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"BE FREE FROM THE STEEL BOX OF RELIGION"—SAYS INDIAN ATHEIST

"People are struggling to be human, to be free from the steel box of religion." This was the message of the Indian atheist Lavanam, when he spoke to a meeting of humanists in London, while travelling around the world promoting a World Atheist Conference, which is to take place in India in December 1980. Lavanam spoke of "positive atheism" and said that atheism must be a "global vision".

Lavanam is the Director of the Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, India, which was founded by his father, the prominent atheist campaigner, Gora. "Lavanam" means salt in his Indian language, and was given to him as a name because civil disobedience by refusing to pay salt tax was part of Gandhi's freedom movement's tactics in 1930 — the year of Lavanam's birth. His sister, Vidya, a member of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party, is the first atheist in the Indian Parliament.

Lavanam said that atheists have agitated for separation of church and state, but he pleaded that they should also seek for a separation of religion and culture. He pointed out that Indian immigrants in America have constructed Hindu temples at which he, an atheist, was invited to speak. Members of the audience had told him that they were atheists and secular in outlook, but temples were there to hand on culture to their children. Culture and religion were interwoven. "I have no religion," said Lavanam, "so I am one of the most uncultured people on this earth".

In England figures like Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant have given dignity and prestige to atheism. "We must remember the past victories, but we must also go forward to make the future better for posterity."

"Atheism is a philosophy for the post-religious society," said Lavanam. "Man is outgrowing religion and leaving behind religious societies." Religion in society was both black and white, and included obstruction of science and progress, but it was no

use finding fault with the past.

"The centre of knowledge and activity for the religious society is God. Now atheism changes god-centred knowledge and society to human-centred knowledge and society." Social work need not stem from belief in God, for people who thought human beings were central would feel bound to work for a better society.

Lavanam said that he saw Christianity as the



(Lavanam in London)

religion of trade and imperialism, Islam as the religion of violence and intolerance, Hinduism as the religion of inaction and the caste system, and Buddhism as the religion of nonentity. Expanding

this theme, he said that he saw Christian institutions constructing great buildings, and trafficking in shares and gold. Under Pope John Paul II, he feared, they would revive a European imperial role.

Islam, which means peace, brings violence where it spreads. Hundreds have been executed in Iran, possibly including humanists.

Hinduism is characterised by superstition, numerology, astrology and fatalism. It is very ironic that in Europe and America the miracle men and gurus are being accepted. This impresses Indians — “even the scientific westerner has regard for our miracle men!” — and produces a competition to become more superstitious. Hinduism is also the religion of inaction, through the concept of *karma*, according to which all life is fated as result of a previous life. Social progress is prevented since villagers say it is their fate to be poor, illiterate, or untouchable.

However, there is also a strong atheist tradition in India. Hindu philosophy includes an atheistic strand, the Sankhya philosophy, and the tradition has been transmitted from ancient times through Buddhism and Jainism. Lavanam spoke of the four pillars of the modern secular movement in India: Gora, M. N. Roy, Periyar Ramaswami and Abraham Kovoov. Gandhi was, in Lavanam's view, more secular than was often realised. In his autobiography he had made it clear that he did not believe in absolutes, and he had advocated separation of religion from politics in India.

Positive Atheism

The Atheist Centre was putting positive atheism into practice. The caste system still unfortunately had a social effect in India. Lavanam saw parallels between the survival of the caste system after official disapproval, and the survival of racial tension in America, after the struggles of Martin Luther King and programmes to remove racial intolerance. The dynamics of social change are the same worldwide. There is the clash between white and black in the USA, between the Sunni and Shia sects in the Islamic world, between those of caste and the untouchables in India. Everywhere “people are struggling to be human, to be free from the steel box of religion.”

Cults from India were promoted in Europe and America because anything was thought preferable to atheism. The orient was seen as an exciting mystery by the westerner, an excursion from traditional religion, but not rejection of religion. Atheism must therefore be a global vision seen to be working on a worldwide scale.

Lavanam gave details of the Atheist Conference in December and hoped that English people would follow in the steps of Bradlaugh and Besant in their links with India. He gave details of the Atheist Centre and thanked British freethinkers and humanists for their contributions to the reconstruction after the devastation of the cyclone in 1977. He described

how villagers were afraid to return to their villages without ritual sacrifice to scare away the ghosts, and how the Atheist Centre had persuaded people back without superstitious incidents.

As one project of the centre Lavanam described the Atheist Study Camps where very diverse people, from professors to illiterates, interacted side by side. The Atheist Centre was providing training in skills such as printing, offering adult education, and teaching about family planning and mothercare to women. They also gave independence and self-respect to people with land use schemes (supported by Oxfam). The reform of criminal groups was another successful activity.

The Atheist Centre was combating superstition in lively ways. Conjurors had performed the tricks of miracle men and then demonstrated their techniques. A beef and pork function had been organised to challenge Hindu and Muslim eating taboos; although at first threatened with legal action, it was supported by many untouchables and became a successful event.

Lavanam spoke with enormous enthusiasm at the meeting at Conway Hall (organised jointly by the British Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press Association, the National Secular Society, and the South Place Ethical Society). He gave an international perspective to atheism, and stressed that atheists must give the people of the world dignity, self-respect and hope.

For further details of the World Atheist Conference, 25 — 28 December, write to Atheist Centre, Vijayawada—520 006, India. Simple board and accommodation will be provided free.

The All India Rationalist Conference organised by the Indian Rationalist Association will be held on 27 and 28 December in Bombay to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the organised rationalist movement in India.

SUN WORSHIP AT LOURDES

A boom in nude sunbathing at Lourdes is offending church dignitaries. The bishop of the shrine, Monsignor Donze, said: “Many nudists stay on the lawn opposite the Grotto until dark to make love there. We cannot interfere.” The EEC will come to the aid of the offended clerics, when a code sets out where European naturists may enjoy their pleasures.

The Vegetarian Society is carrying out the largest ever survey to study the health of vegetarians. The research will cover a wide sample and take five to ten years. Participation will involve little inconvenience and potential volunteers should contact The Vegetarian Society, 53 Marloes Road, London, W.8.

Whole Body Transplants

BARBARA SMOKER

If it were possible to transplant the cerebral cortex, this would surely raise the whole question of identity. What, then, is meant by the doctrine of reincarnation? This ancient belief has spread in the past few decades from the orient to Europe and the USA, and has been swallowed in Britain not only by the ignorant and weak-minded, but by such people as a qualified medico and a judge. The BBC (with tongue, it seemed, in and out of cheek) made alleged rebirth the subject of the first programme in a TV documentary on fringe beliefs—here reviewed by the President of the National Secular Society.

On August 5, in a television programme entitled "I Have Seen Yesterday", BBC1 showed an interview with a living English psychiatrist (retired) who recalled being tortured and burned at the stake for heresy in the south of France. Or so he said—and he seemed to believe it. Moreover, many viewers believed it too.

It transpired that the retired psychiatrist, a gentleman with a fine military-looking moustache, had, while still practising his profession, been told by a psychiatric woman patient that she had been his paramour in a previous existence. As an experienced psychiatrist he must have been used to being the romantic focus of women patients' delusions, but instead of seeing the attachment and the rebirth story in this light and proceeding to help the woman to see through it, he apparently accepted her supposed "memory" as fact. And one was left wondering whether carnal knowledge of a patient in a previous existence jeopardised his remaining on the medical register.

And what about the standing of a judge who confesses to similar misconduct with a virgin priestess—even if it did take place some while ago, in ancient Egypt, when he was in the body of a bodyguard to Pharaoh Rameses II? The judge in question is Judge Christmas Humphreys, who, having become a Buddhist as a young man (in this life), unashamedly recalled such indiscretions (from previous lives) for the entertainment of the television audience, though his faith in the doctrine of *karma* (the oriental doctrine of reaping in one life what one supposedly sowed in a former life) is hardly consistent with his readiness to disclose without shame the indiscretions of his former selves. Were those selves and he supposed to be one and the same person? If not, there is no reincarnation. But if they are, then the judge (who, in his professional career this time round, has sent hundreds of people to prison in the belief that they were responsible for crimes they had committed some time before, even if they had since repented of them) must believe he is responsible for the crimes committed by his

supposed former selves. Indeed, that is what *karma* means. Why, then, is he ready to confess to things he did in his alleged former existences which he would never admit to had he done them as, say, a teenager in his present existence? Is he merely counting on the fact that most people in Britain do not share his belief in reincarnation, and so he can get away with such admissions without risk of losing his good name and professional and social status?

Apart from this particular philosophical difficulty of responsibility, there is the far more basic objection to the concept of reincarnation, in common with the concepts of heaven and hell and all other forms of personal survival, that a personal identity inevitably refers to a particular body. What gives each of us our unique personality is a combination of the genes we were conceived with, the effects on our physical makeup of life experiences, the memories in our living brains, the hormonal changes in our bodies, our consequent individual likes and dislikes, and the way that we respond to our particular living conditions and social circle. All of this presupposes a continuing living body. When the brain dies, how could the memories that were stored in it survive?

The whole personality can undergo radical change during life, and may be eroded as a result of severe brain damage or senility. When a person is reduced to a "human vegetable" by brain damage, the identity remains the same only by virtue of the historical continuity of the body. What factor could, even in theory, survive the death and final decay of the body that would retain anything of either individual personality or of historical continuity? In other words, what could survive—whether for rebirth or for resurrection—that would still constitute, in any sense at all, the same person?

Whereas Judge Humphreys insisted in his television interview that once a "self" had been born as a human being, there was no going back to sub-human forms of existence, another Buddhist interviewed in the same programme, the exiled Dalai Lama (a more orthodox Buddhist, uncorrupted by Western arrogance), was equally insistent that, human life being comparatively rare, one would almost certainly be reborn as a member of a lower species; most probably an insect. Naturally enough, Buddhists are squeamish about swatting a mosquito or even stepping accidentally on an ant!

One can understand the seductiveness of a belief in a series of human existences, rather than facing up to the finality of death; but to prefer to be reborn as, say, a worm or a beetle, than accept death as final, seems to me bizarre in the extreme. And it raises in an even more obvious form the question of identity already discussed: how could a human person (in one century) possibly be one and the

same "person" as a worm or a beetle (in another century)? And when human partners meet again as worms or beetles, do they have human awareness so as to recognise one another? If not, might they not just as well be other "selves"? Even as wishful thinking, the doctrine makes no sense.

Other interviewees in the programme included pop-singer Nick Turner and his Hungarian girl-friend who met in Egypt (in this life), and who explained their feeling of *déjà vu* as a memory of having met there before (in other bodies) at the time of the pharaohs. (Those pharaohs seem to crop up again and again in reincarnation stories.) The pop-singer had turned this belief to profitable account by building an act around it—dressing up as an ancient Egyptian mummy and performing his own "musical" version of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

Then there was the woman with the upper-class accent who was convinced she was once King James IV of Scotland. The basis of this belief seemed to be that her rather long, slender fingers resembled those depicted in portraits of the Scottish king. Such fingers were admired at that period, and, in the absence of the camera that cannot lie, court painters were likely to distort the shape of the hand according to the fashion. But even if the lady's hands really were similar in shape to those of a king long dead, it could hardly indicate more than the possibility that she shared some of his genes. Anyway, reincarnation is supposed to be about the "spirit", not the body—let alone the shape of one of the body's minor extremities. What could be more physical than that? What could be more materialistic? And what about the shape of the rest of the body, which (in view of the sex change) was presumably not the same?

The fact that the supposed former "self" in this case was a royal personage is significant, for royals and nobles seem to be more numerous among alleged former lives than labourers and milkmaids, let alone worms and beetles.

Inter-life Snobbery

Another example of this inter-life snobbery that was shown in the programme was the Scots girl, Jean, supposedly in an hypnotic trance, who recalled events in her earlier life as the daughter of a French nobleman. Unfortunately, her French accent sounded very phoney. And so unconvincing was her performance, even as self-delusion (which some of the other televised cases seemed to be), that one wondered whether it was kept in the film merely to save wasting videotape footage and to fill up the allotted time, or whether, in a true spirit of scientific inquiry, it was decided not to be selective. A third possibility is that there was more scepticism behind the film than appeared on the surface, and this highly suspect sequence was deliberately included so as to throw a little honest doubt on the whole bag of tricks. In any case, it is to be hoped that it

did have that effect, at least on some of the viewers. However, my own small-scale haphazard opinion poll, conducted among people I happened to meet in the few days following the television programme, was not very encouraging.

Whilst most of the people I questioned found the performance of the Scots lassie less than convincing, and that of the pop-singer more than far-fetched, they felt that they had to respect the "evidence" given by the psychiatrist and the judge. As one quite intelligent, middle-class, middle-aged man put it to me, "If these intellectual, educated, high-up people say that they remember these things, well, you've got to believe them, haven't you?"

Although the gospel hero warned his followers against being "respecters of persons" there seems to be a direct correlation between such respect and religious gullibility. If a doctor or judge—or a theologian or pope—says so, then it must be true.

Incompatible Beliefs

And another thing: many people who call themselves Christians are nevertheless also ready to believe in reincarnation — though it is obviously incompatible with the fundamental Christian doctrines of heaven, hell, the atonement, the resurrection of the body, and so on. It seems that those people who can be coned by one set of superstitious dogma are quite likely to swallow another set with equal ease, and hold both faiths simultaneously, however incompatible the two may be.

Could one reason for the present Western acceptance of the idea of reincarnation be that the need to re-cycle things has spread, particularly in the ecology movement, to the re-cycling of souls?

The week following the showing of "I Have Seen Yesterday", there was, in the same slot, a similarly dotty documentary, this time interviewing second-hand composers. These were people who claimed that the derivative music they composed was dictated to them by the spirits of the great composers of the past, who had made contact with them from "the other side". One woman was not only in continual contact with several great composers, who apparently gave her all sorts of advice in addition to sequences of musical notes (even to such mundane matters as where she could buy the cheapest bananas), but was also able to call up Bertrand Russell, who had admitted to her that since his death he had had to revise his ideas about the spirit world! And there was a man whose compositions allegedly required not just one great composer of the past to help him, but two—Handel to think up the theme, and Liszt to play it through the living man's hands. Some people, it seems, would prefer to be spiritual plagiarists of the great than their own obscure but original selves.

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Fascism and Religion

DAVID BERMAN

Fascism is a catchword for unsavoury politics, but its political philosophy is rarely examined carefully. Taking a recent analysis of fascism as his starting point, David Berman, who lectures in philosophy at Dublin University, examines the extent to which fascism embraces a religious outlook.

Fascism makes most people see red. But if it were really a danger we would be wiser to feel less of its emotional tone and see more of its shape. The reluctance to form a clear conception of fascism is so widespread that, according to a new book by Stanley Payne*, "few of those who attempt to develop a causal theory or explanatory concept of fascism define exactly what they mean by the term . . ." (p.178). In my opinion, Payne is weakest in his analysis of the philosophical background and content of fascism. His suggestion that pragmatism was replaced by the thinking of Nietzsche (p. 39) could hardly be further from the truth, for pragmatism plays a distinctive role in Nietzsche's philosophy. Even more objectionable is Payne's contention that "All of Hitler's political ideas had their origin in the Enlightenment . . ." (p. 97); for the ideas he mentions are, in fact, counter-Enlightenment ideas, characteristic of Rousseau and above all of Hegel. For Payne the debt that fascism owes to the Enlightenment can be seen also in its hostility to religion. This (alleged) hostility is important for Payne's taxonomy, in that one of the key features by which he distinguishes fascist culture from that of the conservative or traditional right is that the former is secular (pp. 10, 15-17).

To see how very questionable is Payne's judgement on the irreligious nature and Enlightenment roots of National Socialism, one must turn to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, "the bible of the new faith". Here one finds Hitler vigorously defending religion, and especially the two main denominations of Christianity, which, he states, National Socialism "looks upon . . . as equally valuable mainstays for the existence of our people, and therefore it makes war on all those parties which would degrade this foundation, on which the religious and moral stability of our people is based . . ." (Murphy translation, 1942, p.196). Thus, like nearly all theologians before the eighteenth century, Hitler holds that social morality requires a religious basis. As he puts it elsewhere in *Mein Kampf*: "this human world of ours would be inconceivable without the practical existence of religious belief" (p. 152). Now this conviction, about the necessary connection of religion and morality, is profoundly opposed to the Enlightenment, which, through such champions as

Bayle, Shaftesbury, Hume and Kant, strenuously tried to establish the autonomy of morality.

Consider also one of the most fundamental dogmas of Nazism: the absolute value and superiority of the Aryan race. In *Mein Kampf* this dogma appears in various theological frameworks. To allow the racial foundations of Germany to be debased, says Hitler, is a "sin against the Will of eternal Providence" (p. 186). More than once Hitler describes the Aryan race as "that highest image of God" which to weaken would be sinful and profane (pp. 146 and 216). "For it was by the Will of God (he writes) that men were made of a certain bodily shape, were given their natures and their faculties. Whoever destroys His work wages war against God's Creation and God's Will" (p 310).

Hitler and Religion

No doubt it will be objected that Hitler's use of the terms "God", "Providence", "God's Will" are vague and empty formulas, and not truly religious. But I should argue that they are no more hollow than those used by most moderately intelligent statesmen and laymen of this century, who have also abandoned the old, clear-cut anthropomorphic conceptions of God. Hitler's positive attitude to religion comes out also in his use of it as a paradigm, or analogue, for National Socialism. He applauds the "spirit of religious devotion and intolerance" and, more specifically, Christianity's "unrelenting and fanatical proclamation and defence of its own teaching" (p. 199). Later he speaks of the "function which religious dogma fulfil" as "parallel to the function which party principles fulfil . . ." (p. 216). And more than once he says: "Here the Catholic Church presents an instructive example" (p. 142). In this context we may contrast Marx, who, in the true spirit of the Enlightenment, uses religion as a paradigm of the *alienated* state of things.

I am not, of course, claiming that Hitler was deeply religious, or that he made no anti-Christian utterances. In fact, most of his denunciations of Christianity are to be found, significantly, in Martin Bormann's *Hitler's Table Talk* (1953). It is these private comments from the years 1941 to 1944 which have probably led Payne (and other historians of fascism) to make such simplistic statements as: "Any serious form of Catholic, Protestant, or Christian Nazism was obviously a contradiction in terms" (p. 54). That this is by no means obvious should be clear from *Mein Kampf*; and the recent *Memoirs* (1970) of Albert Speer should also have

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made Payne and others more guarded; for, according to Speer, one of Hitler's closest associates, "there was hardly anything (Bormann) wrote down more eagerly than (Hitler's) deprecating comments on the Church". But, Speer asserts, "Even after 1942

Hitler went on maintaining that he regarded the Church as indispensable in practical life" (p. 95).

**Fascism: Comparison and Definition* by Stanley C. Payne. University of Wisconsin Press.

Demented Dogmata

The agreed message of an ecumenical Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism is "profoundly obscure". To humanists in a utopia without religion it would seem inconsistent and nonsensical.

The Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism was set up by the main Christian groupings to make 1980 the year when Christianity was "taken to the very doorsteps of the unconverted millions in Britain". It asked fifteen theologians to work out the basic message together. They included Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, Methodists, Baptists and Evangelicals. One called himself Anglican (Charismatic). They managed to produce an agreed precis of the Christian faith, arranged under seven heads.

The statement is of interest to humanists because, like the fifteen theologians, we are concerned about the meaning of life and how to live it. They have chosen one view; we have chosen another. They think we are wrong; we think they are wrong. The point is that they and we are right or wrong about the same things.

Each of the seven heads consists of a key sentence, followed by exposition and a list of biblical references. Here are the key sentences:

GOD: The Living God is Creator, Lord and Father.

JESUS CHRIST: In Jesus Christ Good has conquered sin and death.

THE BIBLE: The Bible is the irreplaceable witness to God's saving purposes.

THE CHURCH: The Christian Church is called Church to be sign and foretaste of God's Kingdom.

THE HOLY SPIRIT: The Holy Spirit enables men and women to do the work of God.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: God reigns; he will bring all creation in the end to its perfection in him.

EVANGELISM: "Evangelism is like one beggar telling another where to find bread" (D. T. Niles).

This is the message to be delivered on the doorsteps of Britain. What view should humanists take of it? It may help if we distance ourselves. Suppose this Nationwide Initiative were planned to take place in some humanist paradise of the future, in which

religious history had been lost. An advance copy of the agreed statement falls into the hands of the administering authorities, who commission a civil servant to write an objective appraisal for the Assembly.

The civil servant's report:

"The prospect of our people being subjected to a high-pressure campaign designed to induce belief in this document is disquieting, for the following reasons.

The document puts forward a metaphysical system of a very curious kind. It alleges the existence of an entity called "God" who is said to be the creator of the universe! Since the concept of a single creator of everything is absurd (who made him, for a start?) it must invalidate all that follows. Confusion is compounded by referring to this "God" as "reigning" and using the feudal term "lord" (*dominus*), with its overtones of tyranny. Then "God" is also given the purely human description "father", which can have no meaning apart from the biological act of procreation. The exposition of the first key sentence makes matters even worse. It says that "God" made man male and female "to share his likeness". Since human males and females are products of an evolutionary process they cannot, by definition, be made in the image of any creator. Furthermore their anatomy reflects the physical requirements of living on our planet, and the biological needs of reproduction. These cannot be the characteristics of a transcendental "God", who moreover could not as a matter of logic possess both the likeness of the male and of the female.

The document then discusses "Jesus Christ", who is alleged in the exposition to be the son of "God". This use of the biological term "son" is the counterpart of "father" in the first head. But whereas "God" is said to be the father of all men, only one man (namely "Jesus Christ") is his son. The document is inconsistent even in its metaphors.

More odd is the statement that through Jesus Christ death and sin have been conquered. We know this to be a lie in the case of death. It is certain that people cease to be when they die, and that the elements of their body return to nature. But what of sin? This is a term unknown to us. All I can go on is what the exposition says. It says that sin is rebellion against the creator. "Sin is

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misdirected love, the wilful assertion of ourselves against God and others." This is obvious nonsense. If there really were a creator, and he expected mankind not to rebel against him, he would give clear instructions. A plain order is the first requisite of obedience. If not told clearly what to do people cannot be said to disobey. "God" has certainly not made his commands clear: every word of the document is profoundly obscure.

The next head concerns something called the Bible. This appears to have been a collection of writings, now lost to us. The document assumes that we should regard as binding a book written thousands of years ago in the dark ages of man's knowledge. It says that the book is an "irreplaceable witness", but we know that mere writing cannot prove facts. It may be the product of hallucination, or wishful thinking — or sheer imagination. Who can suppose that rational beings would subject themselves to such dictates from a distant past!

I need not waste time continuing this analysis. The document will not stand up to a moment's examination, and I would not have troubled the Assembly with it but for one thing. We have reliable information that a number of our people are misguided enough to think they understand the document, and worse to believe what it says. Furthermore they are determined to convert others to this belief. Indeed the duty to effect such conversions appears to be a basic tenet of the Christian religion. So what is to be done?

This is a test of our basic doctrine of freedom of speech. We believe that it is a blasphemy against the human mind to interpose censorship. No one can be sure of the truth, so we must be open to all possibilities. Brainwashing is indeed outlawed, but that requires a captive audience. The Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism has no captive audience. It relies solely on persuasion. Admittedly it appeals to basic needs. Many of us feel we need a father-in-the-sky to replace the earthly father who took care of our requirements in youth. Many would also like a mother-substitute. Death is an anxiety, and the destruction of our unique Self is hard to accept. Those who pander to these needs will get a ready hearing. Some who are gullible may be deceived, for a time. Many will be distracted from the real problems of life and their solution.

My advice to the Assembly is nevertheless not to interfere. Truth has its own dignity, and will in the end prevail.

Back to the present

The seven heads of the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism were fully set out on the court page of *The Times* of July 28. Printed alongside was the obituary of the late Shah of Iran. He was, said the obituary, a well-intentioned monarch whose sincere attempts to modernise his country and improve the social and economic standards of his people were

overcome by religious opposition. "When the work of liberalisation eventually and belatedly began it took place against a current of revolutionary ferment and repressed religious fundamentalist passions which simply overtook it". The protagonist in this was an elderly fanatic called the Ayatollah Khomeini, who fomented disturbance and revolt in the guise of a defender of "the purity of Islam".

It was obliging of *The Times* to demonstrate so clearly how vulnerable one religious dogma is when confronted by another. Since there is no way of proving the conflicting tenets of either, they fall together by their very inconsistency.

WORLDWIDE

AUSTRALIA

Sites sacred to the Aborigines, in Nookanbah, Western Australia would be desecrated if exploratory oil drilling planned for the area took place. The Australian Council of Trade Unions has intervened to persuade the oil company to let the sacred spots be mapped and preserved. Protesters on behalf of the Aborigines sites blocked a convoy of trucks moving equipment into the region. Protesters who were arrested included United Church ministers.

Ethnic rights, religious superstition, labour rights and the illogical, if humane, position of one religion which claims exclusive truth (Christianity) defending another (Aboriginal polytheism)—these are all mixed into the situation. A negotiated settlement will be attempted.

ITALY

Two "saints" who attract pilgrims from all over Europe are to be investigated by magistrates and bishops. They are both alleged to have miraculous powers. It is speculated that they have accumulated over £1 million between them (a "miracle" which many would welcome if it happened to them).

Alfonsiano Cottini has been lying asleep in a chapel for 12 years and apparently never eats or wakes. Visitors, on package tours from Germany, Switzerland and Austria, claim that pains have been cured after touching her. A chief magistrate is concerned at rumours that she eats spaghetti, steak and chips and drinks a bottle of wine at night.

Mamma Rose—the "Pear Tree Saint"—claims to have seen the Madonna in a pear tree flowering out of season in 1964. Since then she has been visited by over 100,000 people. Her assets of a new hotel, an inn, 10 acres of land and houses have been frozen by the public prosecutor.

A new minister at the Calvary Faith Climber Church in Illinois has been ordained at the age of 12. He said: "If I don't know something the Lord will give me an answer. I don't think my age will bother me a bit." But he has decided to wait until he is 18 before he performs marriages.

THE PIG RIOTS

The wave of Islamic irrationalism seems to have erupted into India. In Moradabad about 100 miles east of Delhi, a pig strayed into the mosque as the Muslims were at prayer at the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan. The simplest and the rational thing to do was to chase the pig away! But such an antipathy has been built up about the pig (forbidden to be eaten by Muslims) in the Muslim mind, that the police (predominantly though not exclusively Hindu) were accused of having deliberately let the pig in or having failed, negligently, to stop it. Police and police stations were attacked, four policemen were killed, rifles were seized, snipers appeared on house tops and over 100 people were killed, about 50 in a stampede, some 20 due to gun-shot. Deliberate attempts were subsequently made to spread the riots by sections of the Muslims in other towns in Uttar Pradesh, in Delhi and even in far away Ahmedabad. The use of rifles by snipers is a new and sinister aspect of the troubles. These were reported from the Muslim University town of Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh.

As a result of the post-partition riots, the Hindu Sikh minority in West Pakistan virtually disappeared. A significant Hindu minority remained in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and an even larger Muslim minority (about 10 per cent) remained, some in concentrated pockets, in India. Under the secular democratic leadership of Nehru, India produced a Muslim President within a few years after Independence. It is to the credit of the Hindu mass that despite the trauma of Pakistan, it accepted a Muslim as a father-figure of the nation. There has been another Muslim President in the Pre-Emergency period of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's rule. At least two Muslims have been at the apex of the Indian judiciary as Chief Justices of the Federal Court. Muslim ministers appear in most provincial governments, as a routine. But what is noteworthy is that even provinces such as Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Kerala have accepted Muslim Chief Ministers when their chance came in the hurly burly of Indian politics. The rank and file of the Muslims, mostly urban have tended to vote as a Muslim block for their own candidates sometimes, or supported Mrs. Gandhi generally at elections. The anti-Indira Gandhi wave even brought Muslims and right wing Hindu elements together for the common cause of defeating Mrs. Gandhi and restoring democratic freedoms.

As a result of the Janata debacle in December 1979, Mrs. Gandhi has pulled many Muslims back, but even so the net result of these swings has meant that Muslims have acted and participated in the central debate in secular politics. Needless to say many have supported the communist parties in Bengal and Kerala knowing their leaders to be unbelievers. In spite of all this, there has been a massive opposition to the idea of reforming Muslim

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Personal Law as it relates to inheritance, marriage and divorce, and the "Islamic" leaders take up fundamentalist attitudes, more deeply entrenched than in Egypt or Pakistan on the question of plurality of wives.

The present Muslim riots are a sad setback to the whole process of peaceful development of life in India. The entire basis of the straying pig is so flimsy that one may hope that ever-growing sections of the Muslims will see the folly of their militant religious leaders in promoting and entrenching themselves behind unscientific and irrational beliefs.

OUTSPOKEN CRITIC

Kenneth Tynan, drama critic of *The Observer* during the 1950s, died recently in California at the age of 53. He was described in *The Times* obituary as "one of the most important influences in the British theatre at a crucial stage in its history."

Tynan was a painful thorn in the flesh of the pruders. His use of the word "fuck" in a television programme made him a constant target for the censors. When his most famous show, *Oh! Calcutta!*, opened at the Round House, Camden Town, Lady Birdwood and a Conservative councillor named Smith went to see it and then complained to the police. The reviews had been unenthusiastic, but Lady Birdwood's action resulted in a vast amount of publicity for the show. It moved to the West End and ran for ten years.

Kenneth Tynan was a signatory to the Statement Against Blasphemy Law which was published in 1978.

EUTHANASIA BOOKLET

EXIT, the society campaigning for a law to allow euthanasia, is deeply divided about the publication of its booklet *A Guide to Self-Deliverance*. *The Freethinker* was told at the time of publication of the August issue that the society was determined to go ahead with production of the booklet in autumn. A committee decision of four to three has reversed that resolve, but there is speculation that the AGM in October may return to an approach of "publish and be damned".

Legal advice has indicated that publication might lead to prosecution. According to the Suicide Act, 1961, it is an offence to "aid, abet, counsel or procure" suicide, punishable by up to fourteen years in prison.

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The Acting Chairman, Mr. Larry Hill, said that "The committee members were not prepared to risk being sent to prison." He added that "The two solicitors and a doctor on the committee would also have been in real danger of being struck off their professional registers."

The society has grown from 2,000 to 9,000 since news of the proposed booklet on self-deliverance and many members will be very disappointed if it is not published. Some may wish to campaign within EXIT for a decision to go ahead with a booklet for which there is such a demand.

The Scottish organiser of EXIT, Mr. George Mair, a retired surgeon, has said that they will go ahead and publish the booklet in Scotland. The 1961 Suicide Act does not apply to Scotland. The booklet would only be available to Scottish members of the society and would not be sent across the border.

Hemlock, an American organisation campaigning for euthanasia rights, is to publish a guide to committing suicide. Rather than print direct advice the book will include actual case histories from which readers can draw their own conclusions. It is hard to believe that copies will not reach England, if either of these texts becomes available.

Some people think the risks are exaggerated, others think they are worth taking to provide a test case which challenges the law. Public opinion would surely be outraged at imprisonment of anyone involved with publishing so well-intentioned a booklet. The position would be analogous to nineteenth century prosecutions for publishing information about birth control. A mature society should allow its members information upon which they have the right to make their own decisions.

HOMOSEXUAL LAW REFORM

The House of Commons has voted to permit homosexual acts between consenting adults (over 21) in Scotland. An absurd anomaly, long opposed by the National Secular Society, which exempted Scotland and Northern Ireland from the 1967 Act legalising homosexuality has been partially rectified.

The clause was introduced into a detailed debate on the Government's Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill by Robin Cook, MP for Edinburgh Central. David Steel, leader of the Liberal Party, said it was ludicrous that a person of 16 was able to marry, yet a man of 20 was not permitted to choose with whom he went to bed. The Scottish Secretary, George Younger, warned MPs that they should question

"whether this is the way to pass Scottish legislation."

The Scottish Presbyterians have consistently opposed this reform and have been one of the main causes of the existence of the anomaly. The prejudice in Northern Ireland should now also be resisted and the law be changed there. The Northern Ireland Gay Rights Campaign has been conducting a campaign for reform, but the Rev Dr Ian Paisley and the Ulster Unionists have led a "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign.

Britain is to appear before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg within the next few months, following a European Commission finding that the Northern Ireland Law was in breach of article 8 of the Human Rights Convention guaranteeing domestic privacy.

PRESIDENTS AND RELIGION

The American Presidential contest between Reagan and Carter has been described as more of a dilemma than a choice. Jimmy Carter's born-again Christianity is well-known; his sister Ruth Carter Stapleton is an evangelical preacher and healer.

Ronald Reagan is also a supporter of Christianity. An American atheist President is less conceivable now than at the time of Thomas Jefferson (who played down his sceptical deism).

An example of the attention American politicians give to religion—and priests give to politics—is seen in the existence of Fr Donald Shea on the Republican payroll. He is in charge of religious and ethnic liaison, and says "I stay strictly with the issues, rather than be involved with any particular presidential candidate." (A dubious claim—he can hardly avoid campaigning for the Republican nominee.)

One result of Fr. Shea's work has been support for "tuition tax credits" in the 1980 Republican platform. This would give tax concessions to parents sending their children to private schools. American state schools are not allowed to include religious teaching and parents who want their children to have a denominational education must send their children to private schools.

PRAISE FOR Mrs W.

Mrs Mary Whitehouse and the National Viewers and Listeners Association have been thanked by the Archbishop of Canterbury for the encouragement they give to good broadcasting. Dr Runcie's praise came at a ceremony marking National VALA's award to "Songs of Praise" as an ideal type of religious programme. Dr Runcie admitted that he had not always agreed with Mrs Whitehouse on every point, but expressed his admiration for her courage, consistency and Christian conviction.

INSTITUTE OF FOOLS by Victor Nekipelov (Translated by Marco Carynnyk and Marta Horban). Gollancz, £7.95.

"Pedestrians, citizens of Moscow, you stare absently at the pavement beneath your feet! Tear your weary gaze from the ground when you walk along Smolensk Boulevard past the familiar bakery, workshop, and pharmacy. Look up at the dim squares of windows far above that unobtrusive yellow wall. Even now, someone is languishing behind these dull, colourless panes."

The heart of this book is a sketch of the V.P. Serbsky Institute in Moscow, the leading centre of Soviet forensic psychiatry, by a poet who was detained there for two months in 1974. The authorities were labelling their intellectual opponents "mentally ill" and putting them into psychiatric hospitals with the assistance of eminent psychiatrists. This practice, which has persisted in various forms for at least 40 years, has recently received a critical appraisal in international circles. Probably because such criticism was then at its height, Nekipelov was found to be sane, tried secretly and sent to a labour-camp for two years.

What then were Nekipelov's crimes? Why did a provincial psychiatrist refer him after five minutes to Moscow, with a provisional diagnosis of "sluggish schizophrenia" or possibly "psychopathy"? Why was he interned then and why has he been interned now since December 1979 after a long series of raids and searches? The answer to these questions is given by the appendix, taken from the *Chronicle of Current Events*, a do-it-yourself publication in which Nekipelov, among others has repeatedly exposed illegal acts of repression by the Soviet authorities.

This background is important to understand the concerns of the editors, whose introduction and notes stress the plight of "prisoners of conscience" to the exclusion of the rest of Nekipelov's message. The latter has a deeper and more general application to the problems of power, disorder and injustice—extending well beyond the USSR—as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

To begin with the title, you must understand that to the ordinary Soviet convict, those ruled insane—the "fools"—appear to be a privileged class. The prime function of the Serbsky is therefore to detect and return to criminal justice prisoners who have fooled all other authorities in their efforts to be declared "nonresponsible". The best part of Nekipelov's account is taken up with portraits of his fellow -prisoners, their crimes, hopes, their self-delusions, their humanity. Prison mythology states that a "fool" who succeeds in being claimed insane receives a psychiatric passport to a paradise in which almost anything goes. "He won't have to work; he'll

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get milk and meat in his rations; there will be doctors instead of guards; and the beds will be clean." "He'll be allowed parcels and visitors almost every day and he'll stroll in the garden." The advantages continue after the supposedly early release: "we can drink and carouse all we like, because they can't do anything to a madman."

Nekipelov sees through the myth, although he is well aware of its power. The other side of the coin is represented by the systematic use of forcible drugging and other "medical" methods to control and punish prisoners. It is represented by detention of certain men for periods far longer than their crimes would otherwise have merited. It is also represented—although he does not say this directly—by the corruption of medicine, by the steady erosion of any pretence that such psychiatry is therapeutic, concentrating as it does on individuals to the exclusion of the structural defects of the state. "Upon closer scrutiny, my fellow inmates proved to be victims of someone else's will, of circumstances, and, in the final count, of a deprived society and state."

"But why do I devote so much attention to these people, you may ask. What connection is there between them and the use of psychiatry in the USSR for political violence and the suppression of dissent? I am not sure. I cannot explain it, but there is a connection."

Although there are references to Nekipelov's (Orthodox) Christianity, he wears it lightly. He protests weakly at the lack of "faith" in Soviet society, but his critique owes little or nothing to the Christian tradition. The problem of state power is one that should be of central concern to humanists in any modern society. This book does not provide the answer, but it does point to several of the right questions. Read it.

JULIAN MELDRUM

THE REFUGEE DILEMMA by Frances D'Souza. Minority Rights Group, 75p.

The refugees are always with us. Throughout human history people have had to flee their homes because of wars or persecutions, but in the modern world the problem grows. The latest in the Minority Rights Group series of reports clearly reveals the extent of the human suffering which only occasionally gets media attention.

The report highlights the scale of the problem—14 to 18 million people by well-informed unofficial estimates—and, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, one that is

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growing at the rate of 2,000 a day. Africa alone contains 4 million largely forgotten refugees and the report comments that "the future outlook appears to be a cumulative nightmare."

The global scale of the refugee problem is shown on a map which acts as an invaluable summary of the situation worldwide. The western image of a refugee as poor, ill-educated and under-nourished is not entirely correct as the report points out; traditionally, and more recently with the Boat People, many are well-educated and relatively wealthy.

One difficulty is that although refugees "who are part of a mass movement provoked by invasion or oppression" may quickly be recognised as such, individuals "who claim to have escaped persecution in their own country" soon come up against international bureaucracy which can be even more frightening, more obstructive and even more incomprehensible than purely national ones.

A footnote quotes the case of a Muslim girl who before marriage became pregnant and escaped from the culturally and legally accepted punishment of death. Since however this sanction was the norm, she did not fit into the category laid down as "refugee" and had considerable difficulty in gaining asylum within the terms of the UN Convention on refugees.

United Kingdom procedures for refugees are less than satisfactory and this is spelt out in the report in detail. The British habit of giving discretion to government ministers, without right of appeal, is part of the bureaucratic wall which faces a refugee wishing to find sanctuary here. Selection by a host country is often not based on the individual need of the refugee but rather on the perceived effects on the host country.

The report calls for the establishment of an independent organisation comparable to Amnesty International to research into refugee problems and to stimulate and inform world opinion on the causes and plight of refugees.

The Minorities Rights Group is renowned for the thoroughness of its reports and this one is no exception. It is useful, particularly for reference, for all who take the world-wide cause of humanity seriously.

ROY SAICH

HOMOGENIC LOVE by Edward Carpenter. Redundancy Press, 60p.

Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was an early, courageous champion of gay rights. He was openly

homosexual and influenced a generation of socialists. He has been somewhat neglected, but there is a current revival of interest, seen for example in one of Gay Sweatshop's best productions (last year) *Dear Love of Comrades*.

Homogenic Love was issued in January 1895 from the Labour press for private circulation. Later that year Oscar Wilde's trial led to a situation which Carpenter recounted—"a sheer panic prevailed over all questions of sex, and especially of course questions of the Intermediate Sex". Carpenter's publisher, Fisher Unwin, broke off an agreement to publish another of his works and Carpenter became a lone and rarely heard voice.

This pamphlet is more than a historical curiosity. Carpenter's praise of friendship or comradeship in history and literature remains inspiring, if over-romantic. He is a true Victorian in seeing the function of same sex love as "comradeship" rather than delighting in pleasure as an end in itself.

Homogenic Love reads as freshly as ever, and is very attractively reprinted by Redundancy Press—who will find themselves misnamed if they continue with such worthwhile productions.

Available from Redundancy Press, c/o 11 Le Moal House, Stepney Way, London E1.

HACKENFELLER'S APE, FLESH, THE SNOW BALL by Brigid Brophy. £1.95 each. Allison and Busby.

The re-issue in paperback of three of Brigid Brophy's early novels is welcome. Freethinkers will enjoy her wit, style and underlying serious concern with ideas and society.

Hackenfeller's Ape deals with a zoologist who develops an interesting relationship with an ape due for scientific experiment in a rocket. *Flesh* deftly explores the growing sensuous awareness of a young couple, and *The Snow Ball* entertainingly develops the situation of a Mozart opera in a modern setting.

CATALOGUE—THE ALTERNATIVE BOOKSHOP. Free from 40 Floral Street, Covent Garden, WC2.

This catalogue concentrates on "aspects of individual liberty, the free market and open society". It contains many books on economics and philosophy in the classic liberal tradition of Adam Smith, David Hume and John Stuart Mill. There is a bias in the direction of Ayn Rand, so-called "libertarianism" and a critique of marxism and socialism. Keith Joseph, whose writings are included, would approve of many of the 180 pages of titles in any reading list he gives his civil servants for their summer holidays: were they to read them all there would be no time left for governing—an ideal situation for the anti-statists. However, "a wide range of diverse—and by no means mutually consistent—viewpoints are included."

There are sections on anarchism, rationalism and

freethought, critique of modern myths, mysticism and cults, and feminism. It is good to see a book shop stocking titles such as *Did Jesus Exist?* (G. A. Wells), *A Short History of Western Atheism* (J. Thrower) and *Humanism* (H. J. Blackham)—and of course *The Freethinker*.

THEATRE

THE LIFE OF GALILEO by Bertolt Brecht. The National Theatre production at the Olivier Theatre, South Bank, London.

When, in Renaissance Italy, Galileo refuted the belief that the earth was the centre of the universe, thus upsetting the religious and political appellation (though this was never his prime intention), he was forced by the Inquisition to recant. One of his pupils, Andrei Sarti, smuggled Galileo's *Discourses* out of the country into Holland, where his teachings could be freely disseminated. Brecht is at pains to point out, in his notes on the play, that: "In the present play the Church functions, even when it opposes free research, as Authority. Since science was a branch of theology, the Church is the intellectual authority, the ultimate, scientific court of appeal. The play shows the temporary victory of Authority, not the victory of the priesthood. It corresponds to the historical truth that the Galileo of the play never turns directly against the Church."

Eying the National Theatre's spacious cloak-rooms before my performance of *Galileo* began, I deliberated as to whether I should check in my intellect along with my coat, conduct roundly condemned by Brecht. His "Epic Theatre", which has had a profound influence on the writing and staging of plays as well as on film practice, engaged the spectators' critical faculties to the full, while "alienating" their emotions. His was the theatre of debate and of the quest for truth, rather than illusion and catharsis. Fortunately, I decided to bring my intellect into the auditorium this time (something you do not always have to do at the National), for John Dexter's revival of the play is lucid and stimulating and, on the whole, very true to the theories and spirit of Brecht. It's also cracking good theatre.

Galileo was written in 1938-9 and revised in 1945-7 in the light of Hiroshima, which made a tragic case for responsibility and accountability on the part of scientists. After Hiroshima, Brecht added a scene in which Galileo, under house arrest, speaks bitterly to Andrei Sarti: "If only I had resisted! If only scientists had a hippocratic oath, like the doctors, vowing to use their knowledge only for the welfare of mankind! But now all we have is a race of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for anything." This is the play's first West End production in 20 years. A new translation by Howard Brenton has been used. Brenton's version is a brisk, perceptive

piece of writing, a script to buy and cherish, and his own notes are worth quoting: "Brecht was a humanist, for marxism is, to a marxist, the true humanism. . . Milton said he wrote *Paradise Lost* to 'justify the ways of God to men'. Brecht, like a godless Milton of the twentieth century, one foxy eye on the great theme of the stars above, the other on the human mess below, set out to justify the ways of communism to men and women. . . It is a desperately timely play."

The play's timeliness is something we are not made fully aware of in this production. The Brechtian devices calculated to "distance" the spectator include the stage-set which is obviously just that, the galaxy of lights clearly visible, and the use of a narrator; also there are projections onto a large screen which acts as a backdrop. These give the date and location of each scene and occasionally show sketches from Galileo's notebook. The screen is also used, to fine aesthetic and dramatic effect, when the action is momentarily frozen, silhouetted against it a la Lotte Reiniger. I thought it an omission, though, that the play's modern resonances were not once highlighted by use of this screen, as is so often done in Brechtian productions.

"A desperately timely play" indeed. Writing forty years ago, Brecht found the faith in astrology of Galileo's simpler contemporaries quaintly amusing. Now astrology is once again big business. It strikes me that if you can swallow the zodiac cult you can swallow anything. When the Little Monk, one of his pupils, says to Galileo: "How can the Holy Scriptures be good, explaining and justifying the (peasants') patience, the hunger and the misery when they're found to be full of lies?" his words have a disquieting immediacy. On the other hand, there is a sad irony in the fact that Prague is named repeatedly in the play as a centre of untrammelled research and innovation.

On the debit side: the po-faced Narrator and the none too audible and very prep-school choir. On the credit side: a lot. Jocelyn Herbert's cool, spare, but very evocative set. Lesser Church dignitaries are sometimes caricatured in this production, against Brecht's specifications, but Basil Henson's Pope Urban VIII and Stephen Moore's Cardinal Inquisitor are men first, churchmen second. Excellent performances, too, from Simon Callow (an actor destined for greatness) as the Little Monk and from Marc Brenner and Michael Thomas as Andrei Sarti boy and man. Michael Gambon's Galileo is a marvellous cubistic portrait, composed of arrogance, sensuality, cunning, anger and wry self-knowledge. In the early scenes, he struts and lopes, rejoicing in the sensuous pleasures of washing himself, gnawing at a loaf of bread, of teaching Andrei through play and, above all, the keen elation of scepticism and new-found knowledge. Later, as a shaggy, cornered beast, Gambon develops a lopsided, craning shamble, as though simultaneously ducking to avoid blows and peering

half blind through his telescope. Or perhaps listening for new harmonies in the music of the spheres.

VERA LUSTIG

LETTERS

IMMORTALITY AGAIN?

The unrestricted immortality of the soul, as Geoffrey Webster rightly notes ("Freethinker", July 1980), is logically a more formidable doctrine than that which posits a beginning to immortality. Yet if the soul neither begins nor ends in time, then where was it prior to conception? The Hindu would answer "In a pre-incarnation", yet that is utterly unacceptable to the Christian; for supposing that Judas's soul were to be reincarnated as a pious person, then it would have to reside eternally in both Heaven and Hell.

Although this shows that metempsychosis is not a Christian option, it does not imply that Christianity is unable to accept unrestricted immortality. However, if the soul did exist before conception, but not in some pre-incarnation, then it must always have existed in Heaven or in Hell. To hold that the soul resides eternally in the other life, interrupted only by a brief (albeit decisive) interval in this life, may seem startling. Yet that position is not only the more formidable logically, but the more consistently Christian. For it resolves the problem of why Cain (see my article in the "Freethinker" of March 1980) should suffer 6,000 years more punishment in Hell than a man who commits the same crime now. Consider, too, that if God had created the world a century sooner than He did, then the pious would enjoy an additional one hundred years of bliss. As this reflects on God's generosity, so the problem of Cain casts doubt on God's justice. Both indicate a partial dispensation unworthy of a perfect God.

I am aware that a scheme whereby man's rewards or punishments precede his deeds may disturb our moral sensibilities. But it should not perturb those orthodox Christians who believe in that "godly consideration of Predestination . . . full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly person . . .", as the Seventeenth Article of the Anglican Church quaintly puts it. For if there is nothing morally wrong in punishing "curious and carnal persons" for predestined crimes and sins, then neither should there be any objection to pre-punishing them. If carnal persons deserve eternal retribution, then why not eternal pretribution as well? The answer can scarcely be that the sins of the carnal are not that serious. For can one imagine a sin more culpable than that which merits eternal (even though only post mortem) punishments?

DAVID BERMAN

MISTAKEN CRITICISM

"Roger Santerre" hints, quite mistakenly, in his letter (August) that, because of the surname which I have inherited from my forebears, I am an Irish Catholic. If I were given to indulging in his Gestapo-like problings I could just as readily, and just as mistakenly, assume that "Roger Santerre" is the name of a French Catholic. However, I don't care two hoots about his or anyone's national, racial or religious origins, and have no intention of joining "Roger Santerre" in his gutter.

Your correspondent implies that thousands did not flock to join the National Secular Society during my secretaryship because I was not, as he eloquently puts it, "preaching the right stuff." Actually I was not preaching anything. I and my colleagues in the NSS

were opposing religious indoctrination in schools, stage, screen and literary censorship, Church privilege and religious intolerance; we were campaigning for law reforms relating to such questions as divorce, abortion, Sunday observance, homosexuality, charity status, blood "sports" and voluntary euthanasia.

I am not surprised that "Roger Santerre" does not regard such a programme as "the right stuff" and leave readers to draw their own conclusions.

WILLIAM McILROY

IN PRAISE OF CELIBACY

In the August issue of the Freethinker, a gentleman with all the courage of anonymity ("An Indian Rationalist") passes secularist judgment on celibates, coming to the all too predictable conclusions—that they are neurotic, inhibited, secret masturbators, etc.

Let us calmly examine what the obsession with sex has done to India. Whilst ascetics advocated chastity, overindulgence in pelvic gymnastics has led to a country with a population in excess of six hundred million! In the West, the fashionable doctrine of "An orgasm a day keeps neurosis at bay" has resulted in a frenzied society, a civilisation desperately chasing after the momentary exhilaration of orgasm, irrespective of all the unwanted pregnancies, violent quarrels, crimes and venereal infections that directly result from worship of the genital hiccup (sex).

It is true that traditional Indian physiology has emphasised the beneficial effects of semen-retention. After all, why is it recommended that athletes who are in training refrain from intercourse during such a time of strenuous preparation? That sexual activity is debilitating—even in "moderation"—no reasonable person can deny.

If men occasionally experience nocturnal emissions, this does not indicate the need to copulate morning, noon and night. When we sleep, the unconscious mind tends to exercise its influence. That's all.

If sex is the existential panacea, why is society so unhappy, despite the fact that so many folk spend much of their leisure-time in bed-wrestling (as one debauched Roman Emperor referred to it)? Sexual desire is only a vehement manifestation of blind egoism, so what can we expect from it? Yet there is so much propaganda telling folk that they cannot be truly fulfilled without squandering their bodily and mental energies in sex.

It is so easy to generalise about people—so easy to conclude that those who are celibate are lying, or else are "undersexed" (as our Indian friend says in his article). So—is one to be congratulated for frequent performance of an act any cretin or animal can perform? There are some folk who find it easy to refrain from intercourse—cynics will naturally describe them as abnormal, but . . . so what? When we consider how much suffering is directly attributable to sexual desire, can we not see that the contemporary glorification of pelvic gymnastics can be aptly compared to a prisoner kissing his chains and telling himself he is a free man? Whether we believe that we are simply made of matter or whether we believe a "soul" enters into the ovum at the time of conception—in either case, we must see coitus as that act by which we are burdened with existence in this world. That is surely sufficient to condemn it—and those who only engage in non-reproductive sex are also chasing a chimera. A momentary exhilaration—an accumulation and discharge of tension—a totally unsuccessful attempt to transcend misery and duality—ah, this all confirms that sex is the greatest of illusions! If this is the acme of pleasure, what a sad world we must inhabit!

GEOFFREY WEBSTER

HEMISPHEROLOGY

James Hemming says in his letter (August) that he and Kathleen Nott emphasised the non-rational in their speeches at the Annual Dinner of the Rationalist Press Association because it is ignored or undervalued by some rationalists. I have yet to meet any rationalist who either ignores or undervalues the non-rational. Can Hemming or Nott name one, so that we can deal with a real person rather than these imaginary beings?

Hemming says that many people show a clear bias towards left or right hemisphere thinking. I have yet to meet anyone who is biased in the way he suggests, except those whose brains are damaged or diseased. Again, can he name someone?

Hemming ends by denying that split-hemisphere theory resembles phrenology. I agree with your comment that it does so. Like phrenology it sounds plausible, it is based on some evidence, it fits with what many people want to believe, and it gives apparent scientific support to non-scientific propaganda of the kind Hemming has been repeating in the humanist movement for the past few years. Many nineteenth-century freethinkers were phrenologists, and no doubt some humanists are split-hemisphere theorists, but the fad will pass in the same way. There is no way of making one cerebral hemisphere more or less dominant except by physical intervention, but there are many ways of making people think and act more rationally, and one is to ask people like James Hemming for some evidence for their assertions.

W. H. PEMBERTON

RATIONAL RELIGION AND SPES

Peter Cadogan does not put the point quite fairly (Free-thinker, August): the decision was a legal decision, and it was about what we do at South Place, and it was about religion.

Mr Justice Dillon decided that what we do at South Place did not exemplify "religion", as this is understood in the law. We should accept this, and that this understanding of "religion" is not only the one used in the law, but that in this the law reflects the prevailing understanding in common English usage. There are, certainly, other uses of the word "religion" — implying fanaticism, or irrationality, for example. It is also sometimes used for a person's faith, whatever it may be, whether religious or not. The usages are very confusing. And when one considers "rational religious sentiment," one should notice that the adjective has other uses different again from the noun.

Our discussions at South Place have been hamstrung for the last few years, by the case hanging over us. It is now time for us to get down to thinking clearly and carefully about what it is we do, and what we believe; and how they should be described.

HARRY STOPES-ROE,
Appointed Lecturer, SPES

Peter Cadogan says in his letter (August) that my report of the South Place case (July) was "slanted as one would expect". He gives no evidence, and I must say that I wrote as impartially as possible and that my interpretation seems to coincide with that of most of the South Place members who were present in court.

I am sorry that through lack of time I forgot Ninian Smart's affidavit, which repeated his usual inaccurate claims about the non-theistic character of various Asian religions and the religious character of humanism. I am also sorry that through lack of space I compressed the judicial order that the society must execute a new trust deed, which means in practice an amendment of the old ones.

It is true that the judge accepted the charitable status of the objects of the society, including "the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment." It is also true that

he described this phrase as a contradiction in terms and denied that it refers to religion in either the legal or the common sense. I agree with him, and my interpretation seems to coincide with that of most of the South Place members I know.

Peter Cadogan concludes by saying: "We, at South Place, would never dream of telling the NSS or the RPA what to do or what to think. Will you extend the same honour to us?" He is confused. Neither the NSS nor the RPA is telling anyone anything. There have been secularists and rationalists in the SPES throughout the present century, including Appointed Lecturers from the first to the present panel, although Peter Cadogan has stated both in the "Ethical Record" and in the Chancery Court that there is no place for them, and all they are saying is that they have as much right there as anyone else and that the result of the case provides the society with a good opportunity to tell the truth about itself.

NICOLAS WALTER

Peter Cadogan states (Letter, August) that Judge Dillon did not question the words a "rational religious sentiment". This is untrue. In the early stages of the case the Judge described the phrase as "a contradiction in terms", and in his judgement he suggested that the word "religious" was misplaced.

Peter is certainly correct in saying that I had campaigned for SPES to withdraw from the case altogether, since the case was being fought on grounds that in my opinion were both hopeless and dishonest. I am delighted that, in spite of those religious grounds, the Society obtained charity status under non-religious categories—for which of course it could have applied years ago, without a long, costly legal action. Peter is, in fact, boasting of his marksmanship for scoring a bull's eye while aiming at an entirely different target.

BARBARA SMOKER

A Baptist minister, the Reverend Matthew Else, distributed leaflets in the street in the Isle of Man, urging cinema-goers to avoid seeing "The Life of Brian". But he was charged with breaking a bylaw prohibiting the distribution of leaflets in the street. He was given a conditional discharge, and said "The bylaw is repressive and anti-democratic and I was prepared to break it to protest against my saviour being mocked."

CHURCH POWER

An Italian priest, accused of criticising the Pope, has been told to stop writing articles for the papers. Father Giovanni Baget-Bozzo has said that he does not intend "to bow down to any abuse of power". Cardinal Giuseppe Siri had attacked his articles on the ground that they "unjustly criticised the person, the teachings, and activities of the Supreme Pontiff". The cardinal had also warned Father Baget-Bozzo not to speak badly of the Christian Democrat Party. Cardinal Siri has been described as a pillar of the conservative wing of the Church in Italy.

The spread of the atheist outlook is the hope of humanity to turn from war to peace, from slavery to freedom, from superstition to a sense of reality.—Gora.

British Humanist Association Conference 1980

PAUL EBSWORTH

It was with great pleasure that I had the opportunity to attend the Conference from 18 to 20 July, at the Froebel Institute in London, on behalf of the Merseyside Humanist Group.

It was opened by Dr. James Hemming whose talk was entitled "The Chance of a Lifetime" which he described as the humanist chance, which was one of viable encouragement at a time of crisis in the world. A crises of pollution and power. Human beings feel that they have no centre to their psyche and crave a reason for existence amongst the materialistic drives and creeds of our world. One great hope for a free world is in the humanist solution. He mentioned that Marxism is an ideology concerned with change but saw it as a change by force and revolution unlike humanism which offers a peaceful and caring solution to world problems. This talk was an encouraging start to a full weekend.

On Saturday morning Dr. Harry Stopes-Roe opened with "Education About Humanism" which talked about our responsibility to society (and youth) in a society which has become increasingly secular. However we should be warned about becoming as intolerant as Christians when we say that people who are intelligent will naturally accept a secular Atheistic/Agnostic creed, but it doesn't follow that they will become humanists. This is the choice which is the natural path of an open society.

Part 2 was on "Local Groups" and here brickbats really began to fly. The talk was given by Kenneth Furness and, to my mind, was patronising. He did say that humanism was concerned with joint action but he also said that he was sure that almost 75 per cent of BHA membership would be quite happy to do without the local groups. He thought that many of the groups' topics for talks were trivial and unconnected with the importance of humanism. He hoped that in the long run some link-up could take place between local groups and the BHA. I said I thought the local groups provided an important service, helped to keep the BHA on its feet and surely we didn't always have to labour the humanist point of view to the "converted"!

After a break for lunch Colin Campbell had the longest "go" for one-and-three-quarters hours on "The Humanist in Society". He talked about training humanists for their important task of educating and informing youth, etc. He said that humanists have a reputation for being scientific intellectuals and used the terms "blandness" and "lack of passion" which does not appeal to the spirit of youth. He said "We can no longer pursue our humanism individually as members diminish"! I regret to say that his talk was passionless, dull and bland.

Saturday afternoon ended with "Humanism in Action" in which we had information on Humanist

Housing Association which is highly successful and making a profit; also Humanist Holidays when the Eastbourne Christmas break was mentioned—cost £60 and still some vacancies. Also a report on activity in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It seemed that Basil Cooper from Belfast was an optimist and had great drive considering that frequently after arranging meetings the meeting places have to be altered because of explosion threats. This final session was extremely lively.

After dinner we had a very pleasant sociable evening—relaxed and warm and one felt very close to one's fellow humanists and a sense of "togetherness".

On Sunday we had open sessions and Harry Stopes-Roe talked about advertising humanism, e.g. that we offer a comprehensive funeral service available to all Agnostics/Atheists and should advertise this as a service we give. A slogan we could use would be "My Country is the World: My Religion is to do Good". We had a very interesting contribution from Lavanam—a person who is directing the World Atheist Conference in India very soon. He talked (with "passion") about time running out in the world and the need for humanity to have one common goal of sharing/caring regardless of colour, race or creed. It was very uplifting and helped to lift the conference out of the intellectual doldrums.

FAMILY PLANNING GRANT

The Government grant to the Family Planning Association has been increased from £68,000 to £120,000. The FPA which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary this year, has played a leading role in developing contraceptive advice and information.

Dr Vaughan, the Minister of Health, announced the decision in the Commons at the same time as figures for illegitimate births and abortions, showing an "alarming" increase, were given. The Government has also decided to continue the National Health Service family planning service free of charge "despite the economic difficulties facing the country."

The decision was criticised by Jill Knight, MP for Edgbaston, who said the FPA weakened family ties and encouraged breaking the law by giving contraceptives to girls under the age of consent. She said: "I cannot think that public money should be used to flout the law in this way."

Mrs Knight has also vigorously opposed abortion. Can she not see that contraception is preferable to abortion? She has frequently called for the return of capital punishment. How does she reconcile this with support for the anti-abortion organisation LIFE?

MOSQUE BATTLE

A mosque in Rotherham, Yorkshire, has become the centre of a sectarian Muslim feud. Fighting broke out in the mosque in August during the Fast of Ramadhan—a period of high religious fervour. Ten Muslims and two policemen were injured, and ten people have been remanded on bail.

The mosque, in Chapel Walk, has been operating peacefully for ten years, but a visit from a member of the Brelvi sect fired some members of the congregation with such enthusiasm that they formed a breakaway sect. The Brelvis believe that Muhammed is still among them as a holy spirit, while traditional Muslims regard him as a man whose life ended in ordinary death.

The breakaway group set up a temporary rival mosque down the road. When neighbours complained about the temporary mosque, which was too small anyway, they decided to return. This led to clashes in which iron bars, staves and bricks caused injuries and damage.

The Chief Superintendent of the South Yorkshire Police said: "The Muslim community has been very law abiding." He admitted that in this case "the rift is very deep." Both traditional and breakaway groups will have to use temporary accommodation until the conflict over the use of the mosque is sorted out by the courts.

(Whole Body Transplants)

The third programme in the series concerned homeopathic medicine. This seemed a less dotty belief system than the previous two, though I gave up when it transpired that the active ingredients used are diluted again and again until there is less than one molecule left for each phial of medicine. . .

In the realm of the "paranormal", whether of the individual beliefs shown in these television documentaries or of the more orthodox creeds, it seems that reason and consistency have no more part to play than they have in dreams.

THE FREETHINKER

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EVENTS

Belfast Humanist Group. Secretary: Wendy Wheeler, 30 Cloyne Crescent, Monkstown, Co. Antrim. Tel.: Whiteabbey 66752.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Edward Blishen: "On No Account Any Hint Of Affection Between The Sexes"—Children and their Reading. Sunday, 5 October, 5.30 p.m. The Queen's Head, Queen's Road, Brighton (Junction Road entrance opposite Brighton Station).

Harrow Humanist Society. Audrey Williamson: The Genius of Bernard Shaw. Wednesday, 10 September. Angela Willans: The Humanist Approach to Problem Solving. Wednesday, 8 October. Both at 8 p.m. Gayton Road Library, close to Harrow-on-the-Hill Metro Station.

London Secular Group. (Outdoor meetings). Thursday, 12.30 p.m. at Tower Hill; Sunday, 2-5 p.m. at Marble Arch. (The Freethinker and other literature on sale.)

Merseyside Humanist Group. Questions about Humanism. Monday, 15 September, 7.45 pm. 46, Hamilton Square, Birkenhead.

Humanist Housing Association. 25th Anniversary Celebration. Refreshments. Sunday, 21 September, 3-5.30 p.m. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1.

Cannon Michael Green

A well-known evangelist

and

Barbara Smoker

President of the National Secular Society

will Publicly Debate

THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTIAN CLAIMS

TUESDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER, 8 p.m.

Jackson's Lane Community Centre

Archway Road, London N.6.

ALL WELCOME

Freethinker Fund

We thank the following readers for their kind donations: I. Barr, £1.60; N. L. Child, £5; S. N. Fuchs, £2; M. B. Fuller, \$3; E. J. Hughes, £2; J. Mitzel, \$1; D. Parker, £1; O. Sookias, £35; J. M. Thomas, £2. Totals for the period 22/7/80 to 19/8/80; £48.60 and \$4.

Addressed properly