatism, his equally low estimate of human capacity and goodness, and his belief that the essence of life is the craving for suffering and sacrifice and surrender, if to this is added Maistre's considered belief that government is impossible without perpetual repression of the weak and confused majority by a minority of dedicated rulers, hardened against all temptation to indulge in humanitarian experiments, then we begin to approach the strong strain of nihilism in all modern totalitarianism."

Much as I admire Sir Isaiah Berlin, I have to take issue with him. He accuses Voltaire of lacking any degree of softness of feeling. This about the defender of Calas; about the man who wrote the *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* which, leaving aside its philosophical content, is a cry on behalf of "Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!/Affrighted gathering of human kind!/ Eternal lingering of useless pain!" and a plaint on human and animal suffering.

Voltaire couldn't prevent "acts of God", but he helped those who suffered from the repressive acts of men, and Ferney, in J. M. Wheeler's words, "became an asylum for the oppressed from both France and Switzerland". Was this a man without feeling?

Moreover, if you look back at Sir Isaiah's summary of what he sees as the respective contribution of Voltaire and Maistre to the development of modern

totalitarianism, you will see that Voltaire's is "the uncompromising exposure of sentimental and confused processes of thought".

To associate this in any way with the origins of Fascism is perverse and, encountered elsewhere, would seem malicious. And, as Maistre himself is "ruthlessly deflationary", "contemptuous, sardonic" and the rest, the association is as unnecessary as it is invalid. It's a pity, I suggest, that the essay wasn't revised as intended when put aside in 1960.

Body Shop Wins Case

A chain of cosmetic shops has won a High Court injunction against a franchise holder who tried to impose her religious beliefs on the staff. The Body Shop had applied to the court after Pauline Rawle, who ran six of their shops, started to behave in a "curious" way after attending courses at an evangelical church in Hampstead, north London.

The Court heard that Mrs Rawle, who lives in a 17th-century farmhouse in Surrey, insisted on members of staff attending "mystic violence courses" run by the Victory Church. At one meeting they were told that they had been sexually abused before the age of three.

The judge, Sir Peter Pain, ruled that control of the six shops should be returned to The Body Shop. He said that Mrs Rawle had acted "very curiously indeed" at staff meetings.

"It may be because she had come under the influence of a body called The Victory Church," he added.

"She compared herself with God and The Body Shop with Satan."

It was reported in *The Freethinker* (December 1987) that the pastor of the Victory Church, former Soho pornography dealer Micheal Bassett, was being investigated by the police. He lived a luxurious lifestyle in a £200,000 house and ran a £12,000 Mercedes.

Francis Perrin, who died last month at the age of 91, was one of the most distinguished scientists in France. He was a leading nuclear physicist for several decades, and the person mainly responsible for the development of both nuclear power and nuclear weapons from the 1930s to the 1960s. He was well known as a socialist and anti-militarist; he was personally opposed to nuclear weapons, and accepted the leadership of the project for patriotic reasons when France was excluded from the Anglo-American programme. He was well known as a libertarian; he always supported maximum openness about nuclear information, and often disclosed embarrassing facts. He was also well known as a freethinker; he received many honours, but the one he was proudest of was the Presidency of the French Union of Atheists.

Shelley's Atheism

JIM HERRICK

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born on 4 August 1792, so in this bicentennial year it is appropriate to reconsider his atheism. He was the first major British writer to produce works of avowed atheism. His atheistical works such as *Queen Mab* were widely disseminated among freethinkers and reformers during the nineteenth century.

Julian is an Englishman of good family, passionately attached to those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind, and the immense improvements of which, by the extinction of certain moral superstitions, human society may be yet susceptible. Without concealing the evil in the world, he is for ever speculating how good may be made superior. He is a complete infidel, and a scoffer at all things reputed holy. . . Julian in spite of his heterodox opinions, is conjectured by his friends to possess some good qualities. How far this is possible the pious reader will determine. Julian is rather serious.

Julian and Maddalo

This is a self-portrait by Shelley, found in the introduction to his long poem *Julian and Maddalo* in which he dramatises his debates with Lord Byron. It is a judicious self-assessment — not without a hint of self-mockery (“a scoffer”). Attached to Julian/Shelley’s heterodoxy is a belief in the power of the mind — he believed strongly in the eternity of ideas. He also believed that the abolition of “moral superstitions”, within which he would have included Christianity, would eliminate the cause of much social oppression. His hope that even the heterodox may possess some good qualities echoes a cry which freethinkers have expressed through the ages — that it is possible to be good without God.

Shelley’s aristocratic background and powerful (though not tyrannical) father, a member of the landed gentry and a Whig MP, were the nursery of his rebellion. He was always at odds with his background, and friends pointed out the contradiction of coming from a wealthy background and advocating a change to the system to give greater power and wealth to the poor. Another contradiction was that his poems — many of them long and dramatic — were couched in the traditions of mythical Greek thought and offered extremely complex images; they were not likely to be read by the less educated (except perhaps for his poem following the Peterloo massacre, *The Mask of Anarchy*).

Shelley was sent to Eton, which he hated. He became known as a rebel and an eccentric, and in his last year he wrote and had published a gothic novel; although derivative of the current genre of melodrama, it

foreshadows some of his later themes in the figure of Zastrozzi — a villainous, Satanic outcast, a defiant atheist.

Shelley soon entered into more reflective mode. He claimed that his first youthful doubts came from a consideration of the “genuineness of religion as a revelation from divinity” and from the example of Greek and Roman thinkers such as Socrates and Cicero. An early letter puts forward the argument that there is no need to believe in improbabilities:

Suppose twelve men were to make an affidavit before you that they had seen in Africa, a vast snake three miles long, suppose they swore that this snake eat nothing but Elephants, & that you knew from all the laws of nature, that enough Elephants cd. not exist to sustain the snake — wd. you believe them?

A thwarted love affair, which he believed had been terminated because of objections to his irreligion, led to furious indignation:

Oh! I burn with impatience for the moment of Xtianity’s dissolution, it has injured me; I swear on the altar of perjured love to revenge myself on the hated cause of the effect which even now I can scarcely help deploring.

He was to take his revenge by writing his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). He was now at Oxford, where his personal studies were diverse and deep, though the university teaching was uninteresting. He was friendly with Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who probably influenced him to move from deism to atheism — though he may have needed little moving. Shelley had his atheist pamphlet printed and placed in an Oxford bookseller; a clerical browser was shocked and pointed out this depraved work to the authorities. Shelley had already advertised his views by sending copies of the pamphlet to leading Oxford dons and clergymen.

This was a pivotal point in his life. He and Hogg were expelled from Oxford. His best biographer, Richard Holmes, speculates that this was more because of his possible connection with radicals and his refusal to acknowledge the pamphlet as his own than because of the views which he might have passed off as undergraduate speculation. It seems unlikely that Shelley ever seriously diverted from his atheism for the remainder of his life, although tinges of pantheism and neo-Platonism appeared. The quarrel with his father after his expulsion was never made up. He wanted Shelley to recant, but even though it meant the loss of an income for much of his life, he determinedly refused to do this.

Shelley used the material in *The Necessity of Atheism* as a note in his first narrative poem *Queen Mab*, which was privately printed in 1813. He wrote it after a period of radical activity in Dublin and Wales. This was Shelley's first full-length work and some have described it as immature — even if so, it is marvellously animated and sets out the programme for his life's work. It follows the account of a fairy describing the past, present and future of earth from a remote point in the universe: it contains an attack on religion, political tyranny, and the destructive forces of war and commerce, and the perversions of love by the chains of marriage and prostitution.

The note to the phrase "there is no God" is a revised version of his pamphlet, with the addition of substantial quotes from Bacon, d'Holbach, Pliny, and Spinoza; Hume and Paine were unacknowledged influences. He emphasises that our beliefs are unvolitional perceptions and we cannot be blamed and should not be punished for them. Our ideas arise from the evidence of (1) the senses, (2) the activity of the mind (reason), (3) the experience of others. None of these can be considered reliable in their account of the existence of a God. He writes that we merely call God that which causes, "a general name, to conceal our ignorance of causes and essences". Thus the religious view of God "bears every mark of a veil woven by philosophical conceit".

It is important to remember that he begins the essay with the comment on the view that there is no God: "This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken." Those who cast doubts on Shelley's later more moderate atheism tend to emphasise such statements. Perhaps an even better indication of Shelley's position came in a letter in which he referred to an argument he had had with Southey: "He says I ought not to call myself an Atheist, since in reality I believe that the Universe is God." Shelley's response was: "I tell him I believe that God is another signification for the universe." The tautology that God is the universe and vice versa, has not much more meaning than the modern cosmologist Stephen Hawking's belief that the universe is the mind of God.

Shelley also wrote an important pamphlet expanding his critique of religion and God, *A Refutation of Deism* (1814).

Christians have often tried to reclaim the later Shelley. But though expressed with more moderation and subtlety, I think that the major poems of his last few years are shot through with atheism, while he retained a respect for Christ (whom he thought was not followed by most Christians) and a feeling of the energy and force and power of the universe. Perhaps he was close to Wittgenstein who said: "I am not a religious man, but

I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."

These late major poems, written in Italy, are fine works, though perhaps little read now. *Prometheus Unbound* reworks an Aeschylus play, with Jupiter as the tyrant God and Prometheus the mighty rebel. Prometheus is given a vision of Christ on the cross:

O, horrible! Thy name I will not speak.
It hath become a curse. I see, I see
The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just,
Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee,
Some hunted by foul lies from their heart's home,
An early-chosen, late lamented home;
As hooded ounces cling to the driven hind:
Some linked to corpses in unwholesome cells:
Some — Hear I not the multitude laugh loud?
Impaled in lingering fire: and mighty realms
Float by my feet, like sea-uprooted isles,
Whose sons are kneaded down in common blood
By the red light of their own burning homes.

Shelley needs to be quoted at length to appreciate the sweep of his verse and ideas. Such was his view of Christianity and many other similar quotes could be found. He always linked unbelief to political freedom and change. He was more a reformer than a revolutionary, believing in the power of ideas to bring about change. This is seen in the dramatic poem written during his last year, *Hellas*. In the context of the struggle of Greece for freedom from the Turks, he elaborates a justification of freedom and independence of thought. He writes in the notes that: "The received hypothesis of a Being resembling men in the moral attributes of his nature, having called us out of non-existence, and after inflicting on us the misery of the commission of error, should superadd that of the punishment and the privations consequent upon it, still would remain incredible."

Shelley was an infidel like Julian with some goodness in him. He truly believed in freedom of inquiry, political reform, and a spirit of tolerance. He wrote a polemical pamphlet, *Letter to Lord Ellenborough* (1812), the judge in a blasphemy case against Eaton. It was a plea for tolerance and genuine free speech, which we could still heed today: "The time is rapidly approaching, I hope, that you, my Lord, may live to behold its arrival, when the Mahometan, the Jew, the Christian, the Deist, and the Atheist will live together in one community, equally sharing the benefits which rise from its association, and united in the bonds of brotherly love."

Sources

Shelley: The Pursuit, Richard Holmes (1974)
Red Shelley, Paul Foot (1984)
A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell, David Berman (1988)

BOOKS

THE MIND OF GOD, by Paul Davies. Simon and Schuster, £16.99

God seems to be getting everywhere these days. I find it distressing that scientists of repute, when writing on aspects of the cosmos, should act as traitors to their calling and propagate arguments that purport to favour the existence of gods. Stephen Hawking's unnecessary and gratuitous phrase at the end of his *A Brief History of Time* is a major culprit, but there are plenty more, and Davies's most recent book is an example of extended scientific pornography of this kind. Too many scientists have collapsed lazily into the mire of vapid belief leaving a mere handful to sustain belief in the rationality of the world. Scientists, of all people, should grip the confidence that their subject inspires, and see that they can account for everything, literally everything, without recourse to the concepts imposed on them by the conditioning characteristic of societies.

Although I call Davies's book scientific pornography, I do so with the very best of intentions: I dislike the mental attitude that drives it, but find it first class as an example of its *genre*. It is an erudite, pleasantly readable exploration of the clues that some scientists believe mark the handiwork of gods in the formation and structure of this our awesomely wonderful world. I would certainly recommend it to anyone interested in the relation between modern science and medieval belief in gods, for it leads the reader through some of the deeply fascinating and as yet unsolved problems of the universe, such as the nature of physical laws, the surprising efficacy of mathematics, and the balance of the fundamental constants that appear to be so benign towards our emergence, existence, and persistence.

Here we see not the footsteps of faith that have inspired so many to irrational belief, but the arguments of a competent and well-informed theoretical physicist. A scientist does not breed his faith from folk tales and visions, but draws them from the subtleties of modern physics, many of which are expounded here as clearly as one expects from Davies's experience of scientific communication. Yet it is a portrayal of faith (and a betrayal of science) nevertheless, for underlying the exposition is a pessimism about the power of the human mind to arrive at comprehension, a too ready acceptance of the possible advantages of mystical experience, and — most astonishing and revolting of all — a belief in cosmic purpose.

I do recommend this book, not so much for its message, but for the insight it gives into the mind, not

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of God, but of a scientist who cannot come to terms with the awesome simplicity of this accidental place.

PETER ATKINS

QUEST FOR JUSTICE, by Antony Grey. Sinclair-Stevenson, £18 and £9.95

Antony Grey is fortunate in his publishing date. *Quest for Justice* is timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which decriminalised sexual behaviour between consenting male adults over the age of 21. But in fact it appears at a crucial and fascinating point in the long struggle for gay rights, since the gay movement is currently bubbling over with heated debate as to where — and how — it should go from here.

Essentially the present debate centres round the issue of reform versus confrontation. (It is not a new debate; readers involved with the peace movement will remember similar strident differences between the conservative CND and the more extremist Committee of 100.) The radical Queer Power organisation, who want to "reclaim" the word "queer", is deeply angry at society's continuing anti-gay bigotry, at the fact that our sex laws are the most archaic in Western Europe, and they seek to change all this if necessary by direct action. The Stonewall organisation, by contrast, respectable and reforming, represents the gay establishment and is headed up by actor Sir Ian McKellen.

It is not Antony Grey's purpose to discuss this present schism; in *Quest for Justice* he has set out to chart the course of events which led to the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, what has happened since in terms of gay rights, and to describe his own part in this great movement.

It is very clear from this absorbing book that his own role has been crucial. He became Secretary of the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) in 1962 and for the next few years was the driving force in the parliamentary lobbyings which culminated in the 1967 Act. Put down in such cold factual terms, it sounds a worthy if somewhat pedestrian achievement. But we should remember that, up to 1967, all homosexuality between males was punishable by prison sentences, and that to express support publicly for gay rights was likely to lead to any number of unpleasant consequences, including the early morning knocking on your front door. I write as a gay man of roughly the same age as

REVIEWS

LET ME DIE: A STUDY OF VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA
CONTAINING MANY CASE HISTORIES, by Lloyd Cole.

Antony Grey; like him I lived in London at the time. While I and many of my friends were keeping our heads down and vaguely hoping things would improve, Antony Grey and his colleagues were bravely leaping over the parapets. In *Quest for Justice* he concentrates on describing, in fascinating terms, the nitty-gritty of parliamentary lobbying and the detail of the reform process. He says little or nothing of the stress and fear he must have experienced when every day, in effect, he stood up and proclaimed himself a criminal. It was an act of sustained bravery which I for one salute.

Interestingly, the current debate in the gay movement is not without historical precedent. In the years immediately following 1967, Antony Grey's efforts were centred on counselling, through the medium of the Albany Trust of which he was Director until 1977. But in 1970 the gay movement in this country was galvanised by the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front, which favoured much the same radical, direct action techniques which the Queer Power movement does today. In fact it went further, drawing on feminism and establishing the notion of gay pride, making a substantial contribution to what we regard today as sexual politics. One of the most pleasing sections of the book is the author's description of GLF meetings. His immersion in reformist politics might have led one to expect an antipathy to GLF on his part; in fact he gives a heart-warming description of "political rapport" with some of the more flamboyant GLF people in those hectic crowded meetings in the LSE basement in 1970. Not all the GLF, however, shared this comradely feeling; many of them felt that the reformist movement which Antony Grey represented was "an elite, who did it by stealth".

Antony Grey is very conscious of the limitations of reform. Such were the machinations of the parliamentary lobbying process that the Act which emerged, piloted by Leo Abse, fell far short of what the HLRs wanted.

Sadly the events of the past ten years or so, with the advent of AIDS and the anti-gay backlash enthusiastically whipped up by the tabloids and religious groups, together with repressive legislation initiated by the Thatcher Government, have resulted in little progress being made.

But just a few weeks ago, London was the scene of the biggest gay demonstration ever held in this country, when 100,000 lesbians and gays from all over Europe gathered together for EuroPride '92. It went virtually unnoticed by the media, as you would expect, but it would never have taken place without the vital and courageous reforming work of the 1960s.

TED McFADYEN

The literal meaning of euthanasia is a good death, that is dying gently and free from mental or physical distress. Voluntary euthanasia implies the termination of life by painless means, induced by drugs or withholding of life-supporting substances for adults who have predetermined in writing that their death shall not be protracted in terminal illness.

Lloyd Cole stresses the desirability of the quality of life rather than its length. He writes: "I have a liking for the expression 'mercy killing'. I believe in mercy killing." But "mercy killing" is an inexact definition of euthanasia. The disease or body disorder being the killer, euthanasia is the merciful release from useless, prolonged suffering in approaching death. There is no doubt that doctors realise that they could hasten death in incurable cases, but Roman Catholic nurses and some others who believe such conditions are "the will of God" might report such action, and the practitioner would be severely disciplined by the General Medical Council.

The author asserts: "Those whose lives have no longer any meaning or purpose should be free to escape into oblivion." The Suicide Act 1961 recognises and establishes that an adult is the owner of his or her own person and may dispose of it at will. But the means of obtaining suitable drugs and effecting disposal when no other person is in a position to prevent it is a difficulty. Many countries now have societies supporting the theory of voluntary euthanasia, but to date it is only officially recognised in Holland.

Seventeen sample letters from different countries are included in the text to illustrate the crying need for euthanasia in terminal illness. In New Zealand a man was sentenced to nine months in jail for standing by a severely disabled friend — at his friend's request — while he took an overdose of sleeping pills reinforced by a pillow over his face. The sentence was rescinded following angry protests by relatives and the public.

In Britain a woman who gave her mother who was suffering with a painful and crippling disease a dose of sleeping tablets before putting a pillow over her face was told by the Judge: "I think you have suffered enough. You are obviously a caring and loving person. You did what you did because you did not want your mother to suffer."

A son and daughter gave their mother an overdose of pain-killing drugs while she was dying of cancer in hospital. Nurses revived the patient who died two weeks later. Charged with murder, the son and daughter were told by Mr Justice Tudor Evans: "I am sure that

the distress of seeing your mother's suffering was overwhelming for both of you." They were conditionally discharged for twelve months.

These cases surely emphasise the need for voluntary euthanasia to be general. And had they come before a Roman Catholic judge with strong religious convictions, it is doubtful if he would have been so compassionate and understanding. The Voluntary Euthanasia Society

aims to obtain the legal right of an adult suffering severe pain and distress to receive medical help in order to die with dignity by their own considered request.

Let me Die is a very readable book and includes a detailed index. It is obtainable from Lloyd Cole, 37 College Avenue, Maidenhead, SL6 6AZ, price £5.

CHARLES WILSHAW

The Broadcasting Standards Council — A Suitable Case for Treatment

TERRY SANDERSON

The Broadcasting Standards Council has now been in existence for four years. It was one of Mrs Thatcher's more fanciful whims, a statutory body set up to police "good taste and decency" on TV and radio, and chaired by Lord William Rees-Mogg, the well-known Christian apologist. The good Lord is assisted in his righteous endeavours by a cast of other great and good personages.

The BSC was a product of Thatcher's notorious "family values" era, when bigotry, intolerance and Whitehousism were most vocal. The original rationale was that the Council would represent the interests of viewers and listeners who were affronted by the sex, violence, blasphemy and bad taste which — we were led to believe by various Right-wing pressure groups — occupied about ninety per cent of air time.

But la Thatcher has now left the stage, and many of her more extreme religious supporters have been banished with her. The Broadcasting Standards Council remains, gobbling up public money and producing precisely nothing but a monthly bulletin and an annual report that is a model of modern prurience.

Despite the fact that there are at least four other bodies regulating what is shown on television and broadcast on radio, Lord Rees-Mogg still manages to extract one and a half million pounds a year from the Government in order to count the number of times the words "bloody" and "shit" are uttered on the airwaves. This is dressed up as "research", along with the measurement of the number of times the Almighty's name is taken in vain before the nine o'clock watershed.

The BSC is a paradise for those strange folk who go under the generic title, "Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells". The sensibilities of these people are so fragile that if the f-word (as they call it) is uttered within earshot, they are overcome with a maniacal desire to write to Lord Rees-Mogg and kick up a stink.

Mr Bartels-Waller of Norfolk (careful about the pronunciation of the final syllable of that county name) complained about the fact Channel Four had failed to bleep out all the "f-words" in a programme about a training course for members of the parachute regiment. The Committee considered that the expletives were

unacceptable when broadcast at 5pm. ("Fuck" is generally adjudged to be acceptable four hours later.) The reasoning, I suppose, is to protect children from hearing such language. Who, then is going to protect *me* from hearing the f-word (and the c-word) when I go to work on the same bus as foul-mouthed schoolchildren every morning?

Most of the BSC's complaints are rejected (only about 20 per cent have been upheld so far), but some of them are so ridiculous it's almost impossible to imagine grown-up people wasting their time (and *our* money) considering them in the first place. Mrs Bentley, of Warwickshire, for instance, objected to a parody in which Rowan Atkinson "wearing a clerical collar, was in the course of conducting a marriage service, during which, while eating a communion wafer which he dipped in communion wine, he told a story about the way in which, as a minister, he had dealt with a question about fellatio".

The BBC was asked to explain itself (thus causing more time and money to flow down the drain) and replied: "The sketch had been performed with no attempt to mimic either a church setting nor the appropriate vestments and the Elements employed had not been consecrated."

The BSC believes that there are "certain symbols whose significance is of such power to believers that their use as incidentals to an entertainment programme must be the cause of profound offence to some viewers . . . the use of the Elements as props took the sketch beyond the bounds of what could reasonably be called acceptable even in a late-night transmission."

The BSC says that its members make every effort to keep their personal feelings out of their deliberations, but a recent complaint brings this into question. A Radio 1 programme, "Loose Talk", angered a clergyman who said that "references to contraception, the Pope, Mother Teresa and God having a self-induced orgasm were beyond 'normal taste and decency' and offensive to all major Abrahamic faiths including Christianity". The BBC excised the offending lines from a repeat broadcast, but the BSC still upheld the

complaint saying that the programme had gone too far and "could reasonably be seen as holding up to contempt the profound faith of many believers". The BSC did not take into account the fact that many profoundly atheistic listeners might have been deprived of a couple of good jokes.

The sight of a publicly-funded body trying to enforce religious conformity and prevent satirical comment on religious matters is ludicrous, but it is obvious that the BSC is under intense pressure from religious individuals and institutions, and may well be vulnerable to that pressure given the track record of the chairman. When it was discovered that the allegedly blasphemous film *The Last Temptation of Christ* had been bought — but not shown — by the BBC, the Council received 1054 complaints. These had obviously been orchestrated by some evangelical organisation, and fortunately the issue fell outside the remit of the Council. The film was bought as part of a job lot, and the BBC says it has no plans to show it, but if it ever has the guts to put it on air, you can be sure that all hell will break loose.

The Council's Director, Colin Shaw, admits that he has received groups of professional representatives from different faiths (Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Jain) and a group of Christian Evangelicals. He listened for "several hours" to their maunderings about "the use of Christian Holy names as expletives". We do not know the result of these "consultations" as they are said to be confidential, but "they provided the Council with a series of valuable insights into the problems, about which the Council hopes to speak more publicly on a future occasion".

Are the religious among us becoming so sensitive that they will not tolerate any comment which is not doctrinally correct? Is their faith so weak that it won't withstand a bit of ribbing? Can't they step back a little and recognise how ludicrous their behaviour is at times, and how deserving it is of mockery? Apparently not. Look at this complaint to the Council, made by Mr Ward of Essex about a BBC2 programme called "Abroad in Britain". The programme dealt with the relationship of architecture and nature. "The words complained of, which the complainant described as blasphemous, were used to describe a furniture-making college: 'This is a fine building for a new age, for a new and less spend-thrift century, exhilarating atheism and exhilarating architecture that dignifies man and completely forgets about God, whoever He was.'"

The BBC was asked for a statement to justify the programme and said that the speaker has been "considering the possibility that the future of Western architecture might be influenced by doubts about the existence of God".

At the same time that this esoteric exchange between the BBC and BSC was taking place, the Government

was ordering the BBC to make drastic cutbacks in its expenditure. I suggest they start with the man who has to compose these ridiculous responses to daft complaints to the BSC.

If the BSC is really concerned about "standards" in broadcasting, perhaps it ought to look at a quality of some of the programmes instead of calculating what time of day it is permissible to say "Jesus!" or "bastard!" on television. British broadcasting, once a jewel in the nation's crown, is disintegrating in front of our eyes. The BBC's schedules are crammed with abysmal quiz shows and dire soap operas. The ITV companies jockey for viewers by appearing to seek out the most banal and rubbishy programmes they can find (for instance, when did you last laugh at a British TV sitcom?).

The baleful influence of that arbiter of good taste, Rupert Murdoch, and his satellite channels, are driving standards even further down. A look at Sky TV's offerings will give you some idea of what we can expect in future — trash and bilge on top of junk and crap.

Now the Government is telling us that we all have to tighten our belts and that a new round of public spending cuts are on the way. Mr Major could make a start by giving the heave-ho to the blue-noses at the Broadcasting Standards Council and putting money into the Social Fund.

"God Slot" Demoted

A requirement that independent television companies must allocate peak viewing time to religious propaganda is to end this year. Under the new licensing arrangement, the Independent Television Commission (formerly the Independent Broadcasting Authority) will not be able to force companies to screen religious programmes at a particular time, although they will still have to transmit them two hours every week.

At present the ITV "God Slot" — 6.30 pm till 7.15 pm on Sunday — is occupied by Sir Harry Secombe and *Highway*. From next January it will be restricted to ten weeks in the summer and feature films will be shown at prime time. A half-hour religious programme will go out late on Sunday nights.

Top brass at the BBC are not happy that their *Songs of Praise* (SOP for short) which is also transmitted from 6.30 pm till 7.15 pm on Sunday, will have to compete with the other side's non-religious temptations. Although denying any rumours that the hymn-singing session will be moved or even scrapped, one BBC executive admitted they were "very unhappy" about ITV's plans for Sunday.

Ernestine Rose: Reformer on Two Continents

ELLEN WINSOR

Freethought, like most 19th-century social and political movements, was dominated by men. But there are exceptions, one of the most remarkable being the now almost totally forgotten Ernestine Rose. Atheist, feminist and reformer both in Britain and the United States, Mrs Rose was a widely admired and compelling advocate of the causes she espoused. She died in Brighton a hundred years ago this month.

Ernestine Louise Rose (née Polowsky) was born on 13 January 1810 in Pierterkof, Poland, the daughter of a Jewish Rabbi. Her mother died when Ernestine was an infant and she was brought up by her father with whom she had a stormy relationship. It reached a peak when, without her consent, he betrothed her at the age of 16 to a much older man. She successfully resisted the marriage and this, together with the fact that her father married a young woman about the same age as herself, forced Ernestine to leave home and make her own way in the world.

At first she lived in Berlin, experiencing at first hand the restrictions placed on Jews concerning work, movement and permitted length of residence. She was so incensed by the situation that she secured an audience with the King of Prussia which resulted in her being granted permission to live in Berlin as long as she wished and engage in any business.

In June 1829 she journeyed to England. Her possessions were lost in transit due to shipwreck. She was introduced to Robert Owen; there are records of a brief visit to Paris during the 1830 Revolution. Back in England, she earned her living teaching languages, before marrying William Ella Rose, a London jeweller and silversmith and a follower of Robert Owen.

In May 1836 the couple left England for the United States where they settled in New York. Ernestine Rose soon devoted herself to the causes she considered right. These included the promotion of freethought, equal opportunities in education, women's rights and the abolition of slavery. She earned the reputation of being an effective and exciting lecturer, first in New York State and later as far south as Kentucky and South Carolina. According to Samuel Putman in his *Four Hundred Years of Freethought*: "Those who have listened to Ernestine L. Rose remember the vivacity and power of her imaginative eloquence. . . Certainly no orthodox man could meet her successfully in the arena of debate."

She attended the First National Convention of Infidels in 1845, occupying a seat of honour next to Robert Owen. Then aged 74, Owen was an old friend who had come to refer to her as his daughter.

Ernestine Rose was not always well received. On one occasion she went to Charleston and advertised a series of lectures on the abolition of slavery. The lectures were so unpopular that she needed help to escape the city. In 1855 she was at the centre of a feud provoked by an anti-slavery lecture she had been invited to deliver in Bangor, Maine.

During the 1850s and 1860s she was particularly concerned with the question of women's rights. In October 1854 she was elected president of the National Women's Rights Convention at Philadelphia, overcoming objections to her atheism. In 1869 she joined with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others to form the National Women Suffrage Association, fighting for both male and female suffrage.

Ernestine Rose's view on religion and the principles by which she conducted her life are summarised in her *A Defence of Atheism*. Originally a lecture delivered at Boston in 1861, it was one of six pamphlets published in her lifetime. The concluding sentences strike the present writer as being of great significance in explaining the forces that motivated Ernestine Rose.

The atheist says to the honest conscientious believer, though I cannot believe in your God whom you have failed to demonstrate, I believe in man; if I have no faith in your religion, I have faith unbounded, unshaken faith in the principles of right, of justice, and humanity. Whatever good you are willing to do for the sake of your God, I am full as willing to do for the sake of man. But the monstrous crimes the believer perpetrated in persecuting and exterminating his fellow man on account of difference of belief, the atheist, knowing that belief is not voluntary, but depends on evidence, and therefore there can be no merit in the belief of any religions, nor demerit in a disbelief in all of them, could never be guilty of. Whatever good you could do out of fear punishment, or hope of reward hereafter, the atheist would do simply because it is good; and, being so, he would receive the far surer and more certain reward, springing from well-doing, which would constitute his pleasure, and promote his happiness.

By 1869 Ernestine Rose's health had declined and in October she and her husband set sail for England. Although she was never again as active, she nevertheless continued to support the causes of freethought and women's suffrage in England. For example, in 1873 she attended a conference of the Women's Suffrage Movement in London and was speaker at a large public meeting in Edinburgh. There are records of her making a speech at the Conference of Liberal Thinkers, held at South Place Chapel, London, in 1876. Her husband died in 1882.

Even in old age, Ernestine Rose was described as beautiful. She was of medium height, with soft curls in her hair which was iron grey in colour. She was fair.



EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49.) Sunday, 6 September, 6 pm. Public Meeting.

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.

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

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1. Sunday, 20 September, 2.30 pm. Annual Reunion. Speakers from Humanist organisations. Refreshments. All welcome.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 9 September, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Lucie and John White: Our Enjoyment of the Natural World.

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EDITORIAL VACANCY

The editor of *The Freethinker* is leaving the post in December and the publishers are accepting applications to fill the vacancy. Please write to Mr G. N. Deodhekar, chairman, G. W. Foote & Company, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

Alaa Hamid, the Egyptian author already sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for blasphemy, has had a further sentence of one year imposed for "attacking Islam, mocking religion and encouraging promiscuity". The latest "offences" are contained in a book of short stories.

with pale cheeks, had attractive eyes, and spoke with a slight lisp in a foreign accent and pronunciation.

Ernestine Rose died at 39 Marine Parade, Brighton, on 4 August 1892, aged 82. She was buried beside her husband in Highgate Cemetery, north London. Her friend and neighbour, George Jacob Holyoake, officiated at the ceremony. He concluded his address: "The slave she had helped to free from the bondage of ownership, and the minds she had set free from the bondage of authority, were the glad and proud remembrances of her last days. If any around her grave shall provide memories of good done to brighten the end of life it will be equally well with them, and better for all, who have passed within their influence."

Bibliography

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Death of Mrs Rose, by J. M. Wheeler, *The Freethinker*, 14 August 1892.

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Four Hundred Years of Freethought, by Samuel P. Putman, New York 1894.

Letter

I generally enjoy reading *The Freethinker*, well written and witty. In the July issue I have especially appreciated the article by Terry Sanderson entitled "Prophet or Profit?", but I have been very dismayed, to say the least, when I read in News and Notes the article entitled "Dr Carey's Chestnuts".

This inept article, written by a Courageous Anonymous, puts a blur on your paper. To get at Dr Carey, he throws mud on people who are trying to do some good on our planet, and to make sure he succeeds invents some stupid reasons which, even if they existed, would not harm anybody. Mr Anonymous would perhaps prefer to see Mother Teresa strolling the streets of Calcutta with a gun and killing on the spot all the children she tried to help? Or would he like to do it himself?

I don't know Dr Carey, but I hope he reads the article written by our Courageous Anonymous, has a good laugh, opens his Bible and sends him the passage which says "Remove first the plank which is in your own eye and you will see better for removing the speck of straw from the eye of others". (Matthew chapter 7 verses 3,4,5)

I hope other readers have spotted the imbecility of Courageous Anonymous, who has no "regard for others as a principle of action" as he quotes.

MRS RAYMONDE CHESSUM, Bournemouth

Editorial Comment. The vast majority of readers will realise that unsigned material like News and Notes is written by the editor. And as the editor's name appears in every issue, there is no question of anonymity.

The Rev Pratt, vicar of St Simon's, Southsea, will not marry couples who have been living together unless they confess during the marriage services that they have "sinned".

Vatican's "Poisonous and Outrageous" Directive

A new document issued by the Vatican's congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gives official church approval to discrimination against homosexuals. It says they suffer from an "objective disorder", citing employment, housing and child care as areas in which "discrimination on the basis of homosexual tendencies is not unjust".

The Congregation is headed by a noted reactionary, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Its latest statement is certain to have been endorsed by the Pope.

The document has provoked hostile reaction, much of it coming from Christian quarters. A representative of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement described it as "one of the most outrageous and poisonous documents to come from the Vatican".

Describing the document as "vicious and totally lacking in humanity", George Broadhead, secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, said it was in line with numerous documents issued by the church over the last twenty years.

"Affront to Liberty"

Release, the National Drugs and Advice Service, celebrated its 25th anniversary last month by publishing a White Paper on the reform of the drug laws and a petition to the Home Secretary which appeared as a full-page advertisement in *The Times*. The petition, with over two hundred signatories, called upon the Home Secretary "to recognise that the overwhelming weight of evidence demonstrates that the prohibition of cannabis has promoted criminality, conflict and more harm to the individual and society than its use ever has".

Release points out that cannabis smoking is a common feature of British life. It is used by people of all age groups and social classes who, by participating in a recreational activity, are branded criminal.

"Not only is the prohibition of cannabis a law which lacks justification and credibility, it is also an affront to individuals' liberty and a constant threat to the welfare of significant sections of society. It is a law which has proved immoral in principle and unworkable in practice."

Prominent freethinkers who signed the petition include H. J. Blackham, Sir Hermann Bondi, Dr Colin Brewer, Professor H. J. Eysenck, Ludovic Kennedy, George Melly, Barbara Smoker and Nicolas Walter.

The Release White Paper is obtainable from Release Publications Ltd, 388 Old Street, London EC1V 1LT, price £4.20 including postage.

He added: "If lesbian and gay Catholics were expecting a change of heart, they must be sadly disappointed. They would do better to abandon this archaic institution with its entrenched Bible-based attitude to sex and embrace the sensible, rational moral values of humanism.

"They should reject all notions of gods and guilt, sin and salvation."

The Vatican statement is said to be intended as guidance for the American bishops. Another likely reason for its appearance at the present time is to divert attention from the embarrassing scandals involving paederasts among the Catholic clergy and the Church's role in shielding them.

Weekend of Bad News

A group of Hexham children who thought they were off on a fun-packed weekend returned home frightened and tearful. For there was little fun at the event which was organised by Hexham Community Church. Instead they were subjected to hours of sermonising by an evangelist named David Abbot.

Parents were furious when they heard that the children were made to sit through Mr Abbot's boring sermons. They had to close their eyes and chant in strange tongues.

One 12-year-old girl's mother complained to the police her daughter was so upset "she just sat and sobbed.

"I am appalled that people can treat young children like this. It was billed as an outward bound weekend but it turned out to be a weird preaching session. The children hated every minute of it."

Another parent said her daughter was terribly upset when she returned home.

"She hated the whole thing, particularly the chanting in strange tongues. To do this to children seems awful to me."

Mr Alf Entwistle, pastor of the Community Church, said: "It was supposed to be a weekend to establish biblical pattern of views for youngsters, to give them the principles of religious behaviour to help them face the enormous difficulties ahead of them in life."

Evangelist David Abbot belongs to something called the Good News Crusade. It seems that his Bible-thumping antics are bad news for children.

Plans to erect statues of Ancient Egyptian gods Sobek and Horus, in Hamilton, New Zealand, have been abandoned after churches objected to the setting up of "graven images".