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"OWN GOALS" REDUCE INFLUENCE OF MAINSTREAM RELIGION

Barbara Smoker was re-elected President of the National Secular Society at the annual general meeting held in Conway Hall, London, on 4 November. Her presidential address took the form of an international profit-and-loss account for belief and free-thought as we approach the end of the Eighties.

"Financial scandals, connected with mysterious deaths, have surrounded the Vatican Bank, giving Rome an infamous decade", she said.

"Other scandals, financial and sexual, have surrounded some of the most celebrated televangelists in the United States.

"All in all, Christians must have felt a certain degree of disillusionment with their spiritual leaders."

The NSS president declared that it is not only Christianity that has had a deservedly bad press of late.

"In this country, it is mainly Islam that, during the past ten months, has, for the first time, let slip its mask of law-abiding tolerance and exposed its uglier side. The late Ayatollah's 'death sentence' on a respected author in Britain resulted in mass-hysteria among the million Muslims settled in this country, with book-burnings, widespread incitement to murder, and the planting of Muslim firebombs in our cities. Television interviewers have had no difficulty in finding Islamic leaders, as well as young Muslim fanatics, to make preposterous religious demands that can only turn the rest of the population against them and their intransigent creed."

Barbara Smoker warned, however, that the free-thought movement cannot afford to take it easy and rely on religious opponents to do our job for us.

"Tens of thousands of Muslims in this country have yet to begin to see themselves as others see them — and, if appeased by the social institutions, under the protection of the extreme race-relationites

and with the present connivance of the Director of Public Prosecutions, it may well take generations before that begins to happen.

"As for the fundamentalist Christianity of the television age — with its added attraction of promised prosperity — even when two of its televangelists publicly blot their immaculate copybooks in quick succession, gullible believers are no less likely to be taken in by the next evangelical moralist who uses the mass-media for his fundamentalist message and money-grabbing refrain.

"Our old enemy, the papacy, has, of course, similarly been bouncing back after each scandalous exposure since it first assumed absolute power with its absolute corruption."

Barbara Smoker said that all these "own goals" on the part of the various religious teams are to some extent affecting public opinion and helping to reduce the influence of mainstream religion. She emphasised this point by referring to a statistical survey published in October.

"Almost 50 per cent of even the small proportion of Christians who regularly attend church in this country now regard the Old Testament as 'a collection of stories and fables'. It also gives the proportion of people who believe in a god as only two-thirds. This makes scepticism the largest single belief system in Britain and means that the secular humanist movement virtually speaks for a third of the population.

"Even more startling is the statistic that only one in five now believes in a devil. The vast majority of believers in God therefore no longer believe in the existence of his traditional adversary — thus depriving the creator-god of what little excuse he ever had for all the suffering since the beginning of sentient

(continued on back page)



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NEWS

JUSTICE SHAMED

Commenting editorially on the Guildford Four case, the *Sunday Correspondent* declared: "There is only one positive consequence of this disturbing affair. The issue of capital punishment can be finally laid to rest. No case for its reintroduction can possibly be sustained after Guildford". Actually no case for the reintroduction of capital punishment could be sustained before Guildford, even though there was majority support for it. But the knowledge that four young people could well have been executed through being framed by the police, with the connivance of judicial luminaries, will convert many to the abolitionist cause.

However, it is unlikely that the crusaders for capital punishment will now shut up and go away. The Guildford Four case is not going to reduce enthusiasm for the noose in some quarters, particularly among the pro-"life" (anti-abortion) fraternity or the organisers of pro-capital punishment demonstrations which are a nasty feature of every Conservative Party conference. And if the *Sunday Correspondent* surmise is well founded, it will be a disappointment for Peter Bruinvels, prominent Anglican and poison dwarf of the capital punishment lobby who, when Conservative MP for Leicester East, informed the House of Commons that he would be willing to act as executioner.

Those who have been pressing for the hangman's reinstatement are well aware that Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans were judicially murdered. The truth is that keen advocates of the death penalty don't give a damn if occasionally the wrong person is executed, whether in error or as a result of a police frame-up.

When the unbroken and defiant Gerard Conlon emerged a free man from the Old Bailey after serving 14 years of a 30-year prison sentence, he declared: "I have nothing but respect for all the English people who helped, and there have been so, so many of them". His tribute is well deserved by those campaigners who tolerated the sneer-and-smear insults of tabloid-reading, saloon bar know-alls, and the Peter Simples of the newspaper world.

Already attempts are being made by the authorities and a few weasel-wording politicians to belittle the part played by people who campaigned over many years for justice on behalf of the Guildford Four. Some of them are public figures: broadcasters Robert Kee and Ludovic Kennedy; Labour MPs Jeremy Corbyn and Chris Mullin; former Home Secretaries Merlyn Rees and Lord (Roy) Jenkins; former Law Lord, Lord Scarman; former Master of

S AND NOTES

the Rolls, Lord Devlin; and the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Basil Hume. All honour to them, and to the thousands of unknowns who wrote letters, organised meetings, signed petitions and otherwise kept up the pressure in the face of overwhelming odds. Their efforts were justified when the Director of Public Prosecutions announced that the convictions of the Guildford Four "cannot be sustained".

British justice has been shamed by the Guildford case which may not be the last of its kind. This is a part of the price that Britain is paying for creating, maintaining and defending a Protestant police state in the north of Ireland.

A DIVIDED FAMILY

The discomfiture of Roman Catholic conservatives over what they see as creeping protestantisation of Holy Mother Church is a joy to behold. Gone are the days of absolute certainty, undisputed priestly authority and, except under restricted conditions, the Latin Mass. The present Pope may be the most reactionary occupant of the Chair of Peter since the neo-Nazi Pius XII, but even that is of little consolation for the traditionalists who are haunted by the spectre of "modernism". Liturgy reforms, liberation theology, Pope John Paul II hobnobbing with the Archbishop of Canterbury in Rome . . . where will it all end?

In these distressing times there is not much the conservative faithful can do except watch with impotent rage. However, there are newsletters and journals which provide an outlet for their splenetic effusions. *Our Family* is one such publication. It is published in Dublin and edited by Thomas McFadden, an American whose heroes range from Pope Pius X, for his conservative theology, to Ronald Reagan, for his "moral majority" brand of far-Right politics.

Our Family concentrates its fire on Ireland's Catholic institutions where "Neo-Modernism has become the 'established religion'". It traduces the bishops who are "determined to eliminate sin" and priests "who have grown with the world". These and other enormities have caused some Catholics "to seek certainty in the open, traditional arms of Archbishop Lefebvre". How long will it be until the more-Catholic-than-the-Pope Editor of *Our Family* joins the seekers for certainty?

Needless to say, *Our Family* is venomous in its condemnation of the developing family planning movement in Ireland where, in the bygone days of

true faith, good Catholics bred prolifically. The journal also attacks what it describes as "the child abuse industry" — notably the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children — for its "massive invasion of family privacy". This outburst was provoked by the ISPCC's submission to the Irish Government based on information supplied by organisations which *Our Family* says are "noteworthy for advocating positions on a wide variety of subjects contrary to Catholic morals and family life".

While agreeing that "some children are sexually abused by some adults", *Our Family* denounces not only the ISPCC but also the RC Church-financed Childline, a telephone service for children in trouble or danger. *Our Family* asserts that "the obvious persons a child should talk to when in trouble or danger are his parents". It is incredible that there can be such crass ignorance of the fact that one and sometimes both parents are the source of trouble or danger to a child.

Our Family claims that social statistics from the United States show "the greatest sexual abusers of children are the boyfriends of divorced, separated or never married mothers. And by homosexuals". It should be added that court records in the United States and elsewhere show that a vast amount of physical and sexual abuse is inflicted on children by Roman Catholic priests, nuns and teachers. And of course members of Protestant sects are frequently convicted on charges ranging from physical cruelty to the deaths of their children by denying them medical treatment on religious grounds.

For centuries Christianity was the root cause of mental abuse inflicted on children by the hell-and-damnation ravings of ignorant priests and preachers. Religious institutions and schools — particularly those run by Catholic teaching orders like the Christian Brothers — have acquired an unsavoury reputation for ill-treatment of children. But they are stern upholders of "Catholic morals and family life", which *Our Family* appears to regard as being more important than protecting children from trouble or danger.

Our Family is truly a collector's piece for those who enjoy acquiring religious follies. The editorial address is PO Box 1869, Dublin 16, Republic of Ireland.

According to an opinion poll conducted by Public Attitude Surveys, nearly 40 per cent of parents think that religious education should not be compulsory in schools. And 75 per cent of the interviewees said that as the subject is compulsory, children should also learn about non-Christian religions. A large majority thought that Muslim and Christian children should be taught together in Britain and the Protestant and Catholic children should be taught together in Northern Ireland.

"SATANIC COMPUTERS"

There is much talk, particularly, but not only, in religious circles, about the rights of parents. But little consideration is given by the "rights of parents" lobby to the rights of children, one of which should be to equip themselves intellectually for adulthood in the real world.

The "rights" issue has been highlighted by a campaign now being conducted by a splinter of a splinter religious group to withdraw their children from computer lessons in school. The Exclusive Brethren, an even more fundamentalist lot than the Plymouth Brethren sect from which they parted company, believe that computers are "a scientific imitation which rivals what God has put into living persons, making man increasingly independent of God and leading to infidelity".

The dispute has become nationwide, with the Brethren conducting a letter-writing campaign directed at Members of Parliament and education authorities. The Department of Education has received thousands of letters, and the sect has informed the National Curriculum Council that computers are "handtools of the devil".

In north London, Brethren spokesman Stuart Evershed told Barnet Council's Schools and Special Services Sub-committee that "through God's mercy and grace" members of the sect "have come to the deep conviction that the tremendous buildup in computers and communications will give the man of sin, energised by the full power of Satan, totalitarian control over the whole Western world".

Warwickshire education authorities have also come under pressure. Stanley Bass, a representative of the Brethren, said they believed in the literal truth of the Bible. How very odd. The Brethren who regard computers as "handtools of the devil" and set great store by the Bible, are apparently unaware that "the good book" is now typeset by computer aided phototypesetters and printed on computer controlled printing presses. Their stand on this issue resembles that of Sabbatarian zealots who read Monday newspapers that have been printed and distributed on Sunday.

Exclusive Brethren edicts governing the lives of members are a matter of wonderment to the outside world. While being forbidden to vote in elections may be no great hardship, not everyone can afford to live in a detached house. But that is what the Exclusives are directed to do. Living in a block of flats, a terrace or even the innocuous suburban semi, could expose true believers to contamination by the ungodly. There are rules prohibiting men from growing moustaches and women from cutting their hair. A wide range of items, from television sets to fitted carpets, are banned from Brethren abodes.

Weird religious sects are part of life's rich pattern. But while defending adults' right to believe

in superstitious rubbish and live their narrow lives as they choose, we must deplore the imposition of their beliefs on children, depriving them of a full education. Today's children who become 21st-century adults without knowledge of computers will be seriously disadvantaged.

HOLY SHARKS IN THE POOL

When actress Dame Judi Dench and several stars from the world of sport agreed to sponsor a charity swim they understood that the proceeds would benefit cancer patients at London's Charing Cross Hospital. But the organisers of Swimming for Life turned out to be the Central Church of Christ, a fundamentalist outfit of American origin. The operation was set up by a minister of the church, and there was to be "a straight 50-50 split between the hospital and the church's ministry".

The swim was scheduled to take place at the hospital staff swimming pool. It was cancelled after a dossier compiled by a Midlands newspaper was studied by hospital manager Paul Battle.

Olympic swimmer Sharron Davies said she was very annoyed about the way in which she had been persuaded to participate.

"I had assumed that all the proceeds were going to bone cancer sufferers", she added. "I know this gentleman was a church minister, but I thought he was of the Church of England or something like that".

Two points arise here. First, although the present Prime Minister's party voted against the National Health Service in 1948, she has assured the country that the Service "is safe in our hands". Doctors, nurses and health service administrators take a different view. To an increasing extent, medical services and equipment are being provided through public generosity and the goodwill of show business and sporting personalities who participate in fund-raising events. At the risk of being dubbed "political", we ask the question: "Should cancer sufferers be dependent on charity for medical treatment and after-care?"

Secondly, Sharron Davies's statement underlines how easy it is to exploit the misplaced respect that religion still commands. Any organisation with the word "Jesus" or "Christ" in its name can be used by charlatans to mislead the public. And recognition by the Charity Commissioners adds a veneer of respectability to dubious religious organisations whose activities damage genuine charities.

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, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield, S6 3NT.

BOOKSELLER'S VICTORY

Hats off to Bath bookseller Peter Marsh. He not only defied the Attorney General by selling copies of *Spycatcher*, but was awarded £1,725 legal costs in the High Court.

Last year, like other booksellers who were stocking *Spycatcher*, Mr Marsh received a letter from the Attorney General warning him that he was in contempt of court. The reason given was that an injunction had been obtained to prevent three national newspapers publishing extracts.

Most of those on the Attorney General's hit list gave in to the threat. But the authorities discovered that the Bath bookseller was made of sterner stuff. He had decided to make a stand "for freedom against tyranny".

Legal proceedings were initiated, but because of a long delay in bringing the case to court, it was decided that "it was no longer in the public interest" to pursue the matter. Peter Marsh was not content to leave it at that and took out a summons to recover his costs.

"I am happy they have got egg on their face", declared an unrepentant Mr Marsh after extracting his £1,725. However, the censorious face of officialdom was already plastered with egg. Although it is unlikely that *Spycatcher* revealed anything not already known to a "potential enemy", or suspected by those who are less than trusting of the powers that be, the Government spent millions of taxpayers' money in their attempts to suppress it.

Freethinker Fund

Although last month's increase in postal charges has added to distribution costs, the *Freethinker* subscription rate will remain unchanged for the time being. Donations to the Fund enable us to balance the books and keep the price of the paper at a realistic level. We thank those who have sent donations this year. The latest list of contributors is given below.

R. Busfield, W. S. Watson and B. C. Whiting, £1 each; D. M. Carter, M. Crew, J. W. Leenders, L. A. Muller, L. H. Sparks and W. A. Stuart, £2 each; P. Danning, M. Deyner and B. Piercy, £2.50 each; K. Williams, £3; G. Michel, £4.40; D. Aldridge, R. J. Goldsmith, R. W. Hamilton, K. Harris, J. H. Howard, J. R. Hutton, J. R. Leonard, E. Lewenstein, K. Mack, A. J. M. McQuaid, A. K. Middleton, R. B. Ratcliffe, M. J. Rogers, M. Schofield and O. Watson, £5 each; E. F. Channon, £6; E. C. Hughes, £7.60; Anonymous, R. E. Davies, C. G. Roberts, R. Somers and D. N. Towers, £10 each; W. H. Seddon, £15; I. J. McDonald, £25; U. and H. Neville, £45; R. C. Proctor, £100.

Total for September: £353.00.

A Thought for Remembrance Day

ERIC STOCKTON

Armistice Day 1988 was of special significance. It marked the 70th anniversary of the ending of the first World War. There are now very few veterans of that conflict still living. Every year the number of survivors of the 1939-45 War also diminishes.

Armistice Day 1989 is also of special significance, coming soon after the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the 1939-45 War.

It is time to consider ceasing the public observance of Armistice Day. There is, of course, a remaining need to help the victims of the two World Wars, and of the wars that have been fought since 1945. This help should continue to be given both by the State and by private persons. I am simply saying that our remembrance of individuals can be better expressed by such means than by ceremonial acts.

The first World War — a horrible outcome of old-style imperial rivalries — has passed into history for all but a tiny minority of old people. The second World War — a necessary means of stopping fascism precipitated by the disgraceful political failures of the 'thirties — is actually remembered only by those of us who are in middle age.

This is not to say that we who have memories of both World Wars should deny them. I was born in the middle 'twenties and I remember what the first war did to my father and his brothers. I remember him showing me a photograph of a 1911 cricket team of which he was one of the four survivors. I remember three of my own school friends shot down over Germany in 1943-44. I remember the neighbour who went to the Far East in 1942 and who was last seen being captured by the Japanese. I remember helping to dig out dismembered corpses from the ruins of bombed houses in London when I was a boy of sixteen or so. Many people have such memories and worse. I do not wish to forget — even if I could. For the likes of me to remember is one thing; to ask young children in the Cubs and Brownies to shiver by Memorials to wars that were over before even their parents were born . . . that is quite different. First-hand gestures are one thing; third-hand ritual is another.

The World Wars are over, for the time being at least. It is unlikely that the possible Third World War will be remembered by many people — at least not in any detail. We have a duty to help past victims and to save future generations. We have no duty to ritualise memories. Is it not time to privatise them?

The Roman Fall of Dr Runcie

DANIEL O'HARA

The Archbishop of Canterbury's recent meeting with Pope John Paul II in Rome has resulted in confusion and consternation in Christian ranks. Daniel O'Hara, a former Anglican priest, asserts that neither church leader will secure the concessions he wants from the other.

Even before his recent and much-publicised visit to Rome for discussions with the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, had given an interview to the Italian magazine, *Il Regno*, about some of the issues dividing the Catholic and Anglican communions. His answers to some probing questions, as summarised in the *Catholic Herald*, are instructive. He is guarded and equivocal about the extent to which the ordination of women in some parts of the Anglican communion might prove a barrier to closer relations with the Roman Catholic Church, which he chides for aggravating the situation by its failure to respond officially to the final Report of the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC I) published in 1981. Dr Runcie goes on: "Our present ecumenical duty is not to abandon hope of unity, but to reaffirm it and to assess what God is doing by allowing (the ordination of women) to come to the centre of ecumenical attention". (my italics). Readers of this journal will have spotted two unwarranted assumptions in this statement: that there is a God, and that he is "doing" anything.

Dr Runcie goes on to speculate that God may be trying to teach the Catholics something by raising the stakes on the ordination of women within the Anglican communion. That this is more than sheer vanity may be doubted, though Dr Runcie did receive a petition from a substantial number of American Catholics, including priests and religious, begging him to stand up to the Pope on this issue.

Dr Runcie's rationale that Rome can learn from Canterbury is rather strange. He claims: "There is no doubt that what Anglicans have believed about, for example, vernacular liturgies and the acceptance of biblical criticism in the strengthening of faith, are now generally accepted in the Catholic Church". Well, there's a doubtful bit of reasoning if you like! A very strong case could be made that it was precisely the Catholic Church's abandonment of the Tridentine Mass and its adoption of folksy vernacular liturgies which weakened the mystery and power of the Church and its hold on its adherents. It is certain that since the liturgical changes instituted as a result of Vatican II, the Catholic Church has lost adherents in droves, and its ability to discipline its members (as evidenced by the huge fall in the numbers using the confessional) has declined dramatically. It is

knowledge of these facts which drove Archbishop Lefebvre into schism, and which makes the present Pope so keen to back-pedal on Vatican II.

Dr Runcie's views about the significance of Biblical criticism could not, in my view, be wider off the mark. I have never met a single person whose faith was "strengthened" by accepting biblical criticism. I have, however, met hundreds whose faith has been either greatly attenuated or totally destroyed by it. This situation — exactly the opposite of what Dr Runcie likes to believe — might distress him if he could bring himself to acknowledge it. But it shouldn't, since the abandonment of religious faith is the necessary first step to living without illusions. And that's my definition of human maturity.

In answers to further questions, the Archbishop is again equivocal. On the one hand he wants a more widespread acceptance by non-Catholic Christians, of "a . . . universal Primacy in the office of the Bishop of Rome", but on the other he could not accept "centralised episcopal appointments". Dr Runcie wants to have his cake and eat it too. Little wonder that John Paul II would have none of this. In his reply to Dr Runcie's homily at Vespers in the Church of St Gregory, the Pope said: "In sending St Augustine to preach to the Anglo-Saxon people, St Gregory was exercising the pastoral and missionary responsibility which is proper to the Bishop of Rome". *Christian Week* described it as "a hard line speech which offered no concessions whatsoever to Anglicans. True unity (the Pope said), needed to be based on the Apostolic faith and that faith must be preserved. Responsibility for this, he said, 'lay with the teaching office of the (Roman Catholic) Church'".

Dr Runcie himself seemed unaware (or perhaps he was loath to admit) that his four-day visit to Rome brought little progress. He could not have been unaware of the hostility stirred up back home. Dr Ian Paisley and several of his supporters went to Rome to demonstrate against the Archbishop's "betrayal of Protestant Britain" and his suggestion "that he would accept the primacy of the Pope". Other Evangelicals and free-churchmen, without leaving home, made their disapproval clear. The veteran Anglican Evangelical, John Stott, the General Secretary of the Baptist Union (Bernard Green), and the Secretary of the Church Society (Dr David Samuel) all made statements more or less critical of Dr Runcie, and accused him of jeopardising the Inter-Church Process which is developing the institutions that will replace the British Council of Churches.

The joint statement signed by the Pope and the Archbishop on the final day of his visit (October 2)

bewailed "the progressive secularisation of society (which) erodes the language of faith and . . . (the) materialism (that) demeans the spiritual nature of humankind". Their remedy for this malaise is a renewed commitment to evangelism, which might comfort the faithful, but will leave all else wondering how those hoary old fantasies can be repackaged for marketing in our (rightly) sceptical world. That the two venerable churchmen should "solemnly re-commit" themselves and their flocks "to the restoration of visible unity and full ecclesiastical communion" presumably means different things to the two of them. The Pope demands nothing less than the submission of all Christians to the authority of "the Vicar of Christ on Earth" (i.e., himself), while Dr Runcie would like the Pope to remodel the papacy on Anglican lines. Neither has a hope in hell of seeing his dreams fulfilled. Not that this should dismay anyone. The Protestant reformation, in decisively rejecting the outrageous claims of the See of Rome to universal authority, took an important and irreversible step in the right direction. But a further, and more decisive step is needed. We must

reject all religious beliefs, based as they are on incredible and arbitrary claims to have received a "revelation" from some supposed "divine" being.

The *Church Times* was quite right to claim that the papacy is incapable of changing in the direction Dr Runcie seems to want. It could not conceivably be in its interests (maintaining strong centralised control) to do so. For Anglicans to adopt even an attenuated notion of Papal authority, it said, would lead people to ask: "Is this not the same papacy . . . that was crashingly wrong about Anglican Orders, or contraception, and was known by many of its servants even at the time to be crashingly wrong, and yet cannot find a way to admit the mistakes and reverse them?" Yes indeed. The Catholic Church has been wrong and has behaved abominably on these and many other issues. But the Protestants have been just as wrong to cleave to equally discreditable notions like the existence of God, the authority of the Bible, and the other irrational and inhuman beliefs which are the common property of all who support the Christian religion in all its myriad forms.

A Babylonian Passion Play

R. J. CONDON

An article of mine in *The Freethinker* of January last contained a brief reference to a Babylonian drama about the death and resurrection of the god Bel. A reader has asked for details of this, and particularly my sources of information, having failed to find any mention of the play in standard works on ancient religions. The matter may be of general interest.

There was a time when it was fairly easy to acquire old books of biblical criticism, and many a curious volume found its way to my shelves. One I still have is *The Sources of Christianity*, by the Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, Imam of the Woking Mosque which published it in 1924. As Muslims do, the author believes in a man Jesus who was a prophet of God, but he dismisses the gospels with contempt as so much astral mythology. His knowledge of the Babylonian play comes from the January 1922 issue of *Quest*, a quarterly publication probably now defunct.

The Imam writes: "The passion play of Baal, the Babylonian sun-god, was in existence centuries before the birth of Jesus. It was acted as a popular mystery drama. The Jews were taken as prisoners by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon, where they remained for generations. They saw the mystery drama acted every year at the beginning of spring on Easter Day. The captives, on their return, brought with them many traditions of sun-worship which one can easily trace in Jewish literature. They could not fail to

have vivid memories and impressions of the passion play of Baal. The main features of the play have recently been deciphered from some tablets discovered in Babylonian ruins. There are two tablets, says *Quest*, belonging to the cuneiform documents which were discovered by German excavators in 1903-4 at Kalah Shargat, the site of the ancient Assur. They belonged to the library of Assur, formed in the ninth century BC or even earlier. They are, however, copies of still earlier Babylonian tablets.

"The tablets disclose astounding facts, perturbing thousands of honest minds in Christendom. It is not the similarity of some features of the stories of Jesus and Baal that excites their astonishment; the two are one and the same. The evangelical records are complete plagiarism. Let readers decide the point for themselves".

Here is the synopsis of the play as given by *Quest*: Bel, like Jesus, is taken prisoner. He is tried in the House on the Mount, as Jesus is tried in the House of the High Priest. Bel is smitten; Jesus is scourged. Bel is led away to the Mount; Jesus is led away to Golgotha, a mount. With Bel a malefactor is led away and put to death, while another is released. With Jesus two malefactors are put to death. Another, Barabbas, is released. After Bel goes to the Mount, the city breaks out into tumult. At the death of Jesus the earth quakes, the graves open and the dead come forth.

Bel's clothes are carried away. Jesus' robe is

divided among the soldiers. A woman wipes away the heart's blood of Bel flowing from where a weapon has been withdrawn; cf. the lance-thrust in Jesus' side and the flow of water and blood, together with the women washing and embalming his body.

Bel goes down into the Mount and is held fast as a prisoner; Jesus descends into Hell (Apostles' Creed). Guards watch over Bel; guards are set over the tomb of Jesus. A goddess sits with Bel, as women sit before Jesus' tomb. A weeping woman seeks Bel at the Gate of Burial. A woman weeps before the empty tomb of Jesus.

Bel is brought back to life (as the sun of spring). He comes out of the Mount. His chief feast, the Babylonian New Year at the vernal equinox, is celebrated also as his triumph over the powers of darkness. Jesus rises from the grave, on a Sunday morning. His festival, approximately at the vernal equinox, is also celebrated as his triumph over the powers of darkness.

For the authority behind this translation we turn to another odd book, *The Rock of Truth*, by Arthur Findlay. Findlay was chairman of Psychic Press Ltd, who have kept his book in print since it was published in 1933. It consists of a fierce attack on Christianity followed by a quasi-scientific apology for Spiritualism, which need not detain us.

When Findlay learned of the Babylonian play he called on the curator of the Babylonian section of the British Museum to confirm its existence and correct translation. He writes: "I was told that the particulars . . . can be correctly considered as 'a list of parallel instances (which was drawn up by the late Professor Zimmern) found both in the story of the god Bel and of the Christ. Zimmern deduced the incidents of the story of Bel from ritual texts which seem to describe a primitive kind of religious play' ". Heinrich Zimmern was Professor of Assyriology and Semitic Languages at the University of Leipzig, and a contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*.

Herodotus, says Findlay, tells of an Egyptian play about the sufferings of Osiris. The Greek historian gives no details, but the play can be reconstructed from references to it in Egyptian religious literature. The Raising of Asar (Osiris) in *Het Annu*, the Temple of Heliopolis, has been reproduced virtually intact in John's gospel as The Raising of Lazarus in Bethany. But more of that another time.

R. J. CONDON

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Jehovah's Witnesses

PHILLIP ADAMS

Just who are the religious missionaries who are forever pounding their knuckles on our front doors, proffering us everything from magazine subscriptions to eternal life? Who are the Mormons and why do they wear funny underpants? And what are Jehovah's Witnesses really on about?

The Witnesses emerged around 1870, when they were known as Russellites, Millennial Dawnists or International Bible Students. They were founded by a Charles Taze Russell of Pittsburg, a former Presbyterian haberdasher turned Congregationalist. Like many a troubled Christian, Mr Russell found it hard to reconcile the idea of a merciful god with eternal hell and so re-examined the biblical text. Poorly educated, he used Greek and Hebrew dictionaries in his painful, word-at-a-time Pilgrim's Progress.

In 1879 he began publishing *Zion's Watch Tower*, in which he predicted that the world would end in 1914. Somehow the movement survived the failure of his prediction, as well as the scandal of his marital difficulties and umpteen amusing law suits, whereupon John Franklin Rutherford moved into the *Watch Tower*, christened his followers Jehovah's Witnesses and coined the rallying cry, "Millions now living will never die", which expresses the society's promise that the faithful will survive Armageddon. Rutherford recorded his sermons and issued his missionaries with portable phonographs, so that his voice could be heard in thousands of houses. He made the society into a theocracy, based in Brooklyn, forever attacking organised religion, particularly the Roman Catholic.

In 1942 Nathan H. Knorr took over, followed, in 1977, by another splendid name in Frederick W. Franz. Franz was the first leader of the Witnesses to have attended college, having put in two years at the University of Cincinnati.

These days the Witnesses have 2.3 million members in 210 countries. They claim a 10-million circulation for the *Watch Tower* in 75 languages. However, they've failed to make any impact in the Muslim world.

Every Witness is supposed to spend ten hours a month in home Bible studies, door-to-door preaching and the distribution of literature. Careful records of visits and call-backs are kept, along with Bible classes attended and books and magazines distributed. And every now and then, the Witnesses hold a mass baptism.

Around the world they've got themselves into plenty of trouble by thumbing their nose at civil authority. Witnesses joined the Jews in Hitler's death

camps for refusing to serve in the armed forces or to salute the flag. No Witness will vote, run for public office, stand for a national anthem or recite a pledge of allegiance. While they've made some gains in the United States Supreme Court, Witnesses have failed to win exemptions from military service for their ministers or the right to withhold blood transfusions from their kids. (The Witnesses' attitude to transfusions derives from the horror of blood in the ancient Hebrew texts, "I have forbidden the Israelites to eat the blood of any creature"; and "You shall not approach a woman to have intercourse with her during her period of menstruation" has given the Witnesses a repugnance for corpuscles.)

Because Witnesses know that they've been chosen by God to be saved from Armageddon, they're suspicious of outsiders. Witnesses who've broken with the organisation say they fear retribution and any critical articles or books have been written under pseudonyms. Nonetheless, as many as two per cent of Witnesses are "disfellowshipped" or excommunicated from congregations each year, mostly for sexual offences.

The Witnesses believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, perfect and completely consistent. Needless to say, they are the only people who correctly interpret it. Yet each of Fred Franz's predecessors got the date of the apocalypse wrong. It would, without a doubt, be in 1844. Or in 1874. Or in 1914, or, most recently, in 1975.

Things are really hotting up at the moment. A recent Witness publication called *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* says that the flesh of the wicked shall on the Last Day "rot while they are still on their feet". The author has a great time describing how the tongues of those who scoffed and laughed at the Witnesses will be "eaten up". Also "eaten up" will be the eyes of those who refuse to see the sign of the "time of the end". Also "eaten up" will be the flesh of those who would not learn that the living and true god is named Jehovah. However, there's one commendable aspect of Witness theology. The fact that an apple was once eaten does not, according to them, condemn humans to suffer dreadful torment for all eternity. Instead, Witnesses opt for "mortalism", which holds that the human soul is mortal and dies with the body. As far as Witnesses are concerned, death is the "utter cessation of conscious intellectual or physical activity". So the trick is to avoid death, to elude eternal sleep.

The Witnesses divide humanity into three groups. There's the heavenly class of 144,000, most of whom have already gone to their reward. The remainder of Witnesses hope to live forever here on Earth. As for everyone else, they'll soon die horribly in Armageddon.

Witnesses will have no truck with the Trinity but are "bitheists". God is the father while the son,

Jesus, occupies a far lower ranking. Witnesses are not in the slightest ecumenical. Having one true religion, they refuse to deal with any other Christian group.

Women don't do too well either. There's not a single woman in the governing body of any congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses whilst their major publication, *Let God Be True*, says "woman is merely a lowly creature whom God created for man as man's helper".

Incidentally, apart from their few official publications books are generally frowned upon. In 1972 a *Watch Tower* journal recommended that only copies of *Watch Tower*, *Awake*, encyclopaedias, atlases and books on grammar may be kept in their meeting houses. Volumes of health, genetics, politics, science, mathematics, etc, can be ignored. Witnesses are afraid of demons and of demonic possession.

Studies in the US suggest that Jehovah's Witnesses are more likely to be admitted to psychiatric hospitals than the general population. According to an article in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, they are three times more likely to be diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia and four times more likely to be paranoid schizophrenics. As a writer in the American journal *Free Inquiry* puts it: "Either the Jehovah's Witness sect tends to attract an excess of pre-psychotic individuals who may then break down, or else being a Jehovah's Witness is itself a stress that may precipitate psychosis. Possibly both of these factors operate together".

The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child has lost an important court case in Dublin. It failed to prevent the students' union of Trinity College from distributing leaflets giving information about pregnancy counselling and abortion facilities in Britain. SPUC has also applied for sequestration of union funds and the jailing of student leaders for alleged breach of a court injunction. Mary Robinson, the students' union counsel, argued that they had a right under European law to provide information on services available legally in another European state.

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LOST CHILDREN OF THE EMPIRE, by Philip Bean and Joy Melville. Unwin Hyman, £12.95

It is a terrible story. For three and a half centuries children were shipped from Britain to distant colonies or dominions, most of them unwilling to go: some believing like one poor child that to travel to Australia would amount to "a nice day trip". They were held to be, mostly, orphans: they were, in fact, mostly, abandoned, illegitimate, or from broken homes. The reasons given for the traffic were always sanctimonious, and often hypocritical. "Take them away! Take them away!" as some comfortable 19th century poet put it, as if they had been insensible parcels, "The boys from the gallows, the girls from worse! / They'll prove a blessing to other lands — / Here, if they linger, they'll prove a curse!" They'd also prove an expense: Boards of Guardians calculated that emigration cost the equivalent of a year's maintenance in a parish workhouse, so a child sent abroad at seven (*seven*, note!) saved the parish six years' keep. Now and then the idea that "good British stock" was being scattered throughout the Empire gave way to hysterical assertions of quite another point of view: as when Canada (where, astonishingly, 11 per cent of the population is descended from these child migrants) began to be uneasy. "We are deliberately adding to our population hundreds of children bearing all the stigmata of physical and mental degeneracy", declared a Canadian physician who appears, in other fields, to have been distinguished, and even the National Children's Homes' magazine was inclined to agree: "Canada is no place to shoot rubbish". Thereafter, Australia tended to be preferred: or Rhodesia.

The respectable institutions and private philanthropists that organised the traffic went out of their way to conceal from the children the continued existence of parents: it was commonplace, having split up families, to fail to inform some small, helplessly lonely child that only a short distance away was a brother or sister. Mail was interfered with: not only Barnado's but other philanthropic societies thought it perfectly proper to delete from children's letters criticisms of their treatment, or pleas to be allowed to return home.

This is a book full of the weeping, or frozen misery, of children. They'd arrive in the middle of a Canadian winter dressed by their ignorant sponsors in short trousers, blazers, skirts. "I don't remember", says one witness, "anyone touching a boy in an affectionate way, and some of the boys were quite small". Today, Florence lives in an old people's home in Ontario, herself bright and alert, but surrounded by the senile and disabled: "I started life in a little

orphan Home at four, and I end up here in another Home, and sometimes I wonder if there is a God", she says.

In 1874 an honest man, Andrew Doyle, was asked to make a report on what has been euphemistically called the child migration scheme. He was appalled: having established that on each migrant a positive profit was made of £4. 9s. With some restraint he concluded that those behind the scheme, by then mostly private philanthropists, were "not wholly actuated by motives of benevolence". Doyle's report was pigeonholed longer than most: it was a *hundred* years before anyone took real notice of it. Ironically, there appeared to be respectable religious reasons for ignoring it: after all, Andrew Doyle was a Catholic.

There was a substantial tradition, when it came to child migration, of delaying action after reports, recommendations, attempts to draw attention to this tremendous scandal. The Children Act of 1948 gave the Secretary of State power to make regulations: growing horror at what was happening (at last, notice was being taken) was appeased by assertions that now, at any moment, certainly tomorrow, the Secretary of State would take action. In fact, the last group of children was sent out to Australia in 1967 (particularly angry to find it was taken for granted that they were to be servants); and it was in January 1982 that the Secretary of State at last laid down regulations for a practice that had begun in 1618. The point being that until a date 15 years after the cessation of child exportation, there were virtually no regulations, no inspections, no checks. One hundred and fifty thousand boys and girls had been sent off ("Take them away! Take them away!"), saved from the gallows or worse, with no protection whatever against molestation or exploitation of every imaginable kind.

The authors understandably find it difficult to tell this story without anger; but they prevent this from blurring the terrible edges of their tale. One thinks of the verses in which William Blake might have assailed it; or wishes that Dickens had ever had his attention drawn to this making of, as it were, international Oliver Twists. Two years ago the Child Migrants Trust was set up, to make such repairs as it could among those still capable of being comforted. For this huge hurt, some balm has been provided, for some surviving victims. I find one of the worst features of the story lies in the genuine illusion of benevolence felt by some of those responsible. There's a photograph here of a sort of pyramid of small living creatures constituting an early group of emigrants from Dr Barnado's Home in Stepney. Their faces on this reduced scale amount to two or three hundred blanks. We know from *Lost*

R REVIEWS

Children of the Empire that the photographer, probably, and those who arranged these children in such a dense grouping, certainly, imagined that an act of enormous kindness was being recorded. Very late in the story, an MP, unnamed, admitted that her own children might have been materially better off in a Home abroad; but she believed their hearts might have been broken. This book records the fact that many of these helpless exiles did *not* become better off (of all those who went to Vancouver Island with the confident promise that they would become farmers, not a single one became a farmer), and that a very, very great many of them had their hearts broken.

A further reflection is possible. As the authors observe more than once, virtually no one noticed what was happening. It was an immense case of national inattention spread over 349 years. How often do we not find ourselves, thus, belatedly indignant? How much occurs around us at this moment that, at some time in the future, if we have any, our descendants will find it difficult to forgive? It seems we must give particular attention to our most benevolent intentions, since they may so easily be means of concealing from ourselves a convenient absence of humane imagination.

EDWARD BLISHEN

ON MY WAY TO THE CLUB, by Ludovic Kennedy.
Collins, £15

Ten years ago a little work, *The Book of Heroic Failures*, by one Stephen Pile, made a bit of a stir when it took the mickie out of quite a good few of our more established cliché-mongers who take themselves and institutions too seriously. A few months ago appeared its unrelated sequel, *On My Way to the Club*. Unlike its earlier companion in "ground-breaking" which was a spoof (like a recent Arnold Wesker letter in *The Times* when the playwright wrote in the ponderously reactionary manner of the Chief Rabbi), Ludovic Kennedy's autobiography is no tongue-in-cheek affair; rather is it a substantial meal of serious writing from start to finish — often intentionally serious when funny and intentionally funny when serious. In fact I must confess to finding much of it so hilarious that I found myself laughing out aloud.

Not the least attractive feature of this book are the profiles it contains of those who have figured prominently in the author's life — his father, certain friendships formed, an elderly (childhood) Nanny — these are influences that are cheerfully acknowledged

and written about with a warm feeling that does credit not only to the subjects under discussion but to their debtor also. Kennedy draws in Lords David Cecil and Bob Boothby as the striking eccentrics that they were; having soft spots in his heart for victims of injustice. But what I suspect may appeal to free-thinkers most of all in the narrative is his forthright rejection of mumbo-jumbo (in Iceland, of all places!) when he first saw the naked light being shone on the superstition in religion through reading Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, much as a greedy school-boy would fall upon a tuckbox at boarding school. What that great tract, along with *Commonsense* and *Rights of Man*, did for Kennedy, so Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* had done some years previously for Winston Churchill, another of the author's heroes. It was a character-forming as well as independent exercise, doubtless creating the same state of mind in the younger man as it had done in the older when he was a boy himself. It was something that I heard Kennedy return to on a platform many years later when delivering the Voltaire Memorial Lecture at Conway Hall, London, with the late Professor A. J. Ayer in the chair.

For the more general reader there is much else as well; the account of his wooing of the gracious and beautiful Moira Shearer (Mrs Ludovic Kennedy) is fascinating stuff, to be sure. His book is similar to a wind blowing gustily when it deals with human frailties, comedies and tragedies. Possessing the candour of a true freethinker, never afraid to show himself in a slightly ridiculous light when occasion demands, Kennedy goes so far as to spill the beans regarding one sylphlike talented Ballerina's lack of expertise on the dance floor. It is all well-substantiated stuff and the tales smack of true, rather than tall, stories.

All in all, a thundering good yarn, which in less sensitive hands could have gone over the top. So much of his life firmly embedded in the author's candid memory ensures that it will do likewise for the reader.

PETER COTES

Reviews continued next page

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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What is a subversive? Somebody creeping about Westminster carrying a bomb to blow up the Houses of Parliament? Well not exactly. It's a bit more complicated than that. In 1985 Mrs Thatcher announced revised security vetting procedures to the House of Commons, and stated that it was Government policy that no one should be employed in work vital to security who has been a member of a communist or fascist organisation; or "is, or has recently been, sympathetic to or associated with members or sympathisers of such organisations or groups, in such a way as to raise reasonable doubts about his reliability".

As the writers of this informative and worrying book point out in their introduction, it is the latter part of this definition which is disturbing, since it places a huge number of people in the "subversive" ranks. They assert that it gives MI5 and the Special Branch the power to blacklist individuals who are engaged in lawful, non-violent political activity. How many readers of *The Freethinker* are members of CND, or NCCL, or the Anti-Apartheid Movement? Quite a number, I would guess. This policy of "guilt by association" means that they can be deemed "politically subversive" by the State.

Even membership of trade unions is suspect. At the height of the controversy over the union ban at GCHQ, Mrs Thatcher suggested there was a basic conflict of interest between membership of a national trade union (any national trade union, note, not just those trade unions represented at GCHQ), and loyalty to the State. And at the time when tempers were flying during the miners' dispute, she described members of the miners' union as "the enemy within".

With a wealth of documentation, Hollingsworth and Norton-Taylor look at the Civil Service, at British Telecom, at defence companies, and at the BBC. They produce detailed evidence to support their contention that a number of people have failed to get jobs, or have failed to get promotion in those organisations, for activities entirely unconnected with state security, but simply because they have been associated with innocent groups such as CND, NCCL or Left-wing political parties.

This is not an optimistic book; in fact it has to be said it makes for somewhat depressing reading. In the chapter on MI5 and the BBC, a former senior BBC executive recalls selection boards using Whitehall euphemisms for vetting during their post-interview discussions. "Does he play with a straight bat?" or "Does he have snow on the right foot?" were typical BBC expressions for political suitability.

In their conclusion, the writers note that files are already kept on individuals by doctors, teachers, and university vice-chancellors. Under present law most of them are secret and inaccessible, even though they may be inaccurate. This is in stark contrast to the United States, where Freedom of Information and Privacy laws give American citizens the right to inspect files held on them by Federal Agencies, including the CIA and the FBI.

In this country now we have a climate in which definitions of security can be easily confused with vague criteria of political dissent — criteria which allow practices such as blacklisting to flourish. Ultimately, it is this political climate which has to be changed.

TED MCFADYEN

Peace Diary

Diaries for 1990 have been on sale for many weeks, but it is unlikely that you will find one to equal Housmans Peace Diary for usefulness and good value. In addition to generous space for writing in appointments, meetings and social occasions, the Peace Diary is a mine of information. The British and International directories include comprehensive lists of organisations and their addresses.

Saints' days are not given in the Peace Diary. But it records worthwhile events like the birth of American agnostic and campaigner for women's rights, Susan B. Anthony (15 February); the strike by millions of American students against the Vietnam war (15 May); Albert Einstein's and Bertrand Russell's statement that we must choose between war and the human race (9 July); and the birth of humanist philosopher, Desiderius Erasmus (28 October). But why on earth is Northern Ireland's festival of hate, Orangemen's Day, listed in a *Peace Diary*?

Children are the special theme of the Diary. Each article is accompanied by a contribution from a child, expressing his or her vision for the future.

Housmans 1990 Peace Diary is on sale at independent bookshops, ecology shops and peace centres, and costs £4.95. It may be obtained from Housmans, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DX (add 40p postage).

The new law which requires that the daily act of collective worship in schools must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" is criticised in a leaflet published by the British Humanist Association. The clauses were introduced by conservative Christians during the debate on the Education Reform Act in the House of Lords. The new ruling has been condemned as reactionary and unworkable by Christian and non-Christian teachers.

Nehru and Religion

KARL HEATH

Jawaharlal Nehru, the great Indian statesman and rationalist, was born on 14 November 1889. To commemorate the centenary of Nehru's birth, the National Secular Society has published a chapter from his autobiography.

a letter written in 1707 by the Bishop of London to slave-owners in the American colonies.

"The Freedom which Christianity gives is Freedom from the bondage of Sin and Satan and from the Dominion of Man's Lusts and Passions and inordinate Desires; but as to their outward condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptised and becoming Christians makes no manner of change in them".

The National Secular Society is to be applauded for publishing this deeply thoughtful statement of the humanist and rationalist outlook written by Nehru when he was in prison in 1934 and 1935. The booklet, *What is Religion?*, includes a foreword by Michael Foot, MP, and a preface by NSS president, Barbara Smoker. There are also extracts from Nehru's will, including: "I wish to declare with all earnestness that I do not want any religious ceremonies performed for me after my death".

A century and a half later matters seem to have worsened. I would like to add to Nehru's quotation the following extract from a book of sermons written by the Church of England Bishop Meade of Virginia, recommended to white ministers to be preached to slave congregations. Its viciousness borders on obscenity, threatening to take away from the slaves their great comfort and solace of religious salvation and future rewards for injustice in this world:

While in prison Nehru heard that Gandhi had announced "a fast unto death". Nehru did not share Gandhi's religious beliefs but was deeply moved by the possibility of his death. In a telegram he says: "Whatever happens my love and thoughts will be with you". Nehru's own thoughts turned to death and religion, hence this essay.

"Having thus shown you the chief duties you owe to your great Master in heaven, I now come to lay before you the duties you owe to your masters and mistresses here upon earth. And for this you have one general rule, that you ought always to carry in your minds; and that is to do all service for them as if you did it for God Himself. Poor creatures! You little consider, when you are idle and neglectful of your master's business, when you steal and waste, when you are saucy and impudent, when you are telling them lies and deceiving them, or when you prove sullen and stubborn and will not do the work you are set about without stripes and vexation, you do not consider, I say, that what faults you are guilty of towards your masters and mistresses are faults done against God Himself, who hath set your masters and mistresses over you in His own stead, and expects that you would do for them just as you would do for Him. They are God's overseers and if you are faulty towards them God will punish you severely for it in the next world".

Of the word "religion" he writes: "This use of the same word with different meanings makes mutual comprehension still more difficult. . . The word 'religion' has lost all precise significance (if it ever had it)".

I do not know what generic terms for religion existed before the Romans. Even the Latin word "religio" is still a mystery to classical scholars. It seems originally to have described a sense of awe, even terror, engendered when someone intruded into a place or district inhabited by a "numen" or spirit. Early Roman religion was animistic; some spirits were hostile and threatening, others protective.

Nehru's essay is calm, reflective, but strong. Some may think that the churches have changed or even improved in the intervening 50 years. It is true that we have progressive parsons in the Church of England, although we should not forget that the Thirties saw Hewlett Johnson, the Red Dean of Canterbury, and Conrad Noel who had a red flag on his church tower at Thaxted and a Hammer and Sickle over his altar. Nevertheless, some of the old attitudes remain. When Nehru complains of the condescension of Christian missionaries in India, I was reminded of Bishop Heber's famous hymn, "From Greenland's icy mountains, From India's coral strand", with its unconscious hypocrisy of "the heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone", when this is precisely what still happens in every Anglican Church.

Nehru is more concerned with organised religion, which he attacks for its neglect of social problems on this earth. The Church of England he describes as "not a religion in any real sense of the word", and "long been a State political department". Half a century later the Bishop of Durham would no doubt dispute this today.

Nehru writes: "The religious man is concerned far more with his own salvation than with the good of society". Religion, he says, "offers a safe anchorage from doubt and mental conflict, an assurance of a future life which will make up for the deficiencies of this life". Characteristically, Nehru responds: "I am afraid it is impossible for me to seek harbourage in this way. I prefer the open sea, with all its storms and tempests".

Of the moral standards of the churches he writes: "They have no relation to social needs, but are based on a highly metaphysical doctrine of sin". He quotes

What is Religion?, by Jawaharlal Nehru, is published by the National Secular Society, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, price £1.50 (plus 25p postage).

LETTERS

MISSING EVIDENCE

My article criticising "alternative medicine" has brought the reaction I expected. The adherents of supposed complementary therapies become fanatically defensive in the face of doubters. This is reminiscent of those addicted to religion — they demand that you believe without giving any reason why you should. I said there was no evidence — other than anecdotal — to prove the effectiveness of alternative medicine. None of your correspondents has yet produced any to convince me. Attacking the failings of the pharmaceutical companies, as did Karl Heath (September), is fair enough, but because some conventional drugs have failed the test doesn't make much of a case for the effectiveness of the alternatives. I won't stand in the dock and defend ICI's record, but I would certainly take, say, antibiotics in the knowledge that they would have an effect against given conditions. I could not take homoeopathic remedies with anything like the same confidence.

Olive Markham, too, falls into the trap of imagining that because she has seen some improvement in her health whilst undergoing acupuncture that it was automatically the acupuncture which effected that improvement. She says she doesn't know how she would have survived without acupuncture. I would suggest that she would have survived very well. And to suggest that my criticism of these dubious therapies was "not really fit for publication" was worthy of the most rabid religious fanatic. Don't freethinkers berate Muslims for saying such things?

Finally, Keith Wood's article (October) also failed to make a convincing case for the therapies he advocates. It's all very well making claims, but where is the evidence to support them? Mr Wood repeated the grandiose claims but didn't come up with any convincing proof. He says he has "extensive personal experience" which is once again simply anecdotal. He quotes a cholera outbreak in 1854 when homoeopathy is credited with a significant rate of cure. That was 135 years ago; what has happened since then? Where is the consistent, proven evidence of some kind of predictable effectiveness? There isn't any.

I resent his implications that because I want the pseudo-religious aspects of these therapies challenged and, hopefully, consigned to the dustbin, that I would want to achieve this by force. What I want — like any good freethinker — is to urge caution on those individuals attracted to these therapies, and to recognise the "witch-doctor" elements. I would not wish to coerce anyone into believing anything which they did not want to believe, and if Olive Markham and Messrs Wood and Heath want to believe the incredible, I respect their right to do so.

TERRY SANDERSON

DATE NOT IMPORTANT

Those attending the Turin Shroud conference in Paris (reported in the October *Freethinker*) are making the common mistake of attributing significance to the date when the cloth was made. This "mistake" is understandable. It is made by those who are determined to convince themselves that the cloth is from a much earlier date than the 13th or 14th century, and must therefore have played a part in the Jesus mythology.

What is less understandable is Edwin Lefevre's assertion (Letters, July) that "freethinkers and secularists do their cause no good by attributing significance

to the carbon dating of those textile remnants kept at Turin". He is wrong to assume that we do any such thing. If he carefully reads Barbara Smoker's article, *The Shroud of Turin* (October 1988), the secularist case is clear: "Had it transpired that the flax from which the linen was made had grown during the Roman occupation of Palestine, it would not have proved that the relic was genuine".

If it were possible to trace the Turin Shroud back to a biblical holy man, perhaps we should let a contemporary of the earliest Christians, Josephus, describe the son of God: "A charlatan, who gained for himself the reputation of a prophet, this man appeared in the country, collected a following of about thirty thousand dupes and let them by a circuitous route from the desert to the mount called the Mount of Olives".

Clearly this particular religious charlatan was nothing out of the ordinary, and Josephus, in context, seemed simply weary of yet another potty claimant to divine authority.

ROBERT SINCLAIR

ACTING SHAKESPEARE

I would not wish to put words into the mouth of Peter Cotes (Letters, October). A forked tongue can be hard on soft fingers.

But I shall risk a further schoolmasterly scolding by pointing out that if comparing Dustin Hoffman to *Woo* Georgie Wood is not sneering at the diminutive actor then Laurence Olivier is alive and well and waiting in the wings to make a triumphant comeback; that "taking liberties" with Shakespeare's characters can only mean that American players must not play the Bard; and that there are multiple ways of realising Shakespeare on the stage, not least by fleshing his creations out in a natural style of acting. This Hoffman did effectively.

I wonder what other readers think?

GEORGE STRANG

THOMAS PAINE CELEBRATED BY MODERN FOLK-SINGERS

Thomas Paine is a man rightly respected by freethinkers and the humanist world generally. An unusual programme celebrating his life and work is currently to be seen. It was presented at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's South Bank in July as part of the French Revolution bi-centenary. I saw it when it was put on as part of the Sidmouth International Folk Festival. Don't miss it if it is on at a venue near you.

The programme is called *The Liberty Tree* and the words come from a song that runs like a thread throughout it. It has been compiled by Leon Rosselson, an outstanding singer/songwriter of the Folk Revival (perhaps you know his song about The Diggers of 1649 — *The World Turned Upside Down*). He performs it in partnership with a fine modern folk singer, Roy Bailey. They do a number of readings from Paine's works, showing his trenchant iconoclastic ideas on a number of topics — religion and religious intolerance; the oppression of women; injustice and privilege. These are juxtaposed with modern songs in the folk idiom that vividly illustrate the contemporary relevance of Paine's freethinking and wide-ranging mind.

We pride ourselves on being a democratic country. Yet the writings of Thomas Paine, the man who did more than almost any other Englishman to bring "Common Sense" and "Rights of Man" into being are largely neglected and unhonoured. It was good to see this branch of the arts bringing Paine's life and thoughts to life in such an original and artistic way.

JOHN WHITE

EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 3 December, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. James Sang: Bio-Technology and Ethics.

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. Annual Dinner, Saturday, 25 November. Details from Joan Wimple, honorary secretary, 67 St Aubyns, Hove, BN3 2TL, telephone Brighton (0273) 733215.

Edinburgh Humanist Group. Programme of forum meetings obtainable from the Secretary, 2 Savile Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 3AD, telephone 031 667 8389.

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 Mrs Marguerite Morrow, 32 Pollock Road, Glasgow, G61 2NJ, telephone 041-942 0129.

Havering and District Humanist Society. Harold Wood Social Centre, Gubbins Lane and Squirrels Heath Road, Romford. Tuesday, 5 December, 8 pm. Public Meeting.

Leicester Secular Society. Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Public meetings Sunday evenings 6.30 pm. Programme obtainable from the Secretary, telephone Leicester (0533) 813671.

Leeds and District Humanist Group. Monday, 20 November, 7.30 pm. Discussion with Soviet visitors at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley (telephone Pudsey 577009). Monday, 11 December, 7.30 pm. Public meeting at Swarthmore Institute, Swarthmore Square, Leeds. Greg Benton: China — the Crisis of Belief.

Lewisham Humanist Group. Unitarian Meeting House, 42 Bromley Road, London SE6. Thursday, 30 November, 8 pm. John White: Back to "Onward Christian Soldiers"? Thursday, 14 December, same venue and time, Saturnalian Party.

London Student Skeptics. Room 3c, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Public meetings, Monday at 7.30 pm. 13 November, Mike Howgate: Fred Hoyle and the "Faked" Fossil — a Case History of "Scientific" Pseudoscience. 27 November, David Fisher: A Random Walk in Pseudoscience. 11 December: A Skeptical Yuletide Party.

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

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 13 December, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. S. D. Gangolli: Ethical Problems from Medical Advance.

South Place Ethical Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sundays: Lecture, 11 am; Forum, 3 pm; Concert, 6.30 pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Extramural Studies, 6.30 pm. Please write or telephone 01-831 7723 for details.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends Meeting House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Monday, 20 November, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Public meeting.

THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

President: Barbara Smoker

Founded 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Secularism affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement.

It asserts that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress.

Secularism affirms that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication; that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.

Affirming that morality is social in origin and application, Secularism aims at promoting the happiness and well-being of mankind. Secularism demands the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.

It seeks to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace, to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

(Please use block capitals)

To the Secretary, NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL.

I accept the Principles of the National Secular Society as shown, and apply to be admitted as a Member. I am over 18 years of age.

Name

Address

Post Code..... Telephone.....

Occupation (optional)

Date

Signature

Minimum Annual Subscription: £2
Bankers' Order Forms are obtainable on request

Hands off Broadcasting, Government Told

A new report from ARTICLE 19, the International Centre on Censorship, calls on the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland "to reverse the serious erosion of human rights which has resulted from censorship imposed in relation to Northern Ireland". Publication of the report coincided with the first anniversary of the UK ban on broadcasting the voices of representatives or supporters of 11 Irish organisations.

The organisations have also written to the British and Irish Prime Ministers, arguing that "restrictions on freedom of expression relating to Northern Ireland are both counterproductive and in breach of international conventions on human rights by which the governments of the UK and Ireland are legally and morally bound".

Frances D'Sousa, director of ARTICLE 19, says that censorship impedes open political dialogue.

"By gagging opponents, governments run the risk of driving them into more extreme forms of expression such as violence and terrorism.

"The way to approach the crisis in Northern Ireland is to reopen the channels of communication".

The report declares that until the ban was imposed by the then Home Secretary, "there was little awareness of Government control over broadcasting. . .

"It is for the programme maker and the journalist to decide, subject to ordinary law, who may be interviewed on television or radio.

"It is not the role of Government to determine the political content of broadcasting or any other media".

No Comment: Censorship, Secrecy and the Irish Troubles, is obtainable from ARTICLE 19, 90 Borough High Street, London SE1 1LL, price £3.95 (including postage).

Council Rejects Christian Petitions

Rotherham Borough Council has rejected an attempt by local Christians to stop psychics from holding meetings in council-owned buildings. A petition bearing over 400 signatures was sent to the Policy and Resources Committee. The protest was organised by several Christian groups, notably Christian Information Outreach.

Some councillors expressed annoyance about the tone of the letters they had received. Councillor Derek Marsden commented: "The letters have gone over the top. I'm surprised at the attitude of the Christians in their letters".

The Mayor of Rotherham, Councillor Ronald Hughes, said he was worried by the "aggressive intolerance" expressed in some of the letters he had received.

"Own Goals"

life. As a former NSS president, Chapman Cohen, pointed out, a devil is a logical necessity for the existence of a god: 'in denying the existence of the one, Christians have helped to kill the other'.

"Unfortunately, however, the steady decline in adherence to mainstream religion is counterbalanced by the rise of the 'New Age' with its resurgence of such long-discredited superstitions as astrology, faith-healing, spiritism, reincarnation (often simultaneously with heaven!), miraculous relics, premonitions, and all the rest of the pre-scientific nonsense in which so many young people now believe, and to which are added new quasi-scientific superstitions, such as the Bermuda Triangle and flying saucers."

More Death Threats

Another religious leader has publicly incited his Muslim followers to kill author Salman Rushdie.

Dr Kalim Siddiqui was addressing around 500 Muslims at a service in Manchester to mark the anniversary of the birth of the prophet Mohammed. When he asked the audience how many agreed with him, nearly all those present indicated their support.

The Rt Rev Stanley Booth Clibborn, Bishop of Manchester, who attended the service, said: "Something should be done to stop this sort of thing. It should not be allowed to take place".

The Bishop declined to say if he thought that Dr Siddiqui should be prosecuted.

Those in attendance included Shadow Home Secretary Gerard Kaufman. The Labour MP had already left the service when the call to kill Salman Rushdie was made.

A Harris Survey on behalf of BBC Television has revealed that a large majority of British Muslims believe their religion is more important than the laws of the country. There is wide support for Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence on the author of *The Satanic Verses*.

Home Office Minister John Patten commented: "If you are British, you obey British law".

Two Americans have claimed they are "100 per cent sure" that they have found the remains of Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. Christian fundamentalists have been searching the slopes of the mountain in the hope of finding something that would confirm the Old Testament story of the Flood.

