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RELIGIOUS CHARITIES: TIME FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE ACTION

The Attorney General's decision to drop legal proceedings to remove charity status from the Unification Church (the Moonies) has been described by the anti-cult Family Action, Information and Rescue (FAIR) as "a serious retrograde step in countering the effects of this and other religious or pseudo-religious cults". A representative of FAIR said that Sir Patrick Mayhew's abandonment of the action "will undoubtedly be interpreted as a 'stepping down' by the Government, and may lead to a free-for-all concerning cult fund-raising and recruiting. Even if the case had been lost, much important evidence would have been brought forward and made public."

After the Attorney General made his announcement in the House of Commons he was questioned by David Wilshire, MP (Conservative, Spelthorne) over the mysterious death of a former Moonie disciple, Sonia Martin. Both her father and the Member of Parliament believe she was murdered before she could give evidence in the High Court. She had sworn an affidavit in support of the Attorney General's case for withdrawing charity status from the Moonies. Sonia Martin was found hanging from a lamp post in East Budleigh, Devon, last December. It was reported that Moonies travelled on the same plane when she returned to England with her family.

Lord Rodney, opening a debate in the House of Lords on the influence of religious cults on young people and their families, said he could not conceal his disappointment that the Government had not shown more determination in combating "the insidious infiltration of these cults into British public life.

"The way in which Her Majesty's Government have instituted campaigns to inform people about the dangers of drug abuse has been gratifying. I had hoped that they might mount a similar campaign to

expose cults.

"It is true that certain voluntary organisations such as FAIR and Cultists Anonymous offer advice and support within the limits of their very meagre resources, but it is very much a David and Goliath situation. It is quite certain that if real progress is to be made in exposing these cults, much greater resources are required and the Government must be directly involved."

Lord Rodney then drew attention to a new organisation, Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM) which is being established with a Government grant of £20,000 spread over three years. He referred to a recent statement by its director, the Rev Brian Jenner, who said INFORM is not convinced that the Moonies are involved in activities which should result in the removal of their charitable status. The Moonies had welcomed the new organisation.

Lord Rodney said that INFORM has a reassuring sound to it, but many people are worried about how it will perform.

"Is it surprising that one is worried about an organisation welcomed by the Moonies and apparently supportive of them, and yet financed by Her Majesty's Government and the established churches?

"One must ask why Her Majesty's Government decided to back a completely new organisation rather than build on one which already had considerable experience and information."

Lord Houghton of Sowerby said it should be borne in mind that registration as a charity is an enviable position because the privileges of charities are considerable.

Pointing out that the financial benefits of registra-

(continued on back page)



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NEWS

CHARITY FLAW

The Unification Church's escape from a legal challenge to its status as a religious charity has caused widespread concern. Attorney General Sir Peter Mayhew has been criticised from all sides, particularly by parents who suspect, with good cause, that their sons and daughters were brainwashed by those fanatics described in the House of Commons as "an appalling and obnoxious group of people". Many feel that a Government which made an ass of itself and spent millions in pursuance of Peter Wright and *Spycatcher*, have been dilatory about tackling the Moonies.

It is possible that the Attorney General's decision not to proceed with the case was influenced by the mysterious death of a former Moonie who was to be a key witness. But it is more likely that he was stumped by a law dating back nearly four centuries which enables any outfit on nodding terms with a deity to register as a religious charity.

During the *Daily Mail*-Unification Church libel action in the High Court, Sir Peter Rawlinson, QC, denounced the church as "a canker, a great evil, a maggot growing as it eats its way through society". Judge and jury agreed, but seven years later the Moonies are still a religious charity.

The churches are fully aware of the wrecked lives and family distress caused by imported religious sects. But the reaction of mainstream religious leaders to the Attorney General's ruling ranged from sighs of relief to expressions of pious platitudes. In the latter category, the Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford, the Rt Rev John Waine, declared that people were attracted to religious sects because of disillusionment with our materialistic society. The "ultimate answer", he claimed, is "a renewing of the Christian Church and the older religious movements". He seems to forget that Christianity started off as a religious sect and its fundamental teachings are as daft as anything dreamt up by any odd-ball guru or charlatan. Furthermore, the Bishop's own church ranks among the wealthiest of investors, speculators, land and property owners in this materialistic society.

"Liberal" Christian, Dr Roy W. Smith, secretary of the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Churches, said he and others "had been fearful that the Attorney General's proposed action was a monstrous threat to religious freedom" and had "serious implications". Dr Smith declared that "what we need, more than reformation of charity law, are reforms to ensure that it is possible for everyone to follow the religion of her or his choice".

The dark ages of Christian dominance, when stake

AND NOTES

and crucifix cast a shadow over Europe, are gone. There is nothing to prevent people from following the religion of their choice. Only those with a vested interest will regard the withdrawal of public funds from wealthy religious entrepreneurs and sects as "a monstrous threat to religious freedom". The "serious implications" that Dr Smith and other religious leaders fear is that a radical review of charity law will expose the scandalous extent to which organised religion is publicly funded. Religious freedom will not be threatened, but genuine charities will be seriously damaged if charitable status is not withdrawn from socially harmful and blatantly commercial religious enterprises.

Government action on this matter is long overdue. It cannot be left to well-intentioned voluntary groups that are under-funded, under-staffed and under Christian influence.

RELIGION AND THE CHILD

From the London Borough of Newham we have yet another example of the lengths to which zealous Christians will go in order to defend their religion's privileged position in the education system.

Linda and Tony Gordon have been "educating" Robert, their five-year-old son, at home since last November. They are regular worshippers at St Mary Magdalen Church, East Ham, and refuse to send the boy to a local school unless assured that he will receive specifically Christian religious instruction. Furthermore, they do not want him to read ethnic stories or draw pictures on an ethnic theme.

The dispute originated when Robert participated in a school celebration of the Diwali Hindu festival. "It is disgusting how much teaching of ethnic religion goes on", Mrs Gordon declared.

A spokesman for Newham Council said that children living in a multi-racial borough should have knowledge of all religions. He added: "In no way are children indoctrinated in religions other than their own".

The council spokesman's frankness is a refreshing change from the usual bland assurance by Christian educationists and others that religious education has replaced religious instruction. In the classroom context, religious instruction is a euphemism for religious indoctrination. The great pity is that children are indoctrinated in any religion.

Robert's parents say he is confused. Such a reaction is natural in a five-year-old caught up in a religious tug-of-war. The Gordons' objection to their

son's participation in a non-Christian religious festival appears reasonable, but two questions arise. First, did the boy object? Secondly, how many non-Christian and non-religious parents object when their children are dragged into Christian celebrations at Christmas and other times?

Mrs Gordon's "disgust" with the teaching of ethnic religions could backfire. If present trends continue, Christianity could become what is at present regarded as an "ethnic religion" within her lifetime.

A GODLY CREW

It is not *Freethinker* policy to kick an American televangelist when he is down, hence our restraint in reporting that the Rev Jimmy Swaggart has come a cropper.

Last year Swaggart put the boot into rival televangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker, triggering off a scandal involving adultery, blackmail, drugs and the misappropriation of church funds. "Ah prayed, and Ah prayed, and Ah prayed", wailed Tammy in a television interview, as rivulets of repentant tears trickled over layers of rouge and mascara. "It is a holy war", Swaggart responded, describing the Bakkers as "a cancer that had to be excised".

These kind words prompted the suggestion that the Rev Jimmy was tarred with the same brush as the Rev Jim. Swaggart replied: "Bring on the charges. I have nothing to hide". Well, almost nothing, for another brother in Christ, one Marvin Gorman, provided leaders of Swaggart's church with evidence of his adulterous association with a prostitute. Gasps and groans! Buckets of tears from the Rev Jimmy! The Louisiana charmer had the mortifying experience of confessing all before a mass meeting of his "born again" followers.

Of all America's television holy rollers, Jimmy Swaggart is nastier than most. He has a long list of hates, headed by Catholics, Communists, Jews, liberals, humanists, ecumenists and homosexuals. An out-and-out fundamentalist, he preaches hell and damnation with hysterical fervour. Even poor old Mother Theresa will go to hell unless she is "born again", according to Swaggart.

During his public confession the Rev Jimmy prayed that his breach of the Eleventh Commandment will be "lost in the seas of God's forgetfulness, never to be remembered again". But even if that prayer is answered, Swaggart's troubles are not over. The Internal Revenue Service has started an investigation of his religious centre which rakes in an estimated hundred million dollars a year.

A man being baptised in the Mbuji-Mayi River, central Zaire, was swept away by a strong current and drowned.

JEHOVAH'S CHILD ABUSERS

Jehovah's Witnesses are a pain in the neck, invariably turning up on the doorstep at an inconvenient time. But although a national nuisance, the dismal messengers from Kingdom Hall can add a bit of gaiety to life, particularly when one has half-an-hour to spare baiting them.

However, the joke has been turning rather sour of late. Instead of the usual couple of adults proffering copies of *Awake!* and *The Watchtower*, the householder is now often confronted by a man or woman accompanied by a child. Whether this is due to shortage of Jehovah's adult personnel, part of a training programme for the next generation of Witnesses, or a deliberate ploy to disadvantage awkward questioners, is difficult to ascertain. But it is deplorable that children are dragged from door to door, experiencing rebuffs or listening to acrimonious discussion of issues about which they know little.

If adults chose to waste time and energy peddling superstitious nonsense, that is their affair. But child abuse is another matter. Emotional damage could be inflicted on sensitive children who witness their parents being humiliated and defeated in debate. And there is the ever present physical danger of encountering a vicious dog or a Jehovah's fanatic of a rival sect.

Religious enthusiasts should leave the young to enjoy their childhood.

A 1985 survey indicating that eighteen per cent of French people believe in sorcery may explain the success of "Monsieur Mohammed, celebrated soothsayer and practitioner of the supernatural". He arrived in Vesoul, a small town in eastern France, and invited the good citizens to telephone him (8 am to 8 pm) to arrange "serious and efficacious treatment". A sensitive soul, he did not mention a fee, but clients were asked to participate in a ritual. All they had to do was place their money between the pages of his "sacred book" and in due course it would be doubled. When the book was stuffed with francs it disappeared, as did Monsieur Mohammed. This is not the first occasion on which the gullible inhabitants of Vesoul and their money have been parted. Five years ago another practitioner assured them that if they put their cash in his suitcase it would miraculously multiply. He was later seen leaving town — with a bulging suitcase. They don't tell jokes about the Irish in Vesoul.

Newspaper reports are always required by The Freethinker. The source and date should be clearly marked and the clippings sent without delay to The Editor, The Freethinker, 14 Coundon Road, Coventry, West Midlands, CV1 4AW.

FORMER PRESIDENT DIES

Mrs Ethel Venton, a former president of the National Secular Society, died last month at the age of 96.

She was born Ethel Johnstone in London's East End, one of a family of four children. She became a convinced and outspoken atheist, and with her husband Laurie, who died in 1957, was a member of the NSS for many years. They greatly admired Chapman Cohen, and she was one of his last surviving friends.

Between the wars Ethel Venton did much work for the Labour Party. During the 1930s she was a Labour councillor in West Ham, serving on sub-committees responsible for hospitals and child welfare.

A vegetarian for most of her life, she was deeply involved in animal welfare organisations. Her position as secretary of the National Council for Animal Welfare entailed a daily journey to London from her home in South Benfleet. At the age of 86 she had a fall that marked a deterioration in her hitherto excellent health. The mishap occurred while she was on her way to the annual fair for animal charities which she organised at the Royal Horticultural Hall for many years. She eventually retired after arranging for the NCAW to be absorbed into the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Although Mrs Venton abhorred the tatty image the National Secular Society acquired in the 1950s, she remained a steadfast member of its executive committee and served as a vice-president. Becoming NSS president in her late seventies, she had a hard act to follow by succeeding David Tribe, the Society's most effective post-war president. He had transformed the NSS from a squabbling, inward-looking coterie into a virile campaigning organisation, enabling it to exploit the opportunities for promoting secularism that arose during the 1960s.

Mrs Venton had difficulty in adjusting to new methods of campaigning. However, she realised times were changing and accepted that the NSS had to alter its style and image. Although unable to cope with modern public relations techniques, she recognised that ability in others and gave credit where it was due. Ethel Venton followed the example of her immediate predecessor by always putting the Society's interests first and leaving it in a sound condition.

Despite failing health and infirmity, Mrs Venton remained independent and lived alone until a few months before her death. Last September, in the early hours of the morning, she had a serious fall and was not found for several hours. After that she never left hospital.

There was a secular committal ceremony at Southend-on-Sea Crematorium.

Humanist Opens Brighton Council Meeting

Councillor Raymond Blackwood, the Labour Mayor of Brighton, has introduced a variation to the practice of appointing a chaplain. He has invited representatives of various denominations to share the duty of opening Council meetings. But the most significant innovation is that the town's unbelievers have not been ignored.

George Vale, representing Brighton and Hove Humanist Group and for many years a member of the National Secular Society, opened Council proceedings on 3 March. After thanking the Mayor for the invitation, he added: "We are particularly delighted that you have asked someone from the ranks of the unbelievers, who do in fact form a very large part of your community, to take part in this ceremony.

"Humanists accept people's rights to hold differing views and opinions, so long as they do not lead to

making others suffer. Because we believe that there is no infallible authority, we have to work things out for ourselves as intelligent human beings. Therefore we aim to encourage a rational, responsible, humanitarian approach to life, and reliance on man's own intellectual, moral and social resources in every respect of human existence.

"May your deliberations take place without prejudice and pursuit of private interest, and the safety, honour, health and happiness of the citizens of this borough be in your minds at all times.

"Your duty is to provide a borough where justice shall prevail and none shall prey on others; vice and poverty shall not be found; success shall be founded on honourable service; peace and order shall not rest on force but on goodwill and the concern of all for the good of others; charity and mutual respect in the quest of truth guide you in your deliberations.

"You are probably aware that some of the sentiments I have so far expressed have a familiar ring. Parts have been taken from the standard printed prayer on your agenda; indeed, morality and codes of conduct tend to be almost the same in every society and every culture. This is surely confirmation of the fact that men and women throughout the world are rational beings, capable by their own efforts, without recourse to supernatural assistance, of creating a just and fair system."

Mr Vale concluded by expressing the hope that the meeting "will be amicable, constructive, successful, and to the benefit of the Brighton community."

And we express the hope that other groups will follow the example of the enterprising Brightonians and offer a similar service to civic leaders.

Freethinker Fund

Once again the Fund has got off to a good start. The first list of this year's contributors is an encouraging combination of veteran and new supporters.

The Freethinker has an important role to play as a campaigning journal and expression of the secular humanist viewpoint. It is vital that the movement's organisations and publications combat the religious zealots who are undermining the social reforms won after many years of bitter struggle.

Readers are urged to support *The Freethinker* and introduce it to potential subscribers at every opportunity. Our thanks to those contributors listed below.

A. M. Ashton, N. Bruce, J. E. Dyke, H. G. Easton, R. Grieve, A. J. Hoyle and E. T. Rose, £1 each; R. Lawton, £1.40; H. P. Prince and G. D. Thompson, £1.50 each; B. Cattermole, R. Cheeseman, L. J. Dawson, W. T. Ford, J. D. Groom, W. C. Hall, R. V. Samuels and I. Young, £2 each; R. Pater-son, £2.50; R. S. Eagle, R. Gerrard, T. M. Graham, J. Lloyd Lewis and D. C. Taylor, £3 each; P. Kennedy, £3.40; D. Behr and Y. Gugel, £4.40 each; T. Biles, R. Brown, C. M. Burnside, W. Donovan, R. M. Gilliland, W. Grainger, B. Hayes, J. Hazlehurst, A. P. Hodges, M. D. Jeeps, J. Lippitt, E. J. McCann, A. McGee, J. Madden, H. Madoc-Jones, V. C. A. Mitchell, O. J. Scott, E. W. Sinclair and A. A. Van Montague, £5 each; V. S. Petheram, £7; A. Garrison, J. M. Joseph, A. E. Woodford and P. D. Wrighton, £10 each; Anonymous, £11; B. Able and P. Barbour, £15 each; J. Vallance, £20; Anonymous and V. D. Brierley, £30 each; F. Dahl, \$5.

Total for January: £320.10 and \$5.

Tragedy of Operation "for Religious Purposes"

When a Coventry couple took their 28-day-old son to a doctor's surgery to be circumcised he was in perfect health. But within hours of the operation he was dead.

The child, Mohammed Jabar Ali, was given an injection of the pain-killing drug, Pethidine, and two further injections of local anaesthetic. The father, Fazland Ali, said at the inquest that after they returned home the child changed colour and fluid was coming from his nose and mouth. He was rushed to hospital and died fifteen minutes after arrival.

Dr Susan Jones, a consultant anaesthetist at Birmingham Children's Hospital, said it was highly unlikely she would have performed a circumcision for medical reasons on a child so young. The father said the operation was required for religious purposes.

One Law for Religion

BARBARA SMOKER

At last a responsible columnist, Polly Toynbee, in her *Guardian* article "The Veil of Tears" (4 February), has dared to risk outraged charges of repression and racism in speaking out honestly on the dangers of fundamentalism, especially among immigrant religions.

Of course we must deplore the imprisonment of anyone anywhere on religious grounds, however fanatical their beliefs and personal practice, but if someone like Melika Salihbegovic is to be granted political asylum in this country something should be done to deter her from coercing others to follow her lifestyle and impose it on their children.

Many Muslim families resident in this country are already subjecting their children—especially their girls—to an incompatible double culture that often leads to the tragedy of mental illness and even to teenage suicide. Separate Islamic schools aggravate and perpetuate this situation, and now there is a vociferous demand from fundamentalist Muslim leaders that such schools be granted voluntary-aided status. As long as Roman Catholic schools are heavily subsidised in this way, it is not easy to resist the argument that similar public funding cannot in equity continue to be denied to Muslim, Sikh, and other religious schools.

Another law that plays into the hands of religious fundamentalists of every type is their automatic entitlement to charity status on grounds of religion, so that they are exempted from all direct taxation and (statutorily) from half the local rates. This legal privilege, dating from 1601, is based on the principle that all religion is beneficial—and even the most harmful of the fundamentalist sects and modern fringe cults continue to cash in under this law.

Similarly, places of religious worship are exempted from the general provisions of our planning laws. One consequent piece of vandalism was the destruction in Spitalfields in 1986 of the most complete 18th-century galleried interior in London, in order to convert the building into a mosque. Supporters of Save Britain's Heritage, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and other such bodies, were in tears on the pavement outside, but could do nothing against this anomalous religious privilege under the law.

Last October, the Government decided against implementing the recommendations of their own advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council, to put an end to the religious slaughter of animals for meat without pre-stunning. The National Secular Society sent an open letter to the Minister of Agriculture, protesting against the Government's thus giving precedence to the cruel practices of ancient Palestine and 7th-century Arabia over our own comparatively humane slaughter regulations.

The Jewish and Muslim communities each deny that their own method of slaughter (which differs one from the other) is cruel—but, significantly, each accuses the other of cruelty!

Not only does Britain allow religious exemption from its general slaughter laws; Halal meat is actually on the daily menu of many of our county schools, for the sake of orthodox Muslim pupils—though there could surely be no genuine objection to the daily provision of vegetarian dishes instead.

It is high time that our laws were made universally binding in this country.

Radio Jottings

ERIC WESTMAN

Strangely, the State radio of a nearby Catholic country is far more "open" in the matter of political and religious matters than is the BBC.

RTE—the former Radio Eireann—recently allowed a woman atheist to give her views freely on the popular Gay Byrne morning programme. Objecting letters from hate-filled Catholics were read out the following day, then another atheist—a former nun—was interviewed, without sly questions or a priest standing by to have the last word. Such a liberal attitude does not obtain on State radio in Britain.

The following day, a Jesuit priest was interviewed on the subject of atheism, and gave his views in a reasonable manner. The thing that exerted atheists most, he said, was the Trinity. He also gave some interesting statistics from the last three censuses in the Irish Republic. In 1961, one person out of every 2,720 entered "no religion"; in 1971, it was one in every 732; in 1981, one in every 81 persons. At the present day, he added, one out of 23 young males in Dublin are atheists.

A broadcast from the USSR mentioned that only ten per cent of Soviet adults are members of the Communist Party. A British broadcast pointed out that ten per cent of Russians go to church regularly, whereas only five per cent of Britons do. Logically, then, the USSR is a more Christian country than Britain. However, with the much greater birthrate in Uzbekistan, reported in *Soviet Weekly*, the next century will see the USSR a Moslem country.

Darlene Jackson, of Milton, Florida, starved her four-year-old daughter to death in a bizarre ritual rite. Mrs Jackson kept a diary which revealed that she thought she was exorcising a spirit from the child. A deputy sheriff said Mrs Jackson often attended evengelicist revival meetings.

My Bloody Oath

DAVID TRIBE

Charles Bradlaugh's historic Oaths Act received its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 14 March 1888. In this centenary article, his biographer and a former president of the National Secular Society recalls Bradlaugh's successful fight for the right of affirmation by unbelievers and religious objectors to oath-taking.

Charles Bradlaugh has been described as a legend in his lifetime. Certainly legends were woven around him, some libellous, some merely inaccurate.

Though a major figure in freethought and radical history, Bradlaugh features today in mainstream history as little more than a footnote concerning his struggle to enter Parliament. Such a footnote is likely to run like this: "Charles Bradlaugh, a well-known atheist, was elected a Liberal member of Parliament for Northampton in 1880. Refusing to take the oath, he was unable to take his seat, which was declared vacant three times. On each occasion he was re-elected at a by-election. Gladstone brought in an Affirmation Bill which enabled him to take his seat in 1886". On the centenary of the Oaths Act 1888 (51 and 52 Vict ch 46), it is appropriate to set the record straight and review the implications of the issue. (The saga is extremely complex. Honesty, if not modesty, obliges me to say the only fully accurate account appears in my *President Charles Bradlaugh, MP*. John M. Robertson's contribution to *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* and Walter L. Arnstein's *The Bradlaugh Case* contain more Parliamentary detail but also significant legal and other errors and omissions.)

From the establishment of Christianity and Christendom in the fourth century, the crux of the social nexus was the oath. This was defined in the eighteenth century as an "appeal to a Supreme Being as thinking him the rewarder of truth, and avenger of falsehood". Bradlaugh himself distinguished four types of oath: (1) promissory (loyalty-pledging); (2) purging oneself of some charge, as in an answer to a bill in chancery; (3) for witnesses (assertory or testimony); (4) for a jury sworn to try an issue. For all practical purposes only (1) and (3) needed distinction. As Bradlaugh was to find, they had a different history and, prior to 1888, list of exemptions.

From the viewpoint of the political and ecclesiastical establishments, the most important (and at times the only) oath was (1). The reason was that in the declining years of the Classical Period and throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the power of rulers was largely a game of bluff. There was no police force, no standing army, and little technology in the hands of militia or a sovereign's personal bodyguard. Supernal sanctions, administered by the clergy, thus assumed overwhelming significance. The

powers-that-be did not rely on God to strike all criminals and traitors dead, but on everyone's belief in God to curb behaviour which would be rewarded or punished in the afterlife. To check abuses of power, sovereigns had to take coronation oaths to govern according to the laws of God, as understood by both secular and clerical authorities. Theoretically, the clergy had only an advisory role, but in Western Christendom the pope as the vicar of Jesus Christ had two trump cards. He could excommunicate, and thus intimidate, a wayward, believing sovereign. More importantly, he could absolve citizens from their oaths of allegiance and thus intimidate an unbeliever.

That, at any rate, was the theory. Of course, in practice the system did not prevent a succession of crimes, treasons, schisms, revolutions and other civic and ecclesiastical upheavals. It became complicated after the Protestant Reformation, especially where — as in England — the sovereign declared himself head of the Reformed Church. Oaths of allegiance then became more particular. A peasant might still pass through life without ever being asked to take an oath, but all constables, mayors, militiamen, members of Parliament and other office-holders, and all witnesses in law courts, were obliged to conform and were penalised if they refused.

In case God forgot to impose sanctions in the afterlife, secular powers brought in the offence of perjury, or false swearing. The farce was that lying when not under oath was not a criminal offence, so any interrogation before an oath was administered did not come within perjury provisions. This interrogation could occur if it were suspected that an atheist or a Jew was willing to swear "upon the true Faith of a Christian", or a Roman Catholic to swear a Protestant oath, and thus escape supernal sanctions. But generally interrogations of oath-takers did — and do — not occur, in accordance with a seventeenth century formula, "Their Oath, their own consciences to look into, not we to examine it". The same applies to unbelievers. One well-known Humanist told me he always took the oath, swearing "by Almighty Od", unchallenged.

Not all Christians, however, were willing to take an oath. Some cited Matthew 5, 34 and 37: "Swear not at all. . . But let your communication be, Yea yea; Nay nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil". Presumably this injunction arose from fear lest any oath required by secular authority have secular implications and compromise religious faith.

In 1696 Quakers were allowed to make testimony affirmations "in the presence of Almighty God", but not promissory affirmations. The reason appears to

be that the former were deemed desirable in the interests of justice, but the latter were regarded as conferring privileges on individuals and were to be restricted to those who were ideologically sound. A Quaker was, however, allowed to affirm and take his seat in Parliament in 1833, and in 1866 the Parliamentary Oaths Act formalised this position for "every Person of the Persuasion of the People called Quakers, and every other Person for the Time being by Law permitted to make a solemn Affirmation or Declaration instead of taking an Oath". It was generally assumed that this really applied to odd Christian sects like Moravians and Separatists; for in previous decades the Anglican oaths had been watered down to allow Nonconformists, Roman Catholics and Jews to swear allegiance to the Crown.

Thanks to the exertions of Bradlaugh, unbelievers were allowed to affirm in law courts after 1869. This situation arose from the 1867 civil action of *Bradlaugh v De Rin*, involving the realisation of bills of exchange. Counsel for the defendant objected to Bradlaugh's either swearing or affirming to give evidence, and Austin Holyoake was unable to swear to go bail for costs. Following agitation by the National Secular Society, an Evidence Further Amendment Act was passed in 1869 to allow anyone who did not believe in "any being independent of the universe, governing or ruling it" or "a future state of rewards and punishments" to affirm in any "court of justice" or before a "presiding judge". When an arbitrator was appointed to decide a question of fact in the *De Rin* case, Bradlaugh was allowed to "swear" an affidavit (in effect swearing that he was incompetent to swear), but it was then found that an arbitrator was not a "presiding judge". The Evidence Amendment Act of 1870 removed this anomaly, but still did not extend affirmation to jurymen, affidavits or Scottish courts.

When Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament in 1880 (that part of the above footnote is correct), he announced that he would be perfectly willing to take an oath but thought it would be "more decorous" to affirm. He believed that the 1869-70 Acts took him retrospectively into the ambit of the Parliamentary Oaths Act. The House of Commons decided to appoint a Select Committee to see if he had a legal right to affirm. Sir Stafford Northcote, Commons leader of the Conservatives, wrote in his diary: "It seems strange to require an oath from a Christian and to dispense with it from an atheist. Would it not be better to do away with the members' oath altogether, and make the affirmation general?"

When the Select Committee found Bradlaugh had no legal right to affirm, on the basis that promissory affirmations required special legislation, he cheerfully announced he would take the oath. This was objected to and another Select Committee set up. The resultant hearings were more acrimonious than

before, and clouded by allegations that a leading republican could not profess "true Allegiance" to the Crown in any form of words. In the event, the committee decided he was not entitled to take the oath but should be allowed to affirm. A motion that he be so allowed was lost, Bradlaugh declined to withdraw from the House, was arrested and became the last person to be imprisoned in the Clock Tower at Westminster.

After his release, Gladstone moved that unbelievers be allowed to affirm, "subject to any liability by statute", and Bradlaugh took his seat. This liability was a £500 fine, imposed in 1714, on members of Parliament for every vote cast without taking the oath. After his first vote a common informer, backed by a Tory MP, claimed the penalty. In the ensuing action the judge declared that Bradlaugh had no right to affirm, subject to appeal. After Bradlaugh had incurred possible penalties of £108,500, his seat was declared vacant and a by-election called.

To cut an extremely long story short, this pantomime occurred three times, with Bradlaugh being re-elected in 1881, 1882 and 1884. After the first re-election, as a huge band of his supporters waited in Westminster Hall, he was literally kicked out. It took all the persuasion of his daughters and Annie Besant, briefed by him in advance, to prevent an invasion of the House. Not only did he express willingness on many occasions to take the oath until the law was changed, but he twice administered the oath to himself. Private members, and eventually Gladstone himself, introduced an Affirmation Bill or a Parliamentary Oaths Act (1866) Amendment Bill, but they were all defeated. Meanwhile appeals and new court cases were brought, but they decided only fringe issues like the right of common informers to sue, the illegality of maintenance by third parties and the powers of the Sergeant-at-Arms. Bradlaugh finally took his seat in 1886, after the 1885 general election, when the Speaker, Sir A. W. Peel, allowed him to take the oath at the beginning of the Parliamentary session and refused to allow a debate on the issue.

It was Bradlaugh himself who secured liberating legislation. Ironically it was not called an Affirmation Act but an Oaths Act. It was a portmanteau affirmation measure that accommodated all types of religious and irreligious opinion in its formula: "either that he has no religious belief, or that the taking of an oath is contrary to his religious belief". Thus it included unorthodox religionists who considered that an oath had a "binding effect" on their consciences (and so could not affirm) yet they had no belief in "a future state of rewards and punishments" (and so could not swear). And it extended to jurors, affidavits and Scottish courts: in fact, every context where an oath might be required. As such, it has

survived to today.

Bradlaugh was well aware of the main freethought objection to the Act: that it allows an interrogation to determine the ground for affirmation and the possible arousal of prejudice against an affirmer. But he considered, no doubt correctly, that he had gained as much as was possible at the time. Freethinkers should neither permit nor precipitate a detailed credal inquisition but should simply state "I have no religious belief". That statement must be accepted.

Increasing numbers of lawyers, libertarians and liberal Christians are joining freethinkers — and Sir

Stafford Northcote — in calling for universal affirmation. Not only would this standardise and harmonise legal proceedings, it would remove a lot of practical difficulties. Every court usher knows that Jews swear on the Old Testament and men cover their heads, but how many are familiar with the forms and practices of the array of Eastern religions now represented in the United Kingdom? Most of them must secretly say to themselves: "I, A. B., do solemnly, sincerely, and truly declare and affirm that the oath is a bloody nuisance".

Hugh Schonfield: Author of The Passover Plot

H. J. BLACKHAM

Hugh Schonfield, who died on 24 January, had a family connection with the Ethical Union, for his wife was sister to the wife of Eric Elkan, who ran the Hampstead Ethical Society for many years, and latterly was treasurer of the Ethical Union. Schonfield, although with a family of his own, always seemed a man apart from his fellows, withdrawn, inscrutable, and physically unusual, with a tight-stretched skin like parchment, which seemed to assimilate him to the ancient documents with which his life was notoriously concerned. Notoriously, because he revived the free discussion of Jesus of Nazareth in the early first century that had been totally eclipsed in the perspective of history. His *The Passover Plot* (1965) is said to have sold two million copies. The plot was an arrangement by which Joseph of Arimathea would take Jesus down from the cross when, drugged, he would seem dead; so that he might appear to his disciples, and give authority to his Messiahship. Actually, the spear which pierced his side did kill him.

Brought up in a Jewish community in Hampstead, Schonfield was fascinated in early years by the figure of Jesus and his place in Jewish history, and that remained the core of his serious interest in the record. He was not a debunker with a gift for popular exposition. Rather, he had thought himself into the position of the first Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church. He had a reasoned line on Jesus as Messiah, Jewish, wholly different from orthodox Judaism as from orthodox Christianity. What motivated this view was his central and dominant interest in a postulated world movement to human universality and world order. Jesus, in the succession of Israel's prophets, was indeed the Messiah who would announce its coming. Schonfield himself was identified with this mission; he founded the Commonwealth of World Citizens, which sought to combat divisive nationalism by getting people to enrol themselves as citizens of the world. (I remember him on the National Peace Council, and I remember an abortive

canvass to get him nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.)

This central interest, which produced a long series of books, as well as a notable translation of the New Testament and rank speculation in interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, merged in a general interest in the Middle East, with a history of the Suez Canal on its hundredth anniversary, and a biography of Richard Burton. A wild theorist, he was at heart a visionary. The fertile spring of ideas that welled from his vision flowed in a spate of publications that were still forthcoming when he died at 86. If personally withdrawn, he was abundantly fulfilled in this output.

Schonfield is interesting, and of some importance, to freethinkers, just because he did something to restore the climate of opinion in the earliest days of the Christian church before Rome silenced the many voices, Greek and Latin, by imposing the orthodoxy of Trinitarian dogma on the variety of ideas and beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth. For it was all very well to say that he was God and man, but what did that mean exactly, and how was it accomplished in the event? What was decided, with the attempt to extinguish alternatives, was never made intelligible. Digest the Athanasian Creed! The orthodox were compelled to rest in mystery—and invited to glory in it.

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BOOKS

DEAR MR SHAW: SELECTIONS FROM BERNARD SHAW'S POSTBAG. Compiled and Edited by Vivian Elliot. Bloomsbury, £14.95

A new volume added to the miles of previous works on, about and by, Bernard Shaw, must always be an "event", and the latest addition is no exception. True, it goes over some old ground, but lots of new as well, and if many of the efforts of the various correspondents in trying to keep up with the Bard of Ayot St Lawrence pale into insignificance beside his own in pungency, scholarship and point — well, this is to be expected. Many of the subjects, too, have been touched on in the past, but the "world" of GBS as letter writer, poet, dramatist, philosopher and jokester is so wide that there's always something being written — agree with it or not — that catches our attention and quickens our thought-processes. Our heartbeats, too, are frequently stimulated by subjects touched upon in various moods and displayed by The Sage whilst dealing with loving, begging, threatening, rude and admiring additions to his post-bag.

GBS would occasionally say, mischievously, that black was white, day was night, and even wrong was right. But rarely when the issue was serious enough — and never when the matter was getting out of hand. He led his correspondents on, getting them to think and not merely to feel; contradicting and pulling legs when he suspected his adversary in an argument was merely flexing muscles and refusing to think an argumentative debate out to its logical conclusion.

Many of his correspondents were the famous — Ellen Terry, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Granville Barker, Kipling, Sean O'Casey, Barrie, Galsworthy, Chesterton and H. G. Wells — but this present work concerns the little ones for the most part; those who wrote to the Big Man and received more unexpected kindness, as well as wise advice, than they had thought possible. He covered his tracks, of course, believing that if his charitable impulses (and there were many) were discovered he would never be free from beggars knocking on his door; and he believed, as he shows constantly in his replies to impecunious correspondents, that the authorities would then go on evading their responsibility to ensure that the poor, homeless and dispossessed, were cared for in a civilised society, just so long as there were private individuals who showed sufficient compassion to take the load off the Government's shoulders.

A case in point was once recounted to me by that distinguished drama critic, R. B. Marriott (now retired, but for many years the senior critic on *The Stage* newspaper) when as a very young man from

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the provinces he came to London to seek fame and fortune, after already carving out careers as a journalist in both Manchester and Liverpool. Apparently he had met GBS by chance, who had been encouraging "to a young nobody" (Mariott's words); sufficiently so, at any rate, for the youngster to recall in chats about his correspondence with Shaw, that upon one occasion, in the company of a friend, he had broken in on the Great Man at his Whitehall Court flat. There, he was courteous, considerate and helpful. Described by some, who were unable to read-between-the-lines of his sometimes devastating letters (usually postcards when he thought the correspondent worthy of a reply and his signed card could help to "raise the wind") as vain and a bully, my friend deprecated such descriptions, referring to their friendship and later talks and correspondence as truly wonderful. Here was the world's greatest ballyhoo merchant and premier playwright, away from the public gaze, entertaining two young men barely, at the time, on the threshold of entering a vastly different life, and talking to the vigorous old man (it was in Shaw's own mid-'70s that Marriott first met him) in a tongue-tied, surprised and inhibited (at the start) sort of way, but gradually unwinding in the presence of such simple greatness; learning of the graciousness that can accompany greatness.

For George Bernard Shaw was and remains through his writings — his plays and prefaces especially — a great man, and if he likes to remind us through his correspondence with others that he "knows of no English prose style which is better than my own", then it is as well to read that correspondence on all sorts of subjects with all sorts of people; for there was nobody a "nobody" in Shaw's world of letters (*pace* T. W. Robertson's *Caste*). He would write to Mr Cragg, a beggar in a workhouse, with as much wit, and even a spice of constructive advice, as he might write to the world famous Charlie Chaplin or his old friend Lady Astor:

What is the use of coming to me with all this? It is a case for a philanthropist; and I am not one. If you can't find work there is nothing for it but to have one wild spree with enclosed couple of pounds, and then go into the workhouse.

The point is that this old rational romantic sentimentalist couldn't refuse, and resorted often to a damnable rudeness that was never malicious and often uproariously funny. And as Vivian Elliot, the Canadian compiler and editor of *Dear Mister Shaw*, points out in the course of her perceptive comments in a text that does no injustice to her subject's greatness, albeit in his lightest and most throwaway

REVIEWS

moments, even a GBS "turndown" (on the surface) proved to be of financial benefit to a supplicant. Indeed his rejections, with "G. Bernard Shaw" written in the well-known spidery signature attached to postcard or letter, could be easily disposed of by selling to dealers for handsome sums amounting to a most generous subscription to the charity, more often than not the individual rather than the charity in question — although as an ardent socialist he despised private charity. Besides, he said, "you only make enemies that way" so he'd do his good works on the side, citing Jesus Christ's abandonment by God to back his own additional "case" against charity: "Perhaps that is why God refused to give Jesus Christ anything, and made him buy what he wanted with his blood".

As Eric Batson, that admirable one time secretary of the Shaw Society, once wrote (after quoting J. B. Priestley's assessment of Shaw's monumental achievement: "He was the last of the giants and the first really civilised man"):

He was the last, possibly, of the great urbane writers, who stem from the fine liberal free-thinking traditions of the 18th century. . . . What he did in his endeavours to correct us he did with all kindness, even when he had to knock us over the head for our own good with the shining shillelagh of his Irish wit. He trod on the toes of some of us, but if there was any good at all in us they glowed all day with a more cheerful warmth.

As with the present collection under review.

Vivian Elliott's readers will feel a sense of indebtedness to her, although I suspect she has had her reward through what must have been a labour of love, in sifting and sorting — and laughing.

PETER COTES

THE ATHEIST'S CASE. Compiled and Edited with a Commentary by Paul Lester

This small book deserves a circulation far greater than it is likely to achieve. Dr Lester has assembled extracts from Shelley, James Thompson, Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels and Freud, linking them with an erudite and pertinent commentary. Some of the extracts will be unfamiliar, such as passages from Darwin's *Life and Letters* which his wife and daughter expurgated from the published version because they were clearly a profession of atheism.

Shelley's words have a clarity and elegance lacking in many modern writers.

Dr Lester, like Corliss Lamont, does not find Marxism and Humanism irreconcilable. The pro-

fessed Humanists who do so have clearly not bothered to read Marx and Engels.

Paul Lester is to be congratulated on this compilation.

KARL HEATH

The Atheist's Case is obtainable from *The Atheist Press*, 89 Frances Road, Cotteridge, Birmingham B30 3DV, price £1, plus 20p postage.

Dodo in the Strand

DANIEL O'HARA

Next time anyone thinks of giving a dramatic presentation of *Alice in Wonderland*, the prime contender for the role of the Dodo must surely be Professor Stewart Sutherland, Principal of King's College, London.

In the last of a series of articles (*The Independent*, 13 February) discussing the Bishop of London's Fulton Lecture, the professor, comparing the apparently incompatible views of Dr Leonard and the Archbishop of Canterbury, on the possibility of God-given moral absolutes, declares, in effect, "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes".

It is not that he is uncritical of either the Bishop or the Archbishop: he even accuses both of putting too much trust in reasonableness! He then goes on to make some quite extraordinary assertions, and to indulge in some tortuous analogies which become more opaque the more you consider them. I suppose the effect he intends is that even if, like Alice, his readers think the whole thing very absurd, they will also, like Alice, consider that the contenders in this latter-day Caucus-race all look so grave that they will not dare to laugh!

I trust that readers of *The Freethinker* will have no such compunction. They will, however, agree with at least one of the professor's contentions: ". . . appeal to what 'God says' is of course . . . appeal only to what human beings say 'God says'". But this excellent Hobbesian maxim is then vitiated by wittering about "a natural law", which, though imperfectly discerned, enables us "unambiguously (to) reject subjectivism and radical relativism." This sleight of hand, which is the stock-in-trade of Christian apologists, is followed by another bit of grovelling human self-deprecation which adds weight to Feuerbach's objection to Christianity: "We are poor short-sighted creatures who *certainly* (my italics) live *sub specie aeternitatis*, but whose vision is through a glass darkly". This sort of nonsense is clearly intended to dispel argument, as it sheds not a single gleam of light on the subject; indeed it only succeeds in further muddying the waters.

The professor's next sentences are so opaque I defy anyone to make sense of them. What he is trying

to say, however, appears to be that we must not deny that there are absolute standards of truth and morality, even if we have no way of knowing what they are. Well, if that's the case, they are about as useful as a packet of fishnet condoms, and humanists can be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about! But we should not be so easily deceived. Religionists are as adept at using theological smoke-screens to rob us of our reason as apiarists are at using more visible smoke to rob the bees of their honey. The real trouble with Dr Leonard and Dr Runcie, *pace* Professor Sutherland, is not that they

place too much trust in reasonableness but in striving to assert their own authority, they devalue it to such an extent that what happened to the German Mark in 1923 seems the merest hiccup.

Readers of this journal will probably not need reminding that King's College, London, was set up in 1828 as the Established Church's answer to "godless Gower Street" (i.e. University College, founded in 1824 on Benthamite principles). The present Principal has provided fresh evidence that those who value intellectual rigor should still give a wide berth to this Dodo in the Strand.

Span the World With Friendship

ROBERT WHITTLE

Last month Sara Wood related her experience of the Girl Guide movement from which she was forced to resign after refusing to become a Christian. Humanist parents may like to know about the Woodcraft Folk, a non-religious youth organisation which was formed sixty years ago. Its wide range of activities enable young people to foster friendships and develop personal responsibility.

Take a few moments and imagine your ideal youth organisation, one that would be valuable in the pluralist society of 1988, with its continuing problems of alienation, child abuse, youth unemployment, and diminishing public sector support. Then I'll introduce you to one such organisation by sketching an event of last summer.

It is seven in the morning, and in the centre of a large circle of tents a herald recites:

"All ye who dwell within the camp, Awake! Arise!
For the earth has cast off the black cap of night
And is arrayed in the shining white garments of day.
Awake! Arise!"

And the camp is awake! Later that morning we see the determination and exhilaration on the faces of ten-year-olds as they make their first canoe trip under expert instruction. Back in the camp, under the direction of the Keeper of the Provender, lunch preparation has developed; first, into a discussion about the countries of origin of the foods, then to opinions about food economics and boycotts, and on to vegetarianism.

After lunch several dozen courageous leaders dress up as convincing and frightening figures from *The Hobbit* and hide in the wood as part of an adventure game for the younger members. After dark around a ceremonial camp fire, all three hundred camp members watch young members from groups in each Sussex town announce their presence formally. We sing songs from around the world about peace,

protest, work, humour and history. This is not only a fun weekend but a regular part of the ongoing activities of a co-educational progressive youth organisation called The Woodcraft Folk.

The Woodcraft Folk is a charitable-status member of the voluntary youth sector, and "Districts" of the Folk exist in many towns and cities. Elfyn Groups comprise six to nine-year-olds, Pioneers are aged ten to thirteen and Venturers from thirteen to sixteen. Associated with each Group are several adult Leaders and helpers, and many parents also participate.

The philosophy of the Folk is to foster the growth and development of young people; first by an appreciation of the history and culture of our society, secondly by offering experiences for personal growth that come from creative activities and co-operative action, and thirdly by examination of the way we behave towards each other.

Translated into action, these ideals determine the programme of regular weekly evening meetings, weekend camps and visits. One evening may be devoted to art or craft work on a particular theme. On another occasion we might begin a role-playing drama session to explore methods resolving conflicts instanced by, for example, the pressures of development versus conservation, or stemming from the warrior cult of a country. And perhaps we would play co-operative games, learn how to pitch a tent, or master the steps of a folk dance.

There are badges that Folk members earn through their own efforts: Folk dancer, Ecologist, Peace and Citizen. The apogee may be to take part in an international youth camp with young people from another country. This forms an important and lasting memory for many Folk members.

The organisation originated within the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society area of London in 1925, and continues to enjoy strong support from the Co-operative movement. Districts of the Folk throughout the country co-ordinate their larger ventures

within the areas served by individual Co-operative societies. The history of the Folk in the social ferment of the 1920s and '30s, when it attempted to avoid imperialist and ecclesiastical connections, is fascinating.

The Woodcraft Folk represents a challenge to sexism and ageism, social and political conformity. Baker's Education Bill offers no promise of any chance to explore multicultural issues in our schools, but there is scope for this in the Woodcraft Folk. I would stress to Humanists the satisfaction and opportunities that the Woodcraft Folk provides both young people and adults, hoping that it may encourage readers to become involved and perhaps offer their skills and experience.

Children who experience the thrill of participating and decision making, or the satisfaction of acquiring new skills, are more likely to join in the shaping of the community later in their lives. We value opportunities for people of all ages to establish secure friendships, supplementing those within families. Adult Folk members sometimes offer career advice and, when necessary, consolation to members in difficulty or suffering loss.

Friendships develop in such an environment, and the title of this article is the motto of the Woodcraft Folk.

Information about the Woodcraft Folk and its local groups is obtainable from 13 Ritherdon Road, London SW17 8EQ, telephone 01-672 6031.

LETTERS

MIND AND BODY

I read with great interest Barbara Smoker's review of Ian Wilson's book on "near-death experiences" (February), a subject which has also been receiving attention recently by the BBC, both on television (in the series QED), and on radio (*Into the Light*).

I must confess I do not find Barbara Smoker's "rational" interpretation of the phenomena very convincing. She claims that the patients remain "half-conscious", and that the temporary deprivation of oxygen to the brain causes them to have the illusion that they are floating above their bodies. But, in truth, the patients are not half-conscious, but totally unconscious. They have suffered, as Barbara Smoker herself says, cardiac arrest, and the doctors are making frantic efforts to resuscitate them. And, of course, when we become, or are knocked unconscious, we can see and hear nothing. How then, can some of these people both see and hear clearly the events taking place in the room beneath them?

Barbara Smoker goes on to assert that "any other explanation of the 'out-of-the-body' experience would mean our abandoning the basic known fact that thought is an outcome of brain activity . . ." But is this a "basic known fact"? She must surely be aware that many philosophers, from Plato onwards, have contended that materialism puts the cart before the horse. To them, the relationship between mind and body is (to use Plato's analogy), like the relationship of a lute player to his instrument. When the latter becomes worn out or

is destroyed, the former does not cease to exist. Mind, in short, can function independently of the body, a theory which both telepathy and near-death experiences would seem to confirm.

JOHN L. BROOM

Barbara Smoker replies: How on earth can John Broom insist that anyone suffering a cardiac arrest is "not half-conscious, but totally unconscious"? All the evidence is to the contrary.

He himself accepts that some near-dead patients can perceive what is actually happening and can also think — and afterwards can remember their perceptions and thoughts. But that is surely what we mean by consciousness! And if they can experience both perception and thought, by what means are they perceiving and thinking?

He presumably has the dualist idea that the patient's "spirit" has temporarily broken free from the body, or remains attached to it only by a sort of thread; but dualists never explain how the "spirit" can exercise all the functions of a complete human sensory apparatus, by means of which we normally perceive things, without having the use of that apparatus. As I asked in my review last month, why have we evolved all that elaborate sensory apparatus if it is possible to manage so well without it? And why cannot the blind see and the deaf hear by these alleged spiritual means?

Dr Jonathan Miller has said, in a TV programme, that the "map" of our bodies which we normally carry in our minds enables us to locate most sources of pain, and that once this "map" is impaired (as it is when the brain is deprived of oxygen), pain can be sensed as a free-floating thing, separate from the body. This could explain the "out-of-the-body" experience.

I have a friend who, after a cardiac arrest, reported the actual words spoken by members of the medical team who were preparing to resuscitate his body — as it seemed to him, below him. Doctors used to be amazed (and occasionally embarrassed!) at this ability of the "clinically dead" to hear, but nowadays trainee doctors are told to be careful of what they say in the presence of a corpse within five minutes of death, since hearing seems to be the last of the senses to be lost through oxygen deprivation. When patients also report after resuscitation that they "saw" (usually with closed eyes) what was going on around them (cr, as they often imagine, below them), this is likely to be an inner visualisation, just as a visual dream can be triggered by external sounds actually heard during sleep.

The methodology of all the recent research into near-death experiences is unsatisfactory, for there is inevitably delay after a cardiac arrest before the patient can communicate — he or she being on ventilation, unable to speak, for some while. Besides, questioning the patient can itself be highly suggestive, and there is a tendency among many people to "embroider" any story that others find interesting. Then, those with nothing of any interest to report are generally eliminated from anecdotal surveys.

LABEL AND CONTENTS

Karl Heath (Letters, January) comes close to the heart of my November article when he writes, "The argument is about labels". The article has in fact appeared in Australia under the title "Humanism: the Label Has Faded" — published, ironically, by the friend who unwittingly provoked me into writing it. However, I have long been impressed with the concept — Celtic, I think — that words, as labels, to some extent colour and modify the concept or substance they describe. The label matters because it tends subtly to influence

the substance.

Harry Stopes-Roe (February) at least admits that a number of rationalist bodies did rename themselves **humanist**. He thinks the development "suggests something new". Yes indeed!

Take South Africa, for instance. There the local Rationalist Association had an honourable history. Its leading member, Eddie Roux, was banned by the Government. But in about 1978 the Rationalist Association was wound up in favour of a Humanist Association whose founding manifesto contained some circumlocutions which meant, in effect, that the new body would not give the Government too much trouble. It was not a very impressive change in my eyes.

So the statement in **Humanist News** was a "misguided error", was it? This sounds like the secular equivalent of a genre of Catholic (and anti-Catholic) jokes that end with the punch line, "God be praised! Another miracle!"

In my article I made it clear that the people who introduced humanism in the 1960s "had their merits". The late Lindsay Burnet, for example, did a remarkable job with what became the Humanist Housing Association and in founding a host of local humanist groups. (I became the first secretary of one.) Harold Blackham gave a new impetus to the ethical movement in West London and beyond, though I am not sure that "Ethical" should eventually have been abandoned for "Humanist".

I can well believe that Mr Blackham fell foul of some secularists: so too did people within the National Secular Society who wanted the Society to campaign on a wider range of issues. Eventually the ostrich party, who favoured a very narrow concept of secularism, seceded from the NSS and set up a comic-opera Secular League with almost as many branches as members.

Some humanists, however, were not exactly sympathetic towards the NSS's 1964 secular education campaign and they also opposed criticism of orthodox religion as "flogging a dead horse". At least secularists were aware that tides may turn (as the rise of fundamentalism has shown) and were concerned about the long-term implications of sectarian education in a multi-racial society.

John White (February) has selected a number of quotations with which he will not be surprised to know I have little objection. I doubt if Quakers, Unitarians and many liberal Christians would either. He does well to remind us that humanists (in the broad sense) are concerned about population and environmental matters. He misses the point, however, that freethinkers were concerned about these issues long before **humanist** came into fashion. I have previously mentioned (jokingly) the humanist lady who preferred cats to people. What brought me up with a start, however, was being told in all seriousness that animals had nothing to do with humanism. This is logically defensible, given the etymology of humanism (and proof of the subtle power of labels), but it is philosophically suspect, as I am sure Professor Peter Singer would agree. (I am not suggesting that the movement should be exclusively concerned with animals either!)

I confess that I have not properly perused **People First**. Mea culpa! It does, I admit, sound a bit like the title of a manual on lifeboat drill. Please do not forget the ship's cat: that is all I ask.

Both Mr White and Dr Stopes-Roe refer to Sir Julian Huxley whose writings greatly influenced me as a youngster. In the last chapter "Evolutionary Humanism as a Developed Religion", of his **Religion Without Revelation**, Sir Julian makes some profound comments about aesthetic values, over-population, and the desirability of restoring "our unity with nature". Yet at the

same time he assumes that the only form of materialism is Marxism, regards it as proper to talk of "higher" and "lower" organisms, and writes glowingly of "our human destiny . . . to be the agent of the evolutionary process on this planet, the instrument for realising new possibilities for its future". He also puts me on my guard when he writes: "Evolutionary biology shows us the destiny of man on earth as a partnership between man and nature, with man in the leading position — a common enterprise involving the participation of the entire human species for its most fruitful execution".

Our species is, for the present, in a privileged position. We are, as I have said before, a part of nature; and in the light of our knowledge since Huxley wrote his words I think we should be very wary of talk about partnership, let alone "leading". We can certainly try to understand the world around us and then act as wisely in it as we can.

After I had written my article I read an account by Souza Jamba which has appeared in Britain (the **Spectator**) and Australia. It describes the writer's experiences in Zambia where humanism is the official ideology of a one-party state. Souza Jamba claims he was beaten up by "Humanist" police, soldiers and teachers, and describes how "the debating society of a nearby school once debated the motion 'Zambia is a Humanist Society'. After the opponents of the motion had spoken they were arrested and dragged from the platform by the secret police in the audience. The chairman declared the motion carried."

My critics will surely comment that, even if Souza Jamba's account is accurate, the heavy-handed ideology of an emerging African nation is completely different from a strand of the Western libertarian freethought tradition. Quite so, but here, once again, we have **humanist** being used with yet another meaning, one I would prefer not to be associated with.

Labels are important, and I think they should be as clear as possible; for I suspect and hope that we are all agreed that the substance — freedom, justice, compassion, curiosity and reason — is what matters. Our movement and its various strands are certainly worthwhile, but I am not at all sure that **humanist** is the best name for them. Judging from the interest my views have aroused — both opposition and support — it is clear that the whole matter needed a good airing.

NIGEL SINNOTT

USE OF LANGUAGE

Harry Stopes-Roe's style of disputation is surely rather offensive, descending to the language of the **Sun** newspaper in describing one of Nigel Sinnott's statements as a "bleat".

If he must resort to personalities, he might consider his own addiction to the first person pronoun.

Reading Luke chapter 14, verses 8-11, may add decorum to his life-stance.

KARL HEATH

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Diana Rookledge's problems with allegedly sexist attendants (Letters, February) arise from confusion, not sexism. She doesn't spell out how she would like her examples to address her. As Muzz? Good grief forbid. (The people at fault, let us note, were doing jobs unlikely to confer "social ease").

I have every sympathy with men who find public and private relations with women difficult to define at this time, and even suspect that some take refuge in a homosexual stance because of this. Let's hope some good comes of it all ultimately.

JOYCE HOARE

EVENTS

HITLER'S RISE TO POWER

To what Michael Duane says in his review (January) of *Theologians Under Hitler*, by Robert P. Ericksen, concerning the background to the rise of Nazism, one should add fear of Marxism — especially, from 1917, of that ideology in the form of Bolshevism, fear of which was intense in Germany.

Michael Duane speaks of the three theologians "submitting to an illegal and criminal power". But it is important to realise that Hitler, far from coming to power "illegally", did so (like Mussolini) by constitutional means. He was appointed Chancellor by President von Hindenburg on 30 January 1933, and was given dictatorial powers by the Enabling Act (the "Law to Combat Misery in the Reich") which was passed by the Reichstag on 23 March thereafter, and signed by the President on the following day.

The Vatican played an egregious part in all this process. But that is a story of its own.

R. J. M. TOLHURST

CHESS MASTERS

Asked by Byran Appleyard (*The Times*, 4 February) if he was religious, Nigel Short, the 22-year-old chess Grandmaster, replied: "No, I don't think any of the major chess players are. I don't want to offend anybody, but I think people with a religious belief need an emotional support and I think chess players can see through a thing like that."

May I suggest chess for the core curriculum?

D. R. LOVE

A correspondent in *Christian Week* has raised the question whether cremation is desirable in principle for Christians. C. M. Rogers, of Bedford, suspects "that a nation once more rooted and grounded in Christ . . . would begin to ask itself whether it should not cast out the abomination of cremation and see to it that all its dead were given a due and fitting burial".

National Secular Society

ANNUAL DINNER

speakers include

David Yallop

(author of *In God's Name*)

Ted Goodman

(chairman, Campaign Against Censorship)

Barbara Smoker

President, NSS

The Coburg Hotel,

Bayswater Road, London

Saturday, 19th March, 1988

6.30 pm for 7 pm

Vegetarians catered for;

advance notice essential

Tickets £13.50 each

NSS, 702 Holloway Road,

London N19 3NL, telephone 01-272 1266

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday 10 April, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Martin Ryle: Ecology and Green Politics — Nature and Human Nature.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme for Forum meetings from the secretary, 59 Fox Covert Avenue, Edinburgh, EH12 6UH, telephone 031-334 8372.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Meetings on the second Friday of the month at 7.30 pm.

Glasgow Humanist Society. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Norman Macdonald, 15 Queen Square, Glasgow G41 2BG, telephone: 041-424 0545.

Humanist Holidays. Easter Holiday at Norwich from Thursday, 30 March until Monday, 4 April. Details obtainable from Gillian Bailey, 18 Priors Road, Cheltenham, GL52 5AA, telephone 0242 39175.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 31 March, 7.45 pm. Public Meeting. *The Dead Sea Scrolls* — a Maundy Musing.

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone Norwich 47843.

Scottish Humanist Council. The Cowane Centre, Stirling. Saturday, 23 April, 10 am until 5 pm. Annual Conference. Speakers include television producer Stuart Miller. Details obtainable from Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

Sutton Humanist Group. The Public Library, St Nicholas Way, Sutton (near Sutton BR Station). Tuesday, 12 April until Saturday, 16 April, 9.30 am until 8 pm (Saturday, 5 pm). Exhibition: *Humanism for a Better and Happier World*. Information obtainable from George Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM14PD, telephone 01-642 8796.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 April, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Barbara Smoker: *The National Secular Society — What it is and What it Does*.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 21 March, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group. Information regarding meetings and other activities is obtainable from Georgina Coupland, 117 Pennard Drive, Southgate, telephone 044 128 3631.

Worthing Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Bob Thorpe, 19 Shirley Drive, Worthing, telephone 62846.

Thomas Paine Remembered in Thetford

The fine old tradition of regularly celebrating Thomas Paine's birthday, 29 January, has been revived in Thetford, the town of his birth in 1737. Through the impetus of last year's 250th anniversary celebrations, local people met at the foot of the Paine statue this year, together with Labour MP, Ken Livingstone, and the chairman of the Thomas Paine Society, Christopher Brunel, to remember the great revolutionary and reformer, and lay sprigs of rosemary.

Mrs Mary Page of Thetford Labour Party, a leading spirit in the celebrations, said that people today had a lot to learn from Paine. He was a radical and an apostle of freedom, whom we needed more than ever today.

The pouring rain did not deter Ken Livingstone from pointing to the relevance of Paine's thinking to today's world. He felt that Thomas Paine would have been as shocked as he was at the result of the appeal

Religious Charities

tion are enormous and growing, he added: "The Government are putting fresh opportunities in almost every Budget for additional claims to be made upon the Revenue for charitable relief. Now we have contributions to charities which are deductible under pay-as-you-earn provisions and allowable for tax purposes.

"We must look very close indeed at the question of charitable registration."

Lord Houghton said that religious bodies were in the front row when the State and Parliament came to look at the statutory position of charities.

"Religious charities probably get on the register more easily than any other type of charity," he added.

"A religious body does not have to prove to or satisfy the commissioners that it is contributing to the good of the community. All other charities must be able to show that what they are doing is for the good of the community, whether in the fields of education, ethical values, care of animals or in dealing with poverty . . .

"Preaching and doctrine alone are not charitable because those are not necessarily good for the community, even though such groups may claim that they are religious and God-given . . . In order to qualify for charitable status we look to religious bodies to do good works as well. In other words, such bodies will have to qualify under the condition that they are contributing to the good of the community.

"I know that many churches think they are contributing in that way. However, not all of us believe that they are."

of the Birmingham Six, imprisoned over the bombing in Birmingham fourteen years ago, and that he would also have joined in the storm of protest at the Government's alleged RUC shoot-to-kill policy in Northern Ireland.

Christopher Brunel also spoke of the relevance of Paine today, as what he wrote was based on principle. "His ideas for a welfare scheme", said Mr Brunel, "in part two of *Rights of Man*, were the foundation of our Welfare State, developed by William Beveridge and Nye Bevan." Paine was a political fighter, so we should have to fight to prevent the Conservatives from dismantling the welfare system. "The nurses, doctors and others, struggling to preserve the health service", he said, "are in the tradition of Paine".

The meeting, attended by about fifty people, was reminded that even in the dark years, when Paine was denigrated, many secular societies and other progressive organisations here and in America celebrated his birthday year after year. One such organisation in Britain held a children's Thomas Paine birthday party, in 1890.

Marghanita Laski

Marghanita Laski, the writer, critic and broadcaster, has died. She was born in 1915, the daughter of Neville Laski and niece of Harold Laski.

Her published works included six novels and literary studies of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Rudyard Kipling and Charlotte Yonge. She served on the Annan Committee into Future of Broadcasting (1974-77), was vice-chairman of the Arts Council (1982-86) and chairman of the Council's Literature Advisory Panel (1980-84).

She sent "warm good wishes" to the National Secular Society on the occasion of its centenary in 1966.

In a tribute, Sir Roy Shaw, a former chairman of the Arts Council, said of Marghanita Laski: "I do not think I ever heard her speak bitchily of anyone — a rare distinction in the arts world.

"As for religion, she was the most complete unbeliever, untroubled by any twinges of faith.

"At the peaceful end of her life, Marghanita Laski died just as she had lived: with great dignity and calm acceptance of her fate."

Cardinal Franz Koning, former Archbishop of Vienna, has revealed that two churchmen helped Nazi war criminals escape to Latin America. He declined to name them, but said that one was Austrian and the other German. "Both hold to this day high posts in the Vatican", he added.

