

The Freethinker - Vol 100 No. 7 July 1980

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The New Comfort Column

"The Guardian" has ended its regular Saturday religious column. It is intended to introduce another column with a different approach. This piece imagines a journalist on the track of a new column. . .

I was not worried when *The Sentinel* decided to scrap its religious column. I had edited "Comfort for the Credulous" during the entire ten years of its existence. Naturally Peter, the Features Editor, called on me to handle the replacement too. The only question was what form it should take.

"We want to discover what people *really* find worrying about the fundamentals," Peter said. "Instead of dishing out what the dog-collars *say* people need, we're going to begin with a survey about what people themselves *feel* they need." Peter raised his voice to beat the roar of the open-plan office. "I know what *I* need. . ." He was almost shouting. "But it's too early in the day. Wait-" I paused with my finger on the lift button. "Not only will you have to ask the right questions, you'll have to ask the right people. Those who can rise above their conditioning." Peter slouched away, hands in pockets. He threw over his shoulder: "That's if any of us can. . ."

A good starting point seemed to be the LSE, where I have contacts. I decided to find a junior lecturer and put the question to her or him without knowing his or her subject. The academic mind and training, regardless of subject, should do the trick.

Erica Forbes obliged instantly. I did not even need to take her to lunch. We found a corner in the LSE warren, and I took out my pad. She did not in the least mind being interviewed standing up.

"I have very strong objections to life as I am called upon to live it" said Erica. I seemed to have touched a spring. It is as well my shorthand is good.

The gravamen of Erica's complaint was simply that the universe kept her in ignorance of what she was supposed to be doing in it. "I am an intelligent person, and I have 'educated myself to the limit of my capacity. That should be enough." She looked at me defiantly. I hastened to express agreement.

"I am a thoroughly honest and sincere person. I mean well to everybody." Again she looked defiant. "If that sounds smug I can't help it." I assured her it did not sound smug, and that nothing she said was any use to me unless it was what she really felt. Smugness was beside the point.

"Well if you want to know what I really feel, I feel bloody angry. I've been conned."

It was not some errant boyfriend who had conned Erica, but life. itself. She had been convent bred, in Ireland. The nuns were harsh, the food plainer than their faces.

"They ruled us by fear," said Erica. "In the courtyard was a white stone statue of the convent's patron, St. Philomena. They told us the white hand of St. Philomena would get us if we were bad. That stony white hand occupied my nightmares for a full seven years."

But it was not all like this. Sister Agnes, the deputy to the Mother Superior, was a good and holy woman.

"Sister Agnes made me see what this creed *could* produce. She was utterly kind, sympathetic and selfless. Nothing she did seemed to further her own interest. She caused me a lot of trouble."

"Trouble? How was that?"

"But for Sister Agnes I could have consigned the whole lot of them to oblivion as soon as I left the place. I can't forget her, because if everyone was like her the world would undoubtedly be a far better place to live in than it is."

Erica was bitter about the fact that the system which produced the good Sister Agnes was a superstitious rigmarole no intelligent person could swallow.

"Perhaps it's like the manure that feeds the rose" I flippantly suggested.

"But the rose is not intelligent. Nor is it self-conscious. Sister Agnes had utter certainty that when she prayed to the Virgin Mary her prayers were heard. She lived by that certainty, and it made her the most wonderful person I've known. It isn't fair. "

I reported back to Peter that one area *The Sentinel's* new column should certainly explore was how a belief that was obviously ill-founded could be the basis for a life that was obviously suffused by a quality instantly recognisable as goodness.

"It's a start," he grunted.

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