

# The Freethinker

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## RICHARD DAWKINS AND THE MENTAL VIRUS OF RELIGIOUS FAITH

"Like computer viruses, successful mind viruses tend to be hard for the victim to detect," declared Richard Dawkins, the eminent biologist, in his 1992 Voltaire Lecture, *Viruses of the Mind*. The Lecture, given at Conway Hall, London, was arranged by the British Humanist Association on behalf of the Voltaire Trust.

Dr Dawkins said that victims of mind viruses become "impelled by some deep, inner conviction that something is true, right or virtuous: a conviction that doesn't seem to owe anything to evidence or reason". It is called "faith".

The victim may also be under the conviction that "mystery", *per se*, is "a good thing. It is not a virtue to solve mysteries. Rather we should enjoy them, even revel in their insolubility.

"Roman Catholics, whose belief in infallible authority compels them to accept that wine becomes physically transformed into blood despite all appearances, refer to the 'Mystery' of Transubstantiation. Calling it a mystery makes everything OK. All least it works for a mind well prepared by background infection. . . The 'mystery is a virtue' idea comes to the aid of the Catholic who would otherwise find intolerable the obligation to believe the obvious nonsense of Transubstantiation and the Three-in-One. . .

"Is it possible that some religious doctrines are favoured not in spite of being ridiculous but because they are ridiculous? Any wimp in religion can believe that the bread symbolically represents the body of Christ, but it takes a real, red-blooded Catholic to believe something as daft as Transubstantiation."

Dr Dawkins turned to other symptoms that a victim of the mental virus of religious faith and secondary infections may experience. He may find himself "behaving intolerantly towards vectors of rival faiths, in extreme cases even killing them or advocating their deaths. The threat to kill the distinguished novelist, Salman Rushdie, is only the latest in the long line of sad

examples".

While murder is an extreme course, Dr Dawkins said that suicide in the militant cause of faith is even more extreme.

"Of course suicide, like murder, is a mixed blessing. Would-be converts may be repelled, or even treat with contempt a faith that is perceived as insecure enough to need such tactics.

"More obviously, if too many individuals sacrifice themselves the supply of believers could run low. This was true of a notorious example of faith-inspired suicide. The People's Temple sect went extinct when its leader, the Reverend Jim Jones, led the bulk of his followers from the United States to the Promised Land of Jonestown in the Guyanan jungle where he persuaded more than 900 of them, children first, to drink cyanide. . .

"Admittedly, the Reverend Jones conned only a few thousand people. But his case is extreme, the tip of an iceberg. The same eagerness to be conned by religious leaders is widespread.

"Most of us would have been prepared to bet that nobody could get away with going on television and saying in all but so many words 'Send me your money, so that I can use it to persuade other suckers to send me their money too'. Yet today, in every major conurbation in the United States, you can find at least one television channel entirely devoted to this transparent confidence trick.

"And they get away with it in sackfuls. Faced with suckerdome on this awesome scale, it is hard not to feel a grudging sympathy with the shiny-suited conmen. Until you realise that not all the suckers are rich and that it is often the widows' mites on which the evangelists are growing fat."

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*Viruses of the Mind*, by Richard Dawkins.  
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# THE FREETHINKER

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# NEWS

On commencing my third stint as editor in September 1981, I expected to act in that capacity for at least three and at most five years. As it turned out, I am only now leaving the post, the unfailing support of contributors and readers having encouraged me to continue for so long. It would be impossible to list the names of all who have assisted, but two, Jim Herrick and Nicolas Walter, must be mentioned. I am particularly appreciative of writers who contributed articles and reviews, often despite other pressing commitments. Warm appreciation is also expressed to readers who have been so responsive to appeals for newspaper reports and donations to the Fund. The Board of G. W. Foote & Company has been invariably supportive, never interfering in editorial matters. We all owe much to John Cummins of Bristows Printers, our printers; and to the late Ted Biles of David Neil & Company, our former printers. Finally, it would be ungracious to depart without expressing hearty thanks for considerable assistance received from Christians who are adept at shooting themselves in the foot. Televangelism in the United States, moving statues in Ireland, the Turin Shroud and liquefying blood in Italy, the Virgin Mary on the wing from pillar to post — all have added to the gaiety (and scepticism) of nations. William McIlroy.

Inevitably this is a retrospective "News and Notes", recalling some of the highlights and low points during a period of just over eleven years.

It has been a testing time, with defence of past gains taking precedence over campaigning for further reforming measures. For while going on the offensive is far more exciting, it is just as important to hold the line and avoid the ever-present temptation to drop our guard. Even before September 1981, there had been a discernible swing to the Right in British politics. The elevation of Margaret Thatcher to the premiership, "because it's time to give a woman a chance", was the most disastrous political event in post-war Britain. During the 1980s there was a revival of the worst of Victorian values: fiercely reactionary and uncaring attitudes, jingoism and the suppression of dissent.

However, unlike the United States, where Reaganism overwhelmed Thatcherism, Britain was not attendant barmy notions like creationism and "end-time" rapturism. True, this country was invariably included on the itinerary of jet-setting religious undesirables like Pope John Paul II and the American televangelist, Morris Cerullo. While they attracted the converted and committed in impressive numbers, public enthusiasm for their pronouncements seldom exceeded the level of blood heat. Even Roman Catholics took

# S AND NOTES

little notice of the Holy non-Father's exhortations to eschew contraception, while Brother Cerullo was generally recognised as a religious charlatan whose "faith healing" quackery was both ludicrous and dangerous.

Previously the mildest criticism of any religion emanating from the south or east of Ramsgate provoked indignant protests and accusations of racism. However, religious ecumenists and political innocents were eventually compelled to face the reality of Islam as a menace to personal freedom and social harmony. Islamic terrorism surfaced in Britain, with book-burning in Bradford and hordes of Muslims rampaging through the streets of London in support of Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence on Salman Rushdie for writing a novel.

Islam was not the only religion engendering disorder and fanaticism during the 1980s. In Northern Ireland, one of the few remaining areas of the British Isles inhabited by God-fearing, Bible-believing Christians, religious intolerance continued to be a major factor in the violence that has resulted in more than two thousand deaths since 1969. Endeavours by a minority of Christians — mainly Quakers and Unitarians — to promote good communal relations could not obscure the fact that the Christian majority and Christian institutions, like the sinister Orange Order, bear much of the responsibility for yet another religious war.

Despite the best (and worst) efforts of our opponents, important reforms achieved during the 1960s and 1970s were, for the most part, successfully defended. The reactionaries' chief target continued to be the Abortion Act 1967, which withstood every assault from both inside and outside Parliament. Religious pressure groups operating under the "pro-life" umbrella mounted numerous dirty tricks campaigns, including harassment of abortion clinic staff and patients exercising their legal rights.

Sunday observance, an issue that has concerned the freethought movement for well over a century, is a quaint custom now practised in parts of the Scottish Highlands and the Western Isles. But less than a decade ago the Lord's Day Observance Society could triumphantly announce a mighty victory for "Our Lord and His Day" — prevention of a Sunday antiques market at Newark. While we know of no plans to change the name of the LDOS journal, at present called *Joy and Light*, Sabbatarians have little to be joyous about. Despite heavenward supplications by the LDOS and the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, there has been

an enormous increase in Sunday activities, particularly sport and shopping. Although the campaign to rationalise Sunday trading laws suffered a hiccup when the Shops Bill was defeated in 1986, the restrictive Shops Act 1950 is a dead duck.

Demands that blasphemy law should be extended to protect erstwhile "false faiths" like Islam were forcefully, and so far successfully, resisted by literary, libertarian and secularist organisations. Initial support for extension was withdrawn by the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Remembering that his Established Church already enjoyed such protection, Dr Runcie was no doubt also mindful of the fact that orthodoxy in Canterbury may be blasphemy in Constantinople. And he could not have been unaware of the fact that converts from Islam to Christianity literally go in fear of life and limb in countries where the Prophet's law is supreme.

With hundreds of churches closing or being sparsely attended, Christians attempted to attract public interest with missions, marches for Jesus, the Decade of Evangelism and other gimmicks. They were also determined to retain their privileges, including access to captive audiences. Here they had much success, particularly in the nation's classrooms.

For many years teachers had taken into account pupils' non-Christian and even non-religious backgrounds when arranging assemblies and RE lessons. But the Education Reform Act 1988 strengthened Christianity's legal position in the system by decreeing that religious education and observance must be "mainly Christian" in content. Fortunately teachers are using their judgement and initiative to ensure that schools do not become part-time churches. But a head teacher who tries to broaden the content of religious education risks being hauled before the school authorities if a complaint is made by Christian parents or members of staff.

The 1988 Act also encouraged Islamic leaders to become more aggressive in their demands for State-funded separate schools in which Muslim Children would be strictly segregated. They have been supported by (mainly Labour) MPs and councillors, partly on grounds of equity but in many cases fearing that opposition would incur the racist slur and lose Asian votes.

Surveys conducted since 1981 have consistently revealed a decline in religious belief, commitment and observance. Of course there were anomalies. Fundamentalist churches and groups attracted a substantial following, particularly among Africans and West Indians whose recent ancestors were Christian-owned slaves. And despite being put in their third-class place by biblical authority and kept there for centuries by institutionalised Christianity, women continued to play a key role in keeping the old firm going.

After many years of clamour and campaigning, the

General Synod of the Church of England has just agreed to the ordination of women (a momentous decision which must be approved by Members of Parliament who include atheists, agnostics, Roman Catholics, Jews and assorted Dissenters). The church is seriously divided following the Synod vote, which was not the result of some new revelation from On High.

And at what cost? One churchman, Canon Grigg, of Cottingham, North Humberside, has told parishioners that the destructive fire at Windsor Castle may be an act of divine retribution for the General Synod's presumption. Could be: the Almighty Vandal struck York Minster in similar fashion when Dr David Jenkins was appointed Bishop of Durham!

## Humanists and the Supernatural

KARL HEATH

Does the current vogue for fantasy conceal a deeper and perhaps sinister trend to irrationalism and anti-intellectualism in the face of current world problems?

Once upon a time it was a shilling spent in a fortune-teller's tent at a village garden fête, or a holiday joke at a palmist's, or Gypsy Rose Lee on Blackpool's "Golden Mile". Now, as this scientific century draws to a close, primitive sooth-saying has become a multi-million pound business catering for clients who really believe in it. The Sunday tabloids' classified columns contain dozens of advertisements for "Tarot Readings" on 0898. Five minutes will cost more than £2, with more rake-off to add to British Telecom's sad and sleazy pornography.

As a child I was rather fearful of a drawing in an old book, showing an emaciated, half-naked man, bearded with staring eyes, and with a flat pan of burning charcoal on his head. His name, I think, was Solomon something, and he roamed the streets of London during the Great Plague of 1665, no doubt crying "Woe, woe, the Day of Judgement is at hand". The declining years of the Roman Empire spawned armies of diviners, astrologers, necromancers, thaumaturgists, not to mention the crazed followers of Heliogabalus. As we approach the end of the millennium there will be a surge of Rapture, Armageddon fantasies and apocalyptic derangement. Nor will applied science entirely stem it. Market forces ally technology with fantasy in escapist games like Nintendo.

How should Humanists react? While challenging traditional, established and institutional religion, some Humanists appear tempted by mysticism. I recall the "near-death" experiences which fascinated some *Freethinker* readers not long ago. Twelve years ago, a Midlands Humanist group which, to avoid embarrassment, I will not name, was apparently taken over by astrologers. They sent a three-man delegation to the Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group in a vain effort to convert us.

It is my view, with which not all readers will agree, that Humanists should be rationalist, atheist and materialist. I know there are a few odd exceptions, like the philosopher, John McTaggart, who managed to be

an idealist atheist, rejecting both God and matter. I accept the criticism that the word "matter" itself is a metaphysical term. Here we are limited by language. No intelligent person today thinks we are talking about solid lumps of something. We can accept energy, relativity, the time-element, "events in space-time" and the Heraclitean flux. The vulgar error which associates materialism with a desire for physical possessions deserves only contempt. By materialism I mean a view of the Universe as it presents itself to us, and of which we are ourselves a part, not just dwellers but part of the structure. The Universe presents itself to us through the limited senses of a short-lived species, but with the accumulated knowledge of our ancestors. With our reasoning power we try to make sense out of the small body of information which is significant to us. We can use our imagination, we can contemplate possibilities and assess probabilities. We can project hypotheses. We can nibble away at the mysteries, fractionally pushing back the boundary between the known and the unknown. But we should acknowledge that the region of the unknown will, for ever, vastly, if not infinitely, exceed the known. Above all, we should not, with dogmatic assertion, people the unknown with gods, ghosts, goblins, or any other creatures of our imagination. Transcendentalism, metaphysics and dogma are not for Humanists unless we wish to revert to the level of primitive spells, incantations and witch-dances.

If, as W. B. Yeats wrote long ago in *The Second Coming*, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", we need clear pools of rationality in a world threatened by disintegration. Otherwise, without rationality, we might await the sinister mysticism of Yeats's continuation:

"And what rough beast, his hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

**A baby has died and 22 people are being treated for polio in the Netherlands. The outbreak is confined to Reformed Protestant communities who refuse vaccination. It is against their religious beliefs to prevent an illness inflicted by God.**

# Family Values: a Christmas Meditation

T. F. EVANS

*A little more than kin and less than kind.*

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

*The family? Whose family? What family? The Holy Family? The Royal Family? The Swiss Family Robinson?*

Bernard Shaw, *On the Rocks*.

In Shaw's play, Sir Arthur Chavender is the Conservative Prime Minister of a National Government. The time is the 1930s, not to be confused with the period of any later administration, let alone one in the present day. When the play opens, there is a serious unemployment crisis and the Prime Minister who is, to outward view at least, not a man to allow such things to disturb him, sits reading *The Times* — as if that is likely to help him. When he starts work with his secretary, he remembers that he has to prepare a speech to deliver at Church House that afternoon. Although apparently supported in the coalition by Opposition members, he chooses to speak on the theme of "How Socialism will break up the family".

By a remarkable coincidence, this theme has been discussed from time to time in recent election campaigns. It is perhaps more generally stated in a form that the party putting forward the idea — the Conservatives in Britain or the Republicans in the United States — believe that it is necessary to maintain family values. This is usually interpreted to mean, for it is rarely stated directly, a married couple (legally married that is, preferably in church) with a number of children, the whole group bathed in warm domestic harmony.

The other side of the coin is, of course, a firm opposition to any unorthodoxy, such as free love, cohabitation without the approval of the church or State, illegitimate children, easy divorce, abortion, homosexual unions or promiscuity of any kind. This attitude encourages the view that anyone who indulges in these or similar excesses is not only on his way to eternal damnation, but striking blows against the sanctity of private property, the nation and the future of civilisation itself.

There is a moment in Shaw's play, however, when Sir Arthur, temporarily losing the thread of his remarks asks the secretary, very sharply, to be more precise and to tell him exactly which family he is supposed to be talking about. He then adds ruminatively: "Has it occurred to you, Miss Hanways, that the prospect of Socialism destroying the family may not be altogether unattractive?"

Of the families mentioned by Sir Arthur when he is

trying to regain his current of thought, we may ignore the Swiss Family Robinson as liable to take us into wider fields than may be strictly relevant to our present purpose. But the Holy Family and the Royal Family are, if not always in the thoughts of all of us, frequently invoked by those who think that these family units should in some way provide guidance to those who need examples of a way of life on which to model their own. If, however, the matter is examined with care, very great difficulties are soon encountered.

To begin at the beginning, we come across a very strange being called God the Father. It is not clear when this term was first applied to the Deity, or by whom. There are, however, certain contradictions which have never been satisfactorily explained. The very word "father" implies the act of begetting. This act is one that cannot be committed by one person alone. There must be an accomplice, or partner, which must be a better word. Nowhere do we find God the Mother as a parallel term. (We do come across the Mother of God, but to go further along that road would make an involved subject more complicated still.)

It will be answered that the term "Father" is used of God in a purely metaphorical sense, to signify one who is in a special relation to the human race, all of them, past, present and future, and that it is the same as the relation of a father to a single child. Here is the difficulty. The idea of God the Father being the father of the entire human family, as the father in the usual sense is the father of children begotten upon his wife or wives, is all very well in its way. But it poses the question: which came first? There is only one answer. The man came first who thought of his God as his father. In other words, man created God in his image and not the other way around. Nothing wrong with that, it might be thought, but it does knock the essential idea of fatherhood, with which we began, rather sideways.

If we leave God the original Father and come down a few generations to the Holy Family as usually thought of, we find that it is not a family at all, in the sense that the word has later come to be understood. It is often remarked that Mary, the Virgin Mother (this is a stumbling block at the centre) has either "lived in sin" or is actually living "in sin" at the time of the birth of her child. (There is some ground for believing that "No room at the inn" did not mean what it said, but was simply a form of words used by an ultra-respectable hotelier who had to maintain standards by refusing to accommodate a couple of obviously dubious character, and did not wish to cause unnecessary pain in his refusal.) It is not altogether clear where Joseph the

joiner (James Joyce's term) came from in the first place, nor when and whither he eventually disappeared. What seems clear is that Mary became the head of a one-parent family.

It is just possible that, were her predicament to be translated to the present day, an unworthy motive might be suggested. Thus at the Conservative Party conference only a few weeks ago, Mr Peter Lilley, the clever and sensitive Secretary of State for Social Security, clearly benefiting from his expensive education at Dulwich and Cambridge, recited an extremely witty and amusing parody of Ko-Ko's song in W. S. Gilbert's *The Mikado*. A line listing those "who never would be missed" included "Young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing list." It is hardly necessary to add that this felicitous sally was very well received by the assembled Conservatives who were assured by Mr Lilley: "Make no mistake, the family is under threat from the Left. They hate it because it is a bastion against the dominant State."

To turn from the Holy Family to the Royal Family is to move into a world which — and this is hardly surprising — may be called "down to earth". If we go back no further than Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth, from whose reigns may be dated the peculiar English compromise of the union of Church and State, we find at once that neither monarch can fit into an orthodox pattern of family life of the kind Mr Lilley must have had in mind when he was looking for a bastion against the State.

It was not until two more centuries had passed that anything like the present-day idea of a "normal" family occupied the royal palaces. Even then, it was not normal in the accepted sense, as the father, being only the Prince Consort, was not the head of the family. Albert's death made the full family life of the royal couple shorter than it might have been and, in any event, it can hardly be said that Queen Victoria's relations with her children were of the kind which supports the idea of the Royal Family as an example to all subjects.

Perhaps the reign of George VI and his Queen Elizabeth may be thought to have given us an ideal of the domestic virtues. But it is not easy to see in exactly what way anyone has profited from such an example.

There are those who suggest that the union of our present Queen and her husband (again not the head of the family in the accepted sense) has not always been of the happiest. Whatever the truth of this, it has to be admitted that — whether the parents are to be blamed or not — the children of the present Queen have not been successful in the marriage stakes.

There is, of course, no question of throwing stones here. The very fact of a royal marriage, with all the idiocy of the sycophantic articles in the papers and

magazines, makes the situation so far removed from normal that failure is almost inevitable. Those who live by publicity are almost sure to die by publicity. To expect anything that can remotely be called "normal" is to ask for the impossible. And to think that a royal marriage can set the rest of us an example that will set up a bastion against whatever Mr Lilley or anyone else thinks should be withstood, is also expecting the impossible.

When we look for guidance in the difficult area of family life, therefore, we may find that the Holy Family and the Royal Family tend to produce more problems rather than to solve existing ones.

We are still left with the question posed in Mr Lilley's remarks at the Conservative Party conference. In what way can the family serve as a bastion against anything that we feel ought to be opposed or which is likely to imperil our security? An unworthy thought which comes to mind is that, if the defence of the family is always put first, the members will not have the time or energy to cultivate an interest in the well-being of anyone outside the family circle. However, we have to ask what is the family circle? Is it simply a small unit behind its neat curtains, oblivious to the affairs of the rest of the world if those affairs do not touch them directly and immediately? Not even the most fervent advocate of the theory that there is no such thing as society could go as far as that.

The question remains: is the family that must be preserved, the values of which are so important, just a small collection of individuals concerned with their own future? Even if the answer were affirmative, it would present greater difficulties in view of the great change in the position of the family from what it was, say, a hundred years ago. One-parent families have already been mentioned. For various reasons, the absence of a marriage bond, or the breakdown of such a bond through divorce (the figures rise inexorably) or more separation, the number of one-parent families will increase. Society, because it does exist, must concern itself and give help where necessary. So, as the politicians say when it suits them, we are all members of one family. It goes even further. We are all members of one human family. Famine, disease and death know no frontiers. They do not concern themselves with class, colour, creed, party programmes, or religious faiths.

Bernard Shaw, with whom we began, contended that "families are not kept together at present by family feeling but by human feeling". We, including ministers of the Crown and the Conservative Christian Fellowship, of which Mr Lilley is a Patron, might do well to remember this and the chilling fact that the majority of crimes of personal violence, including murder, are committed inside the family circle.

# Henry Hetherington: Champion of a Free Press

ELLEN WINSOR

This year marks the bicentenary of the birth of Henry Hetherington (1792-1849). Starting as a "Freethinking Christian", he came to abandon all religious belief, declaring in his will that he did not believe "in the popular notion of an Almighty, All-wise and Benevolent God". Hetherington defended many good causes and throughout his life he resolutely opposed tyranny by Church and State.

Henry Hetherington, like other nineteenth-century freethinkers, was a political radical who regarded his freethought as a philosophy or creed which underpinned his views on social, economic and political issues. Such freethinkers pioneered a variety of causes, including birth control, women's rights, the extension of the franchise and a free, unstamped press.

Henry Hetherington was born in Soho, London. (It has proved impossible to ascertain the exact date of his birth.) He served an apprenticeship as a printer with Thomas Hansard, who printed the parliamentary debates. By the early 1820s he was advocating the cooperative ideas of Robert Owen. At first he seems to have stood outside the mainstream of atheistic freethought and in fact found himself in dispute with Richard Carlile over his issue. Instead he joined a group of "Freethinking Christians" from whose standpoint he endorsed the right of every person to express religious views without hindrance.

The cause of a free press is the one with which Hetherington was most closely associated. To hear some modern commentators speak, one might assume that a free press is a traditional right of the English granted them by their rulers without demur. This is far from the case. In the eighteenth century a system of total censorship operated. By the 1830s this situation had evolved to a point whereby the circulation of radical, working-class newspapers was limited by a stamp duty which had been set at fourpence in 1815. These taxes put newspapers out of the reach of most working people and were referred to as "the taxes upon knowledge" by radicals of the day. In case the stamp duty proved inadequate on its own, the laws on blasphemous or seditious libel acted as a further restraint on press freedom.

On 9 July 1831, Hetherington issued the first penny newspaper in England. It was called *The Poor Man's Guardian*. He made no secret of his intentions, stating in his opening address that the aims of the newspaper included an intention "to excite hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution" and to defy the stamp tax legislation. In the place where the stamp usually appeared was a drawing of a printing press and

the words "Liberty of the Press" and "Knowledge is Power". The fourth issue included an appeal for "some hundreds of POOR MEN out of employ who have NOTHING TO RISK. . . to sell to the poor and ignorant". Not only were volunteers found, but a score of other unstamped papers sprang up, notably Richard Carlile's *Gauntlet* and Joshua Hobson's *Voice of the West Riding*. Collectively, they formed the "great unstamped". These closely printed weeklies comprised a working-class press which carried news of the great struggles of the 1830s concerned with general unionism, the lock-outs of 1834 and protests over the Tolpuddle Martyrs case. They also included debate and exposition of socialist and trade union theory.

Convictions were soon secured against Hetherington; between 1831 and 1835 he suffered three terms of incarceration totalling almost a year. During these periods allies such as James Watson ensured that *The Poor Man's Guardian* continued to be published. Several hundred vendors served prison terms, but for each one imprisoned there seemed to have been at least one replacement. The tactics used were as varied as they were ingenious. They carried copies of the newspapers in their hats and pockets. They left them in safe places "to be called for". When the Government actually empowered officers to seize parcels, open them in the streets and take out any unstamped publications, Hetherington made up dummy parcels and sent off a youth with them in one direction with instructions to attract a large crowd and delay officers if they seized him. Meanwhile, the real parcel was sent off by a different route. Hetherington's own determination was illustrated by a letter which he wrote from Clerkenwell Prison in which he stated: "Had I 20,000 lives I would sacrifice them all rather than succumb to such mean, such dastardly, such malignant reptiles."

The use of the law in an attempt to suppress the unstamped was as ineffective as it was cruel. As is so often the case, legal and governmental actions against publications only served to popularise them. In recognition of this and as an unintended tribute to the courage of Hetherington and his followers, the stamp duty on newspapers was reduced to one penny in 1836, although it was not finally abolished until 1857.

Hetherington's experiences in the early 1830s seemed to have radicalised him still further. He became active in the Chartist movement, alongside William Lovett whose "moral force" approach he advocated rather than the "physical force" of Feargus O'Connor. He also continued as a freethought publisher and bookseller. In

1840 Hetherington was tried for blasphemous libel for publishing Charles Haslam's *Letters to the Clergy of All Denominations*, a penny anti-Christian weekly that exposed scriptural contradictions. He defended himself gamely but unsuccessfully, serving another four months in prison when he failed to pay the fine.

On his release Hetherington decided to expose what he perceived as an aspect of the hypocrisy of the authorities. He had never been prosecuted for selling copies of Shelley's *Queen Mab* and suspected this was because it was also sold by "respectable" booksellers. To make his point he purchased a copy of Shelley's works from the publisher Edward Moxon and then brought a private prosecution against Moxon himself. Hetherington won his case, despite the fact that the bookseller was defended by an outstanding barrister of the time. Moxon was never imprisoned because the prosecution did not request sentencing. Moreover, Hetherington may have realised his main objective in that blasphemy prosecutions against all serious works of literature ceased.

Hetherington died of cholera in 1849. Shortly before his death he prepared a "last will and testament" which comprised a classic statement of freethought principles and demonstrated how far he had modified his views since his early days as a "Freethinking Christian". Many of the following extracts are as appropriate today as they were then:

*In the first place, then — I calmly and deliberately declare that I do not believe in the popular notion of the existence of an Almighty, All-wise and Benevolent God — possessing intelligence, and conscious of his own operations; because these attributes involve such a mass of absurdities and contradictions, so much cruelty and injustice on His part to the poor and destitute portion of His creatures — that, in my opinion, no rational reflecting mind can, after disinterested investigation, give credence to the existence of such a Being. 2nd. I believe death to be an eternal sleep — that I shall never live again in this world, or another, with a consciousness that I am the same identical person that once lived. . . 3rd. I consider priestcraft and superstition the greatest obstacle to human improvement and happiness. . . 4th. I have considered that the only religion useful to man consists exclusively of the practice of morality, and in the mutual interchange of kind actions. . . 5th. As I have lived so I die, a determined opponent of their (the religionists,) nefarious and plundering system, I wish my friends, therefore, to deposit my remains in unconsecrated ground, and trust they will allow no priest, or clergyman, of any denomination, to interfere in any way at my funeral.*

Over a thousand people attended Hetherington's funeral at Kensal Green Cemetery, where his friend, George Jacob Holyoake, delivered the graveside

oration. White was worn rather than black. The hearse was covered with silk a banner bearing the words: "We ought to endeavour to leave the world better than we found it." Hetherington was certainly true to this principle himself and left behind a press which was freer than he found it.

I consider it extraordinary that there is no full-length biography of an individual who made such an outstanding contribution to one of the cornerstones of our liberal democracy. The lack of recognition which this involves for Hetherington's work can only contribute to the absurd notion that squabbles over whether or not editors of tabloid newspapers should publish the latest batch of compromising photographs of members of the Royal Family has something to do with their determination to maintain press freedom. Bunk!

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## Letters

### TOOTHLESS WATCHDOG

Terry Sanderson's "Democracy and Freedom of the Press" (November) was OK so far as it went. But in comparison with the undemocratic Government practice of muzzling the press by means of "D" notices, on the excuse of national security, Terry Sanderson is dealing with trivia. Neither the press, be it Tory or otherwise, nor television, are allowed to "play an essential role as watchdog" when it comes to matters of vital importance in our lives. It is interesting to reflect that whereas the trivial *Sun* tops the league in having "three times as many complaints against it upheld as any other newspaper", it is papers like the *Guardian* that pose a threat to governments.

ERNIE CROSSWELL, Slough

### PUBLIC RIGHT OR PERSONAL PRIVACY?

Whilst agreeing with Terry Sanderson's general comments on the pitiful state of the press in this country, I must take exception to his wish for the private lives of public figures to avoid scrutiny. At a time when the religious Right is increasingly using political power to impose their views on the public in such matters as abortion and education — like the recent outbursts by Education Secretary of State, John Patten — there is a clear connection between public and private lives. Accordingly, hypocrisy of the kind recently seen in the cases of Virginia Bottomley and David Mellor should be brought to light.

Like Terry Sanderson, I question Rupert Murdoch's aims, but feel that ultimately the present flawed structure is better than a silent and fettered press.

W. W. HILL, London E7



# Good to be Human

CHARLES WARD

Long before Darwin put the cat among the pigeons, so to speak, a member of our species, *homo sap.*, suffered an identity crisis. Somewhere in ancient Greece, I understand.

It wasn't merely the interesting thought that our remote ancestors might have descended, maybe in quite a literal sense, from the hairy ones that swung among the tree-tops. He had seen these creatures during his travels. The idea amused him, the resemblance being hard to miss.

What really puzzled him was not how much he was animal, vegetable or mineral — you could trace these elements all down the line until you got to the dust into which one's body finally crumbled. It was whether in essence members of our race were virtuous or vicious.

Considering those he had met, it was easy to place a few of them into one category or the other. But most were a mixture of good and bad qualities. It was the same with himself.

Sometimes rather unsavoury aspects came to the fore: at other times what seemed undoubtedly noble and worthy. Which was our real nature? he wondered.

Other creatures didn't care, apparently, whether their behaviour could be morally approved. Apes were apathetic on the subject, so far as he could tell. There was no way of making them talk. Come to that, few of his own kind, however garrulous, gave any place to virtue as a topic of conversation. About lack of virtue it was cool to boast, or at least pretend. It could raise a laugh. To talk of goodness froze camaraderie in its tracks.

Funny thing, that, since he was keen on learning more about it. Many others possibly felt the same as he did. Like himself, they rarely got round to it for fear of embarrassment. You muddled on in ignorance and got a somewhat cock-eyed view of the whole business.

*Homo* looked for a convenient plinth on which to park his posterior. He slumped there, elbow on knee, chin cupped in hand, and pondered.

Folk had become civilized — that is, they had got to be townies, living in stationary organised communities with all mod. cons. There was a useful arrangement whereby slaves did all the menial work. That allowed types like himself to sit and think. Not that he was being idle. Thinking was hard graft and sometimes gave him a headache.

Being civilised meant you had to have a lot more rules than nomads such as your ancestors had been. Those thieving bastards saw your prosperous life-style as offering easy pickings. They'd attack if they got half a chance. So you needed a planned defence. Government came in there — and in all sorts of other ways. Rules

were made and they had to be seen to be obeyed.

Of course, like those wandering hordes, you were not expected to steal from you own mates. With others — well, you had more or less a free hand. You could even fight and kill them — in a disciplined fashion — when is suited policy, but it wasn't permissible to polish off just anybody you happened to dislike.

All that was plain enough. Good behaviour was socially convenient. Mind you, there were plenty who thought that obeying authority was more than enough in the line of duty. If they could get away with less, they did.

On the other hand, believe it or not, there were some odd customers who liked to do more than what was actually demanded or expected. Nor was that all. There were some who, in certain situations, grew dissatisfied with the prescribed response. "What *ought* I to do?" they asked themselves, and produced their own answers.

That was when real trouble began because it led to cocking a snook at authorities whose traditions required you to keep in line. Peculiar. They weren't all of them red-necked rebels spoiling for conflict. Besides, punishments meted out for such flagrant irresponsibility could be exceedingly painful, not to say terminal.

The spiritual top brass, of course, had a PR job and kept the State machinery well-oiled with reassuring ritual, but they didn't help you over this big question. Virtue as such was not given high priority. It was more a matter of being respectful in the appropriate fashion. But then, priests weren't Thinkers.

Poor *homo sap.*, you may feel. He didn't arrive at much of an answer. Well, how could he, so long as he kept asking the wrong question?

It has taken a long time for a small percentage of humanity to work through such misleading actions as that human nature is essentially either good or bad. It is just beginning to dawn on some of us that all we have is moral potential. Human beings are capable of extreme wickedness and of almost incredible nobility. The choice between good and evil is ours alone and is imposed neither by "God" nor by "Nature".

Most of us deplore what in one way or another we have come to see as immoral behaviour, but, while our "consciences" (a popular term which tends to suggest an unreal equivalence of moral perception among us) betray considerable differences in culture and experience, we agree that "to err is human". That being so, *amoral* behaviour is, by contrast, inhuman. What is superlatively human is the longing for, and the pursuit of, a quality of character which, without the specious aid of religious promises and threats, will reflect a genuine sense of human dignity.

**MARIE STOPES AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION**, by June Rose. Faber and Faber, £14.99

My first ever clandestine read was of Marie Stopes's book, *Married Love*. This was in the early 1940s when a much-thumbed and discreetly brown-papered-covered copy was passed under desks at the girls' grammar school I attended. A decade or so later I visited the London birth control clinic carrying the Stopes name, flashing the engagement ring that in the 1950s was an essential passport to contraception for unmarried women.

Thus Marie Stopes was a dominant influence on the sexual behaviour and knowledge of women of my generation. This fascinating 246-page book shows her even greater influence in less enlightened earlier times and is a compulsive read from beginning to end.

My only caveat is with the author's irritating propensity — particularly in the early pages — to indulge in (pseudo?) psychoanalysis of her subject's behaviour and motivations. This appears to spring from a desire to be kind and to express in gentler terms what most people would interpret as the harsh, insensitive, domineering, egotistical and selfish behaviour that characterised most of Marie Stopes's private and public relationships.

For example, when her war-wounded future spouse, Humphrey Roe, was recuperating, Marie wrote to his commanding officer suggesting the invalid should spend a few days with Dr Stopes; she mentioned neither that she was not a medical doctor nor anything about her gender or their relationship. June Rose describes this as exemplifying "how she (Marie) loved the sport of intrigue", whilst to most of us, I suspect, it was another example of the behaviour of a woman who would go to any lengths to get what she wanted.

In fact there is no need for interpretation or comment; there is material in abundance that stands on its own. After Marie's death in 1958 a three-ton lorry was needed to transport her papers; much of this biography is drawn from these letters and documents producing authoritative authenticity throughout. In today's jargon, Marie would have been described as a polymath; her interests, skills and endeavours were widespread and pursued with unbelievable, inexhaustible energy, leaving one breathlessly wondering how she fitted it all in.

She wrote plays, novels, film scripts, poetry and stories, many of them published and/or performed. Most of these drew on her real-life experience and, in June Rose's words, "she used her own life as the raw

material to wreak change in social attitudes with startling courage and with equally startling indifference to other people's feelings". She was involved in massive libel cases herself and was instrumental, for example, in having criminal charges against Margaret Sanger, one of the American pioneer birth controllers, dropped in the US. At the same time she was giving lectures on the various modes of preservation of fossil plants and writing learned articles for botanical and geological journals.

Her academic achievements which today are almost forgotten were among a wide range of "firsts". She was the first woman at Munich University to achieve a PhD in botany with honours: she was the youngest Doctor of Science in England — and indeed throughout the time when she was notorious for her other activities she continued to lecture about coal on a wide variety of platforms.

Other "firsts" included a letter to *The Times* before the First World War advocating "living in sin", "because of the professional restrictions on married women". After her first marriage she kept her own name, something almost unheard of at that time. When writing *Married Love* (a handbook on "how to obtain sexual gratification and sustain romance in modern marriage from the woman's point of view") it is highly likely that her own marriage was unconsummated — or at least that is what she said as well as having a doctor testify to her "qualified virginity" when she (successfully) sought a declaration of nullity of her marriage. She opened the first birth control clinic in Britain which was first in the world to attempt scientific research among its clients.

Having taken on the Established Church with her book, *Wise Parenthood*, and its justification of sexual intercourse as an act of "extreme value itself. . . separate and distinct from its basis as the procreation of children", one might have expected Marie to have been a rationalist. Her mother, Charlotte, had been a "prominent member of the Rational Dress Society" which was supported by many who had rejected religious as well as sartorial orthodoxy.

However, Marie viewed herself as somebody hearing and bearing God's message. One message she "received" resulted in a pamphlet titled *A New Gospel to all Peoples; a Revelation of God Uniting Physiology and the Religions of Man*. A copy of this was sent by her to each of the 267 Bishops attending the 1920 Lambeth Conference. She wrote to them: "I speak to you in the name of God. You are his priests. I am his Prophet. . .". (Marie's feminism clearly did not extend to

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contemplating the possibility of God as female!)

But it was not only Bishops who were on the receiving end of her megalomania. She pursued energetic public relations on her own behalf wherever appropriate — and often where inappropriate as well — leaving no (upperclass) stone unturned in her self-promotion. For example, undeterred by the non-acceptance of *Married Love* when, in 1920, she sent copies to Queen Mary and then Queen Alexandra the Queen Mother, she followed up a quarter of a century later by sending it to the then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip as a wedding gift for them “to read together”. In 1940 she visited the Home Secretary and then sent a letter suggesting she should join the Cabinet.

Notwithstanding her progressive views on some sexual matters, she alienated and refused to work with others in the birth control lobbies here and in the US; this was not only because of anxiety to hold on to her own unique position but also to distance herself from those who believed abortion could be justified. In terminology reminiscent of Mother Theresa today, Marie wrote: “Abortion not only temporarily causes ill health but often corrupts the woman’s potential motherhood for the rest of her life and is so bad for the race that it is a disaster greater than any German bombing of this country.”

This theme of race purity was a thread that ran through all her writings and motivated much of her work. In many ways her obsession with race and Empire was typical of her time and is exemplified in a passage from a play she wrote in 1916: “. . . is it not wrong that. . . all the fine clean strong young men. . . who go out to be killed should leave no sons to carry on the race; but that the cowards and unhealthy ones that remain behind can all have wives and children?” This explains for me, after many years of wondering, why the contraceptive pessaries dispensed by her clinics were labelled “racials”!

Despite Marie’s undoubted intellectual capacity, many of her views suggest she was a rather silly, unthinking and orthodox woman on issues other than those she had taken up as “her” causes. She was trapped in the class structure of her time, accepting that freedom (although not birth control for the unmarried) for women of her class and education was dependent on the servitude of women from the working classes; she treated children drafted in to be companions for her son abominably. She was vehemently opposed to homosexuals and to all those she dubbed Bolsheviks. Her relationship with those who loved her were mostly one-sided, causing great unhappiness.

Nevertheless, the world today would be a less happy and less equitable place had she (warts and all) not lived. Many women — and despite having read this book I still count myself among them — revere and admire what she achieved. The world needs its eccentric megalomaniacs prepared to challenge and reject the received wisdom of the day. I am delighted for her sake that her enthusiasms continued undimmed into old age as did her capacity for self-delusion. It was fitting that she lived long enough to know that the 1958 Lambeth Conference of Bishops resolved to accept what she advocated and they ignored 40 years earlier.

Everybody who today takes the availability of contraception for granted should read this book and pay tribute to pioneers like Marie Stopes.

DIANE MUNDAY

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**THE WIDOW OF BORLEY**, by Robert Wood. Duckworth, £14.99

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The hamlet of Borley lies in a remote part of Essex. A dearth of signposts makes it difficult to find; indeed it is possible to drive through and not notice it. Yet 60 years ago Borley Rectory won national if not international fame as “The most Haunted House in England”.

It had long had the reputation of being haunted, in a mild kind of way, but the really violent and continuous manifestations coincided with the arrival there of the Reverend Lionel Algernon Foyster and his wife Marianne. There were apparitions, bangs and thumps were heard, bells were rung and objects were thrown. Both the Foysters were assaulted and injured, allegedly by ghosts. Since other accommodation was available, it is astonishing that they continued to live at the Rectory for most of their five years in Borley. Or perhaps not so odd.

While these things were happening, and for some time afterwards, the media in general treated them as a genuine haunting. Later on doubts were expressed, particularly regarding the activities of a certain Harry Price.

As a local man, Robert Wood had a special interest in finding out what really happened. *The Widow of Borley* is the result of an investigation thorough to the point of over-kill — hardly a grain of sand has been left unturned. It is a tale of skulduggery, credulity and inept probing, and if the author cannot contain his sarcasm, who can blame him?

Borley, it now turns out, had attracted as if by a magnet numerous eccentrics and inadequates, all of whom played a part in the story, if only to be manipulated by Marianne Foyster. A compulsive liar and nymphomaniac, she was the first of the ghost-fakers, other joining in the merry game later.

Lionel Foyster was considerably older than Marianne. He had baptised his future wife when she was seven and become infatuated with her, playing Lewis Carroll to her Alice Liddell. Sexual abuse at that early age could well have been a major contributor to her complex psychopathology.

After their marriage Foyster accepted and even encouraged her many infidelities. Marianne had the unpleasant habit of seducing mentally unstable men. She hoped to get money from them by claiming they had fathered the babies she had obtained, without difficulty, from adoption agencies. She contracted at least one bigamous marriage, installing the man at Borley as her husband while the Reverend Foyster obligingly pretended to be her father. Wood thinks he must have been a voyeur as well as a paederast.

Harry Price, described as “an agreeable and astute old fraudster”, kept his origin a close secret. He claimed to have come of solid country stock in Shropshire. In fact he was the London-born son of a grocer who had seduced an under-age girl, Price’s mother. This unhappy start haunted him throughout his life. He was determined to become famous, and succeeded. During the 1930s no radio broadcast or newspaper feature on the paranormal was complete without Price’s contribution. He had achieved a world-wide reputation as the greatest of all psychic investigators.

Price descended on Borley and soon discovered that Marianne was responsible for the haunting. He accused her of it before her husband, but no hint of this appeared in the two best-sellers he subsequently wrote. Readers were meant to think it was all genuine psychic phenomena. Poltergeist activity intensified after Price’s arrival. Wood has no doubt that he was responsible for some of it — he was once caught out with his pockets full of pebbles.

By the time the Foysters left Borley, things had become uncomfortably hot for Marianne. Her outrageous life-style had made her many enemies. She and her now decrepit husband buried themselves in the wilds of Suffolk. Towards the end of the war she realised her career of deception would soon be over. Things were catching up with her, and she needed to get away as far as possible. Where better than the United States?

She found an American serviceman 21 years her junior whom she trapped, with another adopted baby, into a proposal of marriage. But first the Reverend Foyster had to die, which he conveniently did. Wood thinks she probably murdered him — in his state of health a quick smother would have been enough.

And so Marianne embarked for America, the unlikeliest of GI brides. Once there her new husband proved a workshy drunkard. She had picked a dud, but then she always did.

Ah well, it was a long time ago. The principals in the Borley Saga are all dead now, and may their spirits remain at peace. Just a moment, though, not quite all. According to Robert Wood “the widow of Borley” still lives in the United States, where she has made her home these past 46 years. Now well into her nineties, she is a highly respected pillar of her community. Like the Oldest Inhabitant in the joke, she hasn’t an enemy in the world — she’s outlived the ruddy lot.

R. J. CONDON

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**THE BARBIROLLIS — A MUSICAL MARRIAGE**, by Harold Atkins and Peter Cotes. Robson Books, £8.99.

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John Barbirolli was one of the greatest conductors of his generation, and his wife, Evelyn Rothwell, was an eminent oboist. Peter Cotes, a regular *Freethinker* contributor, and Harold Atkins wrote their life-story in 1983, and it has now come out in paperback. Cotes met Barbirollis in 1958 when they worked closely together on a pioneering transmission of a concert by ITV for whom Cotes was working as a producer. This episode rather oddly describes Cotes in the third person, but one can guess that the great admiration for Barbirolli that he shows throughout the book must have either been started or been greatly enhanced by that experience.

The book’s title is somewhat misleading, as, unavoidably, John dominates the book, and the relationship with Evelyn would need no less treatment in a single biography of John. But they do make a fascinating couple — she, the well-brought-up unflappable Home Counties Englishwoman, and he, of fiery and passionate Mediterranean nature, subject to bouts of depression, but immensely warm-hearted, loyal and hard-working — also an enthusiastic chef!

His mother came from Paris and met his father, a native of north Italy, when he came to France as a violinist with a touring opera orchestra. They came to London, and settled there, and in 1899 John was born — and never lost pride in his Cockney origins. He became a cellist, joining Henry Wood’s orchestra when he was only 17. Keen to conduct, he soon formed his own orchestra and then was offered the conductorship of a touring opera company. He first met Evelyn (ten years his junior) in 1931 when she auditioned for this orchestra, although their relationship did not develop till much later, after his brief, unsuccessful first marriage to an opera singer.

His first major post was with the Scottish Orchestra; word of his outstanding ability came to the ear of the New York Philharmonic, who appointed him chief conductor as successor to Toscanini, an immensely challenging opportunity, to which he rose magnificently, staying with them for six years. In 1942, the Hallé

Orchestra in Manchester invited him to be their chief conductor, and thus started his most famous partnership which lasted till his death in 1970, although in later years he worked with many other leading orchestras, developing an especial rapport with the Berlin Philharmonic.

He was clearly a loveable man, a true genius at conducting the more romantic repertoire — with Elgar, Mahler, Brahms and Vaughan Williams he had a special affinity — and also a superb opera conductor. He was brought up a Catholic, but, as Evelyn remarked after his death: “Dear John, he was such a good Christian and such a bad Catholic.” His beliefs were probably fairly agnostic: once asked if he believed in God, he said: “. . . you have to. . .” and then waved his arm at the trees and the sky and said “Well, I leave it to the priests. If anybody wants to know about a Mahler score they come to me. If anybody wants to know about religion, they go to the priests” — a decidedly lapsed-Catholic attitude!

The book is very readable, although perhaps erring on the side of being too eulogistic and chatty. The most serious and surprising defect of this edition is that the life of Evelyn in widowhood, when she continued her outstanding career as oboe teacher and soloist, is written in the present tense, but it has in no way been updated since the original 1983 edition. However, the book is well worth reading for bringing to life the outstanding and colourful character and career of John and also for drawing special attention to his very fulfilling personal and musical partnership with Evelyn.

CHRISTOPHER FINDLAY

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**BOOK WORM DROPPINGS**, by Shaun Tyas. Paul Watkins Publishing, 18 Adelaide Street, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 2EN, £5.95.

**MORE BOOK WORM DROPPINGS**, by Shaun Tyas. Paul Watkins Publishing, £5.95.

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It is a reasonable supposition that even freethinkers and humanists of various persuasions occasionally read books, and perhaps even have recourse to bookshops, new and secondhand. We have all encountered surly, indifferent, rude and sometimes pleasant, knowledgeable and enthusiastic examples of that separate species of humankind, the bookseller. For bibliomaniacs there is even a specialised directory full of detailed, mostly acerbic, comments. But how many of us have considered life on the other side of the counter, and looked seriously at ourselves as customers?

This has been admirably done by Shaun Tyas in his collection of *Book Worm Droppings*, and its sequel *More Book Worm Droppings*, both consisting of absurd remarks made by customers in secondhand bookshops, engagingly illustrated with line drawings by Martin

Smith. They look at people's specific requests, excuses for not buying, attempts to sell, and sundry other encounters, including relations between booksellers which do not always rebound to their credit. They show what curious ideas about booksellers are entertained by the public, and about the condition and value of books, and the curious behaviour people exhibit in bookshops which they would never engage in elsewhere.

If you've ever wondered how to get the knitting book by Yasser Arafat, a copy of *Tess of the Dormobiles*, or the *Rubber Boat of Victor Kiam*, now if your chance to find out. You can find a use for unwanted books (of the right size) by ripping out the contents to put you videos in. The customer who wanted books with paintings on the foreskin was unfortunately out of luck. In short these books are well worth a perusal in a light moment; and when finished with, you can always try to flog them to a secondhand bookseller.

If Shaun Tyas should decide to compile another collection (suggested title, *Even More Book Worm Droppings*), he may wish to include the following from the Peterborough column of the *Daily Telegraph*: Overheard in the Southampton branch of W. H. Smith. Customer: “Do you stock Michael Caine's new autobiography?” Shop assistant: “Dunno. What's it about?”

BRIAN DONAGHEY

## Tribute to Paine

Admirers of Thomas Paine assembled at Chesham Bois Cemetery, in Buckinghamshire, on 21 November when a black cherry tree was planted to commemorate the great 18th-century radical. The tree was presented by parish councillor Colin Mills, and there is a plaque on which is inscribed Paine's words: “My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.”

Eric Paine, secretary of the Thomas Paine Society, expressed pleasure at the commemoration of a great Englishman. He said that Thomas Paine's books, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, “brought political and religious discourse out of the salons of the rich and within the reach of ordinary people. *Rights of Man* was a blueprint for social welfare which is still relevant today.

“Paine's riposte to Edmund Burke's criticism of the French Revolution — ‘He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird’ — would equally apply to the sadness expressed at the burning of Windsor Castle in the midst of all the suffering caused by unemployment and poverty.”

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**Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, has become a Jehovah's Witness. He was jailed for life in 1981 for killing 13 women.**

# With Gods Nothing is Impossible

NEIL BLEWITT

Now the birth of Huitzilopochtli was on this wise: When the pious Coatlicue, which being interpreted is She-Whose-Garment-Is-Woven-Of-Snakes, was deep in prayer, a crown of feathers descended from heaven and lodged in her bosom, and behold! she conceived in that very hour. Her daughter was minded to put her away privily for fear that she had been dishonoured, but the baby spake unto her from within the womb and told her to fear not, for that which had been conceived was a mighty god. And when Coatlicue's time was come, she was delivered of a man-child whom she named Huitzilopochtli. He was born fully-armed; his body was painted blue and he was girt about with the feathers of a humming-bird. And with the javelin which he carried in his right hand he slew his sister in that she had charged her mother with adultery. . .

And the birth of Asclepius was on this wise: When Ischys, the Arcadian, found that Coronis, of the line of Phlegyas, King of the Lapiths, was with child of the god Apollo, he feared not to take her to wife. But Apollo, on being warned of the infidelity of Coronis by a crow, which he cursed until it turned black, put Ischys and Coronis to death by burning. But even while their bodies were being consumed by the flames, Apollo took his son from the womb of Coronis and named him Asclepius. And the child grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and he became a great healer in the land. . .

And the birth of Zoroaster was on this wise: When two virgin cows were led to the stem of the haoma plant in which the spirit of Zoroaster had chosen to enter, they immediately became full of milk. Dukdaub, a maiden of royal lineage, at the behest of the priest, milked the cows and drank of a concoction prepared by the priest from the milk and the stem of the plant. And it came to pass that Dukdaub was found to be with child; and when her time was come she was delivered of Zoroaster himself. And the glory of the heavens shone round about them and the baby laughed for very joy. . .

And the birth of Perseus was on this wise: When Acrisius, the father of Danae, was warned in a dream that he would perish at the hands of a son of his daughter, he decreed that she should evermore be inaccessible to men and, to this end, he caused her to be locked in an attic at the top of a tower. But, even though the doors of her upper room were secured, a god came upon her in the form of a shower of gold and she conceived in her womb and, in due time, brought forth her first-born son and she called his name Perseus. . .

And the birth of Quaaayp was on this wise: When Niparaya had created the heavens and the earth, he took

to wife the maiden Amayicoyondi, although he himself was without form and invisible. And in the fullness of time, she was delivered of a son whom she named Quaaayp, which being interpreted is Man. He gathered about him many disciples and became a great teacher in the land; but he stirred up enmity among the people and they put him to death. . .

And the birth of Krishna was on this wise: In the days of Kamsa the King, the god Vishnu, desirous of being incarnate on the earth, entered into the womb of one Devaki of royal lineage. But when she was delivered of her man-child, whom she called Krishna, King Kamsa sought to destroy him and she betook herself and her child into the fields, there to give him into the care of cowherds until the King should be dead. . .

And the birth of Dionysus was on this wise: When the mortal, Semele, of the royal line of Cadmus, succumbed to the advances of the god Zeus, she found herself to be with child. But before her time was fully accomplished, she demanded to see Zeus in the full and flaming glory of his majesty; and she persisted in her importunity despite many attempts to dissuade her. Reluctantly, Zeus appeared before her in his fiery chariot surrounded by thunder and lightning, but the sight was too much for the eyes of a mere mortal and she was consumed to ashes. But a shoot of ivy, which grew apace when this thing had come to pass, became as a shield and a buckler between the unborn child and its heavenly father and delivered it from death. Zeus took the baby into his own thigh and, when its time had come, he drew it forth and gave it into the care of the sister of Semele. The child, whom he named Dionysus, grew to man's estate and descended into hell; and from there he led his mother to Mount Olympus, where she was received into the Company of the Immortals. . .

And the birth of Mary was on this wise: When Joachim, of the House of Juda, had taken to wife Anna, daughter of Isachar of the same House, they remained childless twenty years. And he was mocked of his brethren in that he alone among the twelve tribes had not gotten seed in Israel and he was sore grieved and betook himself into the wilderness to hide his shame. His wife Anna mourned likewise that she was barren; and putting on her bridal garments she went into the garden and sat beneath a laurel tree and prayed with a great weeping to the Lord that she might be given the blessing of a son or daughter. She vowed that if the Lord fulfilled her petition, the child would be dedicated to the temple. And lo! an angel appeared unto her and said that the Lord had given ear to her prayer and she would conceive in her womb and bear a daughter whose glory would fill the whole world. And behold! a second angel appeared

unto her husband Joachim in the wilderness and told him the good tidings of great joy and charged him to meet with his wife at the golden gate of the temple. And when Anna's time was come, she brought forth her first-born daughter and she called her name Mary, the same who was the mother of Jesus. And Mary was

taken to the temple, as her mother had sworn to the Lord, where she remained until her twelfth year; and she received food from the hands of angels in all that time. . .

And the birth of Jesus was on this wise. . .

## Shoot the Messenger

CHRISTEMPLETON

On the assumption that messengers have "wised up", can we happily accept the quality of truth being delivered by the media? As our machines happily work for us, do the media honestly deliver news of our human progress?

Humanists can be sure of their own thoughts, but must remain sceptical of the reported thoughts of others — particularly those attempting to diminish Western culpability in international affairs — a standard media practice.

Media-conscious humanists will already be uncomfortable living in the only country in the world with a statutory bar on elected MPs addressing their own constituents through the broadcast media. There are now more than a hundred laws that make disclosure of information a crime. Indeed, under the "reformed" Official Secrets Act all the major revelations of official lying in the 1980s would now be illegal.

To understand this concept on an international scale is to unravel the sophisticated threads of brainwashing technique. As the American commentator Edward S. Herman pointed out following the famous "victory" in

the Gulf: "Doing terrible things in an organised and systematic way rests on 'normalisation'. There is usually a division of labour in doing and rationalising the unthinkable, with the direct brutalising and killing done by one set of individuals and others working on improving technology [such as] bomb fragments that penetrate flesh in hard to trace patterns. It is the function of the experts, and the mainstream media, to normalise the unthinkable for the general public." Thus the United Nations (in whose name the war was initiated) declared that the Gulf War had incurred "miraculously small numbers of casualties". In fact, the US, Britain and their allies had caused the death of between 125,000 and 300,000 men, women and children.

Few humanists would argue against "truth" being defined as having some relation to "fact" and must continue to be vigilant in recognising this media habit of "normalisation". As John Pilger concludes in his book, *Distant Voices*: "In truth, we are part of a media society in which unrestricted information has become unwelcome, even a threat."

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## EVENTS

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, 3 January, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Members' Forum and New Year celebration.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanist Group.** Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth. Monday, 21 December, 7.30 pm. Public meeting. Subject: Humanism and Literature.

**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.

**Lewisham Humanist Group.** Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, London SE6. Thursday, 17 December, 8 pm. Winter Solstice Party.

**Norwich Humanist Group.** Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich. Thursday, 17 December, 7.30 pm. Yuletide Evening.

**Preston and District Humanist Group.** Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, telephone (0772) 796829.

**Sutton Humanist Group.** Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 January, 7.45 pm. Mike Franklin: Racial Harassment and Attacks in Sutton.

**Worthing Humanist Group.** Heene Community Centre, Heene Road, Worthing. Public meetings, 5.30 pm, last Sunday of the month (not December). Information from Mike Sargent, Group Secretary, telephone Worthing (0903) 239823.

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**The first Polish-language edition of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* has almost sold out.**

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**The following interesting announcement comes from the parish newsletter of St Edmund's Church, Godalming: "There will be a day of Charismatic Renewal at Worth Abbey, the theme being 'Feeding from the Father's Table'. Bring a packed lunch."**

Since the time of Judas Iscariot treasurers haven't enjoyed a good press.

The notoriety of Judas (if he existed) was posthumous. During his lifetime his work was largely taken for granted.

In voluntary organisations, neglect rather than notoriety is the usual fate of treasurers. Presidents, general secretaries and journal editors are glorified — or vilified; treasurers tend to be overlooked until they retire. Such, no doubt, has been the fate of Govind N. Deodhekar.

I've been removed for so long from the day-to-day activities of the National Secular Society, Secular Society Ltd and G. W. Foote & Co, that I can only reminisce about the early days of Dev's stewardship, following the equally monumental incumbency of Bill Griffiths.

The "swinging sixties" in London brought together a great melting-pot of people from around the British Isles and Commonwealth — some to swing and preen, but others to plan and agitate for a saner society. And, despite intervening reaction, many of the victories of that period survive.

As part of that melting-pot, Dev emerged as a respected teacher and freethinker, with a keen sense of humour but also with that quality associated with both ancient Romans and modern Indians — *gravitas*. Whereas ancient Rome had newly acquired it, India had developed it over millennia.

I don't remember much of the numerous indoor and outdoor public meetings of that period, but one stands out in my mind, perhaps because I was going down with flu (and I mean flu) and needed a surge of adrenalin to carry on.

It was a "Profile on Race Relations" held in the Alliance Hall (has it outlived the developers?) in January 1969, a year or two after Dev had become treasurer. Naturally, there was a vociferous Black Power contingent in the front row, and my difficulty in speaking at all wasn't improved by constant heckling. Perhaps the event did look like the "white" conscience justifying itself, and the NSS's credentials were being challenged.

Noticing Dev, as usual, moving around at the back of the hall attending to "backstage" functions, I pointed out that our treasurer came from India. Eager to pinpoint possible equivocation, the leading heckler demanded, "Is he a black man?" I was feeling equally literal, and anxious to combat "tokenism", so replied: "No, he's a brown man. This society doesn't care whether a man's white, black, brown or yellow with purple spots. And let me say that he wasn't elected because he's a brown man, but because he's the best man for the job." The

heckling didn't stop, but was greatly attenuated from that moment.

It wasn't, however, merely an effective debating point, but represented the views of the whole society from that day to this.

Secularists disappointed by Dev's recent retirement should be glad it didn't happen much earlier. His original intention had been to return with his teacher's pension to India, where he could "live like a king", but he soldiered on in bleak London. I understand he intends to stay in the vicinity, but with winter visits to India.

Now that he has free time, I hope he will write more about that complex and fascinating subcontinent with his judicious blend of sympathy and insight.

## Freethinker Fund

The Church of England has lost a substantial legacy which was bequeathed on condition that the General Synod never voted in favour of ordination of women. With assets running into billions, the lost legacy is but petty cash to the exceedingly wealthy Established Church. *The Freethinker*, like all publications promoting rationalism rather than superstition, depends on the unconditional generosity of its supporters. They have never failed it and given below, with our thanks, is the latest list of contributors to the Fund.

M. G. McIver, £1; Anonymous, M. D. Carter, N. Divall, W. G. Stirling, P. D. Ward and R. A. Wood, £2 each; B. E. Clark, £2.50; M. G. A. Kamal, £3; J. R. K., £4; C. Witty, £4.30; B. Bensley, A McGill and S. M. Rowe, £4.40 each; Anonymous, D. Blackwood, F. Coubrough, A. S. Edwards, J. L. Greenhalgh, R. Keery, A. Negus, D. Richards, K. Mack, M. Sargent, E. H. Seagroatt, A. E. Standley, W. Steinhardt, F. Vale, J. D. Verney, D. Whelan, L. Wilson and V. Wilson, £5 each; J. R. Bond, L. Dubow, P. Somers, R. G. Stubbs, C. I. Ward and H. M. Welstead, £10 each; M. Hill, £12; A. Beeson, J. Dobbin, E. McCann and F. E. Saward, £15 each; G. L. J. Lucas and U. and H. Neville, £20 each; W. E. H. Butterworth, £25; Anonymous, £30.

Total for October: £357

*From January 1993, The Freethinker will be edited by:*

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