

"Opium of the People"— Who's Abusing Drugs?

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There has been a disturbing new twist in the authorities' use of the Obscene Publications Acts, apparently prompted by MPs' complaints. Antony Grey discusses the implications of recent developments.

"Free choice is ultimately what life is about, what ethics is about. The whole of the case for freedom is a moral case because it involves choice. Do away with choice and you do away with human dignity". Brave words, noble words. I instinctively warm to their originator—or would do if she did not happen to be Mrs Margaret Thatcher, whose current caper after her own peculiar version of "Victorian values" is leading her and the country into some pretty strange social experiments these days.

What, I ask myself, is happening to freedom of expression, which in Victorian times was still an Englishperson's proudest boast? A good deal—and most of it worrying. Did you know, for instance, that the much-derided Obscene Publications Acts ("unworkable" according to Mary Whitehouse but not, it seems, in the eyes of the Director of Public Prosecutions) are now being deployed for the first time in a big way against material which isn't concerned with sex, bears no relation to previous concepts of what is "obscene", but is alleged to deprave and corrupt those likely to read it?

For the past year or so, Obscene Publications Acts prosecutions have been pending against a number of booksellers and publishers up and down the country in respect of various titles dealing with drugs, their chemical properties, use and abuse. Altogether some 200 titles, many of them non-fictional and of a factually descriptive nature, have been seized in a series of police raids. Proceedings are being taken under both section 2 (trial by jury) and section 3 (forfeiture proceedings before a magistrate). Some of the books have now been committed for trial; it is likely that the issues raised by these cases will eventually have to be decided by the House of Lords.

The Co-Ordinator of the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse, David Turner, has said: "Organisations working in the drugs field are particularly concerned about the effect that this action might have on their work. Many produce literature designed both to assist people involved with drug users and to avoid or reduce the harm which might result from drug use. The arbitrary seizure of drugs literature has created serious doubt as to whether they can continue

to publish such material".

What is sinister about these proceedings is that the Obscene Publications Squad do not appear to have suddenly decided off their own bat to seize all these books; they have, it seems, responded to sundry nudges and winks from the Home Office, itself spurred on by "constituents' complaints" passed to it by MPs. The prosecution seems likely to allege that merely to disseminate knowledge about drugs, drug-taking and the "drug culture" is of itself sufficient to deprave and corrupt: that reading such books leads to drug abuse and addiction.

Such a naive causal argument is of course not new. Courts hear, with monotonous regularity, of the 'sex fiend' triggered off by a girlie magazine. The late Pamela Hansford Johnson fervently believed that Ian Brady's perusal of De Sade resulted in the Moors murders. "Radical feminists" have an almost mystical belief that pornography breeds rapists—and, it seems (to judge from increasingly numerous public graffiti), that the only harmless men are dead ones. Any humanist could provide copious chapter and verse for the mind-boggling crimes induced by Bible-reading. And so on, and so forth.

Where is all this nonsense going to stop? (It better had, or I'll hazard a prophecy that you won't be reading *The Freethinker* for much longer.) If it doesn't, shall we all join in? Here's my own "little list", just for starters. All of Fleet Street—without exception! Cigarette advertising. Election "literature" (the June batch was abysmally illiterate and the lies weren't even convincing). The entire works of Dickens (some odd Victorian values are depicted there!). Non-Vegan cookbooks. Shakespeare (smutty!). And—of course—the Bible.

Totally absurd. Or is it? Doesn't the spectacle of Maggie's Nanny State protecting against themselves in 1983 those who may be curious about drugs make you wonder what on earth our "Betters" will be preserving us from in 1984 and beyond? Anti-Tory propaganda, perhaps. . . ?

The whole enterprise of "protecting" grown adults from themselves is foredoomed to failure and is fundamentally undemocratic. Can this be Mrs Thatcher's vaunted "freedom"? If people want to smoke, drink or drug themselves to death, or to enjoy bizarre and socially-frowned-upon sexual high jinks with other consenting adults, who has the right to stop them? By all means ensure that consumable products sold to the public aren't adulterated with harmful substances; and use the fiscal weapon to dis-

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circumstances and others, I suspect, from temperamental differences. Perhaps Bradlaugh's greatest notoriety, and delayed acceptance by the official Liberal Party, stemmed from his republicanism. In 19th-century America this was not an issue. Bradlaugh supported free trade, while Ingersoll advocated protection. There were philosophical arguments in favour of each position, but mainly the stands reflected different national interests at that time. Though remaining a favourite speaker at Republican rallies throughout his life, Ingersoll was most active in politics when relatively young, serving as Attorney General for Illinois between 1866 and 1869. Thereafter he might have become the Governor of Illinois had he renounced freethought propaganda. Bradlaugh, on the other hand, did not become a member of parliament till 1880, and even then maintained a largely extraparliamentary career till 1886, when he was allowed to take his seat unchallenged. When he died, he was in line for the position of Under-Secretary of State for India. By that time British republicanism was moribund and he had demonstrated his public usefulness to sundry parliamentary committees and royal commissions.

Radical and Atheist

Despite his steady rise in respectability, I see Bradlaugh as the more radical of the two freethinkers. He personally formed organizations (some of them surviving) and led antiestablishment demonstrations on a score of issues: issues that involved changing the law as well as public opinion. On questions of press freedom and the right to affirm, he was himself prosecuted. In consistently supporting contraception, he made himself unpopular with many of his freethinking colleagues as well as with the authorities. Though there are philosophical arguments for both atheism and agnosticism, it is perhaps significant that Bradlaugh chose the first and Ingersoll the second label. From published speeches one gets an impression of the Englishman always on the frontiers of the politically attainable, long on specifics and short on generalities. Conversely, purple passages flow from the American like a coronation robe and some of his biographical tributes are positively gushy. Perhaps this contrast resulted from more than different commitments to activism. Bradlaugh was made a loner and malcontent—an outsider full of divine discontent—by circumstances: early poverty, failed business ventures, narrowly averted bankruptcies, no recognized profession, a broken marriage through his wife's alcoholism. Whatever the causes of their different styles, Bradlaugh's writings are now generally held to be "dated", while Ingersoll is credited with "timeless eloquence". Not that it matters, for Bradlaugh left other tangible legacies to posterity; and it is more useful to compare than to contrast the two freethinking giants.

Personal favourites are essentially personal.

To their contemporaries, one was known as "Honest Bob" and the other as "Thorough". The two adjectives were interchangeable. One was the "Colonel", the other the "Iconoclast". In many ways these titles were also interchangeable. For their sesquicentenary, at a time when "humanism" is the frontal aspect of freethought, we may well recall that their iconoclasm was no self-indulgent excess, no perverse denial of comfort to widows and orphans. Their attitude was neatly expressed by Ingersoll in his introduction to one version of his famous address on "Some Mistakes of Moses": *Now and then someone asks me why I am endeavouring to interfere with the religious faith of others, and why I try to take from the world the consolation naturally arising from a belief in eternal fire.*

DOING GOD'S WILL

The authorities in Michigan, USA, have taken over 50 children into care following the death of a 12-year-old boy, John Yarborough, at a religious commune run by the House of Judah sect. Police said the boy had been repeatedly beaten. There were bruises and marks all over his body and extensive spinal damage. Children at the commune were regularly beaten, usually with a pickaxe handle, to inculcate discipline. The boy's mother has been charged with manslaughter, but sect members say his death was a punishment by God.

William Lewis, the sect's "prophet" and leader, said: "We haven't done anything wrong because God tells you to put the rod to the children's back and that's what we're doing". Such beatings were necessary for children to enter the kingdom of God. John Yarborough was "the type of boy who would come and go when he wanted to. God killed him because he doesn't like bad children".

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courage irresponsible behaviour which could create unnecessary hardship and unwanted burdens for others: but beyond that, what social intervention against free personal choice is justifiable?

As an unreconstructed J. S. Mill-style Victorian radical, I am vividly aware that whatever else this Government stands for, its trumpeted championship of the individual's freedom of choice is hollow claptrap. A great American libertarian lawyer, Morris Ernst, wrote half a century ago: "When countries go to the Right politically, women go back into the kitchen, books are burned and taboos fence off new frontiers against human adventure". Will we never learn?