

The Freethinker

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SCOTTISH TEACHERS' UNION SLAMS "MORE RELIGION" DIRECTIVE

The Educational Institute of Scotland has come out strongly against proposals on religious education and observance in Scottish schools. In its response to a Circular issued by the Scottish Office, the Institute says that religious education should not be based on any one main religion. And where a school decides to have religious observance, arrangements should be made on the basis of opting-in by parents and teachers.

Commenting on the Circular, Ian Lang, MP, Minister of Education at the Scottish Office, said: "Religious Education has a fundamental place in education and it is time to see that place fully recognised and strengthened." It is asserted that syllabuses of religion in all schools "should be based on Christianity, as the main religious tradition of Scotland, but should also take note of the teachings and practices of other principal religions".

The Minister "considers that religious observance complements religious education and is an important contribution to pupils' spiritual development. . . Religious observance should be of a broadly Christian character but should be open to those of different faiths.

"All pupils should take part in religious observance at least once a week."

The EIS rejects the Scottish Office's directive that Christianity should be the centre-piece in the religious education syllabuses. It declares: "If religious education is ever to achieve academic standing, it cannot be 'based' on one main religion any more than Economics could be 'based' on the study of Marxism. A teacher of a true academic discipline covers without fear or favour all its main philosophical components as well as the views of all its leading exponents."

In schools the subject of religion is flawed "because it is associated in the minds of so many

pupils, parents and teachers with the promulgation of a particular belief system, a system which is subscribed to by a diminishing proportion of the population at large.

"The problems surrounding the subject — the apathy of pupils and teachers, the shortage of specialist teachers and the entrustment of the subject in many schools to well-meaning amateurs — can all be traced to its ambiguous status."

Recalling last year's HMI's interim report, "Religious Observance in Primary and Secondary Schools", the EIS describes the Inspectors' experience in eleven schools.

"It became absolutely clear that there was no consensus as to what constituted religious observance. Schools interpreted the words in their own ways. In particular, schools containing significant numbers of ethnic minority pupils arranged events of educational value which were more in the field of drama than of religious observance. In one case HMIs said that an event which they witnessed was perhaps not religious observance because no hymns were sung and no prayers were said."

The EIS asserts that what is referred to by the Scottish Office as "religious observance" is in fact collective worship.

"But we do not believe that collective worship is part of religious education as it is now understood or that non-denominational schools should be under any obligation to provide it", the Institute declares.

"For collective worship to be part of the compulsory provision of non-denominational schools in a pluralist, multi-culture society in the last decade of the twentieth century is a palpable nonsense."

Fred Forrester, organising secretary of the EIS, described the words "religious observance" as a

(continued on back page)

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NEWS

ALLAH'S BOVVER BOY

When the balloon went up in Northern Ireland twenty years ago, the vast majority of people in mainland Britain regarded the Rev Ian Paisley as a ranting windbag few would take seriously. That perception changed when he was elected with huge majorities to three parliaments. Similarly, it would be a mistake to dismiss Dr Kalim Siddiqui, director of the Muslim Institute, as a publicity-seeking religious demagogue whose ravings will be ignored by all but a handful of sycophantic zealots.

Religious fanatics have few rivals when it comes to creating social divisiveness and ill-will. Dr Siddiqui's latest tirade, which will be remembered as the "lava of hatred" speech, was delivered at a conference in London to officially launch the "Muslim Manifesto". He made the ludicrous claim that a lava of hatred flowed towards Muslims from every Briton. Of course it is true that there are plenty of boneheads who are consumed by hatred for anyone of a different race, colour or nationality. They will be secretly applauding Dr Siddiqui for doing their dirty work damaging race relations. And it is ironic that he should refer to a lava of hatred at a conference where those present, to cries of "God is great", upheld the death sentence imposed on Salman Rushdie by an evil old tyrant.

There has been much talk — and not just in Islamic quarters — about the great offence caused to Muslims by publication of *The Satanic Verses*, a novel which few of them had even heard of before it was publicly burned in Bradford. So it is pertinent to comment on some of Dr Siddiqui's statements which will cause offence and concern to a large number of British people, including nominally religious Muslims.

First, he proposed the setting up of an Islamic "parliament", a non-territorial State within the United Kingdom. It would have the power to "advise" Muslims how to vote. The names of Muslims would be extracted from electoral and community charge registers and put on a computer. One purpose of the exercise would be to raise £5 million to finance the "parliament". This computerised record would expose almost every Muslim in Britain to pressure and manipulation by religious extremists. Furthermore, British people do not take kindly to the concept of a foreign "State within the State".

Secondly, Dr Siddiqui and the Muslim Institute make clear their allegiance to Iran, a country dominated by Islamic despots. His arrogant claim to

AND NOTES

speak for the entire Muslim community in Britain on this matter is offensive and widely resented.

Thirdly, it was extremely offensive of Dr Siddiqui to say that Muslims should apologise to the younger generation for allowing them to be born British. No doubt he would prefer them to have been born in an Iranian or Pakistani village, their lives under cradle-to-grave control by the mullahs.

Islam is a hidebound faith; it has had no Reformation, Higher Criticism or movement of dissent. What is needed is a surge of ideas among Muslims. They must accept and promote the separation of a deity, however perceived, from social organisation, family relationships, inheritance and education. These should be governed by common sense and reason, rather than the practices of their mediaeval ancestors.

No doubt there are many independent-minded, secular Muslims who are at present afraid to defy the book-burners and inciters to murder. It is with them, rather than the offensive Dr Siddiqui and his fundamentalist cohorts, that believers in personal freedom should be making common cause.

MORE GOD SLOTS?

Jim McDonnell, secretary to the Communication Committee of the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, predicts that amendments to the Broadcasting Bill will take broadcasting into "uncharted waters". He believes that "competition is going to hot up and religious groups are going to find it harder to make an impact".

A former Home Office Minister has promised that money raising by religious broadcasters will not be allowed. This assurance is welcome, for although most British viewers and listeners are less gullible than the Americans who showered wealth on evangelical showmen like Jim Bakker, there are nevertheless plenty of religious con artists in Britain who would try it on.

But why the dickens should we, in this post-Christian era, be subjected to religious propaganda from broadcasting centres? Although it is easy to avoid Thora Hird and the squirm-inducing *Songs of Praise* or the vapid *Prayer for the Day*, Christianity is often smuggled in through the studio back door and onto non-religious programmes.

So it was refreshing to read Christopher J. Lote's letter in *Nature* journal protesting "at the way religion permeates society and intrudes into our lives". Dr Lote, of the University of Birmingham

Medical School, suggests that Governments "might resolve to bring to a halt the religious indoctrination of children". He offers a further helpful suggestion: "Religious programmes on radio and television should come with a Government health warning. People might even begin to realise that what happens to our world depends on us."

Although references to God(s) in *Nature* are usually frivolous in content, Dr Lote points out that "the ways in which religion affects the world at large are certainly not a laughing matter".

Amen to that.

ROYAL "FAMILY" IMAGE

Mother Teresa of Calcutta's promised appearance with the Princess of Wales at last month's International Congress for the Family did not materialise. In view of her age and state of health, the organisers probably realised that she was a non-starter. However, the £40 attendance fee necessitated a special inducement to attract pious punters.

Although Mother Teresa did not attend the Congress, she spoke during an interview of her wish to meet the Princess of Wales. It is by no means certain that the desire for such a meeting is mutual. What would they talk about? Mother Teresa declared: "For a start, I should tell her that she and Charles should have more children. They should be setting an example. Two is not enough — they should have five by now." It would be interesting to know how the public-spirited, 29-year-old Princess would respond to this impertinent command by an aged celibate who irresponsibly advocates ever more births in an over-populated world.

The Congress for the Family, held in Brighton, gay capital of Britain, can hardly be rated an unqualified success. Its Patrons and Council of Reference included a predictable array of reactionaries like Lord Coggan, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Jakobovits, the Chief Rabbi, Sir Bernard Braine, MP, Baroness Cox, Dame Jill Knight, MP, and Ann Winterton, MP. Other worthies were Monika, Countess of Draskovich, Gabrielle, Countess of Plettenberg and Joanna, Countess of Westphalia. But there appears to have been no Islamic representation — surely an odd omission at a "family" congress. And no mention either of Mary Whitehouse, veteran defender of the family faith, or Victoria Gillick, Cambridgeshire's champion breeder.

No doubt the organisers of this Right-wing religious jamboree were mightily pleased with themselves at having persuaded a member of the Royal Family to speak. In the event, the Princess of Wales's speech was not at all to the liking of the faithful. Instead of endorsing their narrow concept of the family, or their hostility to sex education,

contraception and abortion, she told the Congress that people had their own views of what a family should be.

"There are certain common ingredients essential for families of all sizes and types," she said.

"I doubt whether there is any standard formula for a successful family. The family is, after all, the most human, and hence the most imperfect, of institutions. Instead, I could only point to those mothers, fathers and children — in lonely isolation or comfortable conformity — who simply do their best with what they have. Their success is measured by the care they have for each other, and I suspect there is no better judgment.

"Remember that the very idea of the human family has many definitions and perhaps only those who depend on it most, the young, the old, the sick and the lonely, can really claim to know its meaning."

This rational and tolerant viewpoint was not at all what the God-fearing upholders of Victorian values had paid good money to hear. The Princess sat down to applause which was, according to one national daily, "noticeably less enthusiastic than that for the more evangelical proponents of a particular type of family".

Propaganda churned out by Christian pressure groups campaigning on "family" issues is rather selective. There is little that is critical of the "Party of the Family" which, since coming to power at Westminster, has introduced policies that have put families under tremendous stress. The family allowance has been in effect reduced, clinics and hospital wards have been closed, and a wide range of social services curtailed or abolished. Thousands of young homeless and mentally ill people wander Britain's streets and sleep in "cardboard cities". The reaction of religious "family" organisations is to attack the allegedly permissive society, organise marches for Jesus and implore the nation to "return to God".

The notion that a stable and happy family "has many definitions", as expressed by the Princess of Wales, is unacceptable to rigid, Christian traditionalists. Their ideal is a legally and religiously sanctioned domestic regime which is a microcosm of the conservative, authoritarian State.

ATHEISM, FREETHOUGHT, POLITICS, HISTORY

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"PRO-LIFERS" PAY HIGH PRICE FOR DIRTY TRICKS

"Pro-Life" groups are in a financial pickle. Campaigning against the embryo research Bill bit into the funds; tasteless stunts such as sending pink plastic foetuses proved expensive. And all in vain — yet another example of the efficacy of prayers and Hail Marys.

Mortgages have been taken out on property to keep things ticking over. Keith Davies, the LIFE campaign co-ordinator, has tactfully suggested that the bishops "could consider an annual pro-life collection". Archbishop Winning of Glasgow has sent £4,000 to the West of Scotland branch of LIFE. Its survival depends on donations from English branches.

Phyllis Bowman, national director of SPUC, has remortgaged her house for £200,000. She admits that the parliamentary campaign has left the organisation "very much in debt".

Mrs Bowman underlined the SPUCites' plight when she declared: "We have reached the stage of praying to St Jude". The situation at SPUC must be dire. St Jude is the patron of lost causes.

Freethinker Fund

Increasing costs are a problem that beset journals like *The Freethinker* (postage charges go up again next month) and the present economic climate makes it even more dependent on readers' generosity. The latest list of donations to the Fund demonstrates determination to enable Britain's only monthly freethought journal to bridge the gap between income and expenditure.

Our thanks to those contributors listed below, and to all whose generous support keeps the paper on course for the 21st century.

R. S. Marsden and M. E. Nottingham, £1 each; J. A. Flashmen, G. Miller, R. B. Ratcliff, R. W. Simmonds, J. E. Sykes, F. Walker and J. White, £2 each; D. Clamp, £2; A. Barrie, Q. B. Gill, K. J. Manning and R. G. Smith, £3 each; M. A. Villarreal, £3.20; F. Hiorth, £4.40; N. Blewitt, I. C. Chandler, A. M. Chapman, M. D. Hallett, G. C. Leslie, S. D. McDonald, P. J. E. Paris, J. Paterson-K. P. G. Spencer, A. E. Standley, L. Stapleton-D. A. Thompson, B. R. Toseland, B. J. van der Sloot and Villiers-Stuart, £5 each; K. M. Barralet, £5.40; W. P. Curry, £7; C. Bayliss, N. Blackford-J. Boyd, R. E. Davies, B. S. Donaghey and R. Siffleet, £10 each; C. Kensit, £15; R. J. Condon and M. A. Shaikh, £20 each; Anonymous, £50.

Total for June: £290.50.

"No Politics Please, We're Humanists!"

KARL HEATH

Can a Humanist Group be too political? Such criticism is encountered from time to time, but usually in the form of a private grievance. The issue should be ventilated openly in group discussion.

Many years ago the *New Statesman* competition asked readers to exercise xenophobic sabotage in compiling a guide for foreign tourists visiting Britain. Extracts were invited. A winning entry was: "Upon entering a British railway compartment the correct procedure is to shake hands with all present." Imagine the old-style compartment with the British stiff-lipped behind their newspapers. Only one subject could safely be aired — the weather. Religion, sex and politics were taboo.

Humanists have no inhibitions about religion, and they have displayed no diffidence on sex issues such as homosexuality and abortion. But with politics there is often a strange ambivalence. The Humanist movement advocates pluralism and the open society. How can these be achieved without the free and open exchange of different opinions? The Humanist movement opposes censorship. Can this be reconciled with inhibition of discussion? The Humanist movement applauds democracy. Does this mean merely a mark on a ballot paper at lengthy intervals, with intervening years of respectful conformity to a Government which may not have secured a majority of the popular vote in the first place?

Among the famous in the history of humanism Fisher and More were beheaded for their politics. Thomas Paine was imprisoned and narrowly escaped the guillotine, Charles Bradlaugh received a prison sentence which he did not serve, and Bertrand Russell, imprisoned in 1918, courted imprisonment again, half a century later, with his opposition to nuclear weapons.

The democrats of ancient Greece would never have understood reticence and privacy in political expression. Their word "idiot" originally meant someone who took no part in the community's public affairs.

The "non-political" critics sometimes qualify their objection by claiming that their real complaint is "party politics". Strangely, these same people condemn one-party states. We have had party politics for three centuries. Why should they be disreputable? Until half a century ago the Conservative Party never contested local politics as "Conservatives" but always "Ratepayers", "Citizens" or "Independents". They complained that the Labour Party had introduced party politics into local government. But, in my home city, the "Ratepayers" campaign was organised from the local Conservative Club.

In October 1989 my local Humanist Group

organised a Human Rights Forum, inviting others, such as Amnesty International, to the symposium. In my contribution, following the world survey of the Amnesty speaker, I felt it appropriate to concentrate upon infringements of human rights in this country. I mentioned the banning of trade unions at GCHQ, Cheltenham, the *Spycatcher* case, the prosecution of Clive Ponting, the prison sentence on Sarah Tisdall, the restraint of free speech in both old and new Official Secrets legislation and the attempts to muzzle broadcasting. A complaint that I had been too political was expressed, but not, as would have been proper, to me personally.

Surely humanism is universal, philosophical and all-embracing. How can it be circumscribed, confined to a compartment which excludes politics? I commend a discussion of this issue by Humanist Groups.

Finally, it would appear that the objectors, like John Selwyn Gummer on the Bishop of Durham, are usually complaining about the politics of the Left. Right-wing support for the Establishment is judged non-political.

Muslims Told to Quit

The Peace Pledge Union, Britain's main pacifist organisation, has been picketing its own building in protest at repeated support by one of its tenants for the killing of author Salman Rushdie.

Parts of the PPU's headquarters in central London are let to tenants. One of these is the Muslim Institute which has taken a fundamentalist Iranian view of Islam, even to the extent of supporting of the sending of Muslim hit squads to murder Rushdie. Although the PPU does not require that its tenants should be pacifists, it draws the line at organisations in its building going to the opposite extreme and encouraging acts of murder. Other tenants in the building have joined the PPU in repudiating the death threats.

In response to a further statement by an official of the Muslim Institute, clearly reiterating support for the killing of Salman Rushdie, the PPU decided to go public in condemnation of its tenant's policies. The decision was influenced by the publication by the Institute last month of a "Muslim Manifesto" which urges British Muslims to involve themselves in the armed struggle abroad.

The Muslim Institute has been asked to vacate its accommodation at the PPU building. Posters criticising the Institute have been attached to railings outside PPU headquarters, and leaflets distributed to passers-by. A message of support has been sent to the PPU on behalf of the National Secular Society.

The Inquisition Knows Best

BARBARA SMOKER

Growing dissent among Catholic theologians in many countries has elicited from Rome a heavy-handed reactionary "Instruction", proclaiming the authority of the Church to be above the individual consciences of theologians. The President of the National Secular Society, herself a former Catholic, here surveys the document and the comments on it that have appeared in the British RC press.

It is more than a year since I noted (in the *Free-thinker* of June 1989) the eruption into the open of the underground rumblings of dissent that had been gathering force among progressive Catholic theologians for the past decade, during which, for instance, the highly respected Fr Leonardo Boff had been summoned to Rome by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a manner that was a stark reminder that the CDF was once known as the Inquisition. But dissent continued to spread among Catholic theologians, and early in 1989 it suddenly burst out of the closet.

Now the CDF, representing the Vatican's curia, has acted: on 26 June 1990, it issued an official document, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, that aspires to plug the volcano (or bang the closet door) with a mailed fist.

Signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and by Archbishop Alberto Bovone, its secretary — both of them mouthpieces of Pope John Paul II — the 28-page *Instruction* (comprising four sections plus an introduction and conclusion) is, according to the introduction, addressed to "the bishops of the Catholic Church, and through them her theologians". While its stated aim is to "shed light on the mission of theology in the Church", it is, in essence, a thinly veiled rebuff to those Catholic theologians (numbering more than 500) who have openly criticised the authoritarian tone and content of directives emanating from the Vatican during the present reactionary pontificate, and is a heavy-handed attempt, on pain of excommunication, to limit their freedom to dissent publicly from the magisterium (or teaching authority) of the Church. In other words, it aims to gag them.

Not, of course, that that is anything new — but it is a reversal of the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, a reinstatement of the old emphasis on papal infallibility, and a setback to ecumenism. It is a return to the style of the curia during the first decade of the present century, when it similarly attacked what was known at the time as "the Modernist crisis" — that is, the application of modern methods of historical research to the study of scripture and the history of dogma. The then pope, Pius X (now a saint), ordered all Catholics not

only to believe whatever the Vatican had decreed but actually to accept in advance any such decrees not yet formulated, and he connived at the setting up of a Vatican secret police to report on any Catholic theologian who seemed to deviate from the orthodox position — shades of the old Inquisition. Indeed, and, paradoxically, a preview of Stalinism.

A solemn oath — the Anti-Modernist Oath — was instituted on the orders of the saintly Pius, to be taken by all priests on their ordination, all bishops at their consecration, and all new theology lecturers upon appointment.

Some of the "modernist" deviations condemned at that time, particularly in the field of biblical scholarship, have since become Catholic orthodoxy — yet it is still held that those who promulgated these findings before the Vatican had put the seal of approval on them were guilty of disobedience, disloyalty, intellectual pride, and defiance of the magisterium.

The present theological crisis concerns social issues and "liberation theology" rather than biblical scholarship, and is encapsulated in the dissident document known as the *Declaration of Cologne*, signed in January 1989 by 163 North European (German, Austrian, Dutch and Swiss) theologians, and since supported by about 350 more in other countries. Instigated by a very game octogenarian, the German Redemptorist priest, Bernard Haering, it was a scathing attack on Vatican trends of centralisation and intransigence and on the Pope's headline anti-contraception stand, which, it said, "mortifies the conscience of husbands and wives".

Following the lead of the *Declaration of Cologne*, 63 of Italy's leading theologians — including both the president of Italian theologians and the president of Italy's moral theologians — produced a three-page "open letter", raising similar objections (though in far more moderate terms) to those in the *Declaration*, and claiming that theologians should have a right to freedom of research, "with no spirit of intolerance". There was an immediate response from the old guard of the Italian Episcopal Conference — a stern rebuke, in the very spirit of intolerance that proved the theologians' case.

The next move was the imposition by the Vatican of an oath of fidelity — yes, again — on those newly taking up office in the Church. Many more Catholic theologians and bishops were angered by this imposition, and not always silently. Bishop John Brewer, Chairman of the Bishops' Conference Theology Committee in Britain, was reported as saying last year: "It is quite scandalous that this should be imposed by the Holy See without anyone knowing about it." The final paragraph of the oath translates as: "I adhere with religious submission of

will and intellect (*religioso voluntatis et intellectus obsequio*) to the teachings which either the Roman pontiff or the college of bishops enunciate when they exercise the authentic magisterium even if they proclaim those teachings in an act that is not definitive."

Nine months after the imposition of the oath, the theologian-muzzling *Instruction* sees the light of day — though this is said to have been in the pipeline much earlier. Following the now statutory "leak", it went on sale as a booklet in English at the end of June, an "extended summary" appearing the same week in the scholarly Catholic journal the *Tablet*.

The first section states that "the whole body of the faithful . . . cannot err . . . when from the bishops to the last of the faithful they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals". The second section deals with the vocation of the theologian, whose role is to "pursue a particular way of ever deeper understanding of the Word of God . . . in communion with the magisterium which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith", and concludes that "freedom of inquiry is the hallmark of a rational discipline whose object is given by Revelation, handed on and interpreted in the Church under the authority of the magisterium, and received by faith". In other words, free inquiry is to be encouraged, as long as it does not lead to undesirable conclusions. Section 3 deals at length with the apostolic succession, and section 4 at even greater length with (a) the theologian's commitment to "the task of presenting and illustrating the doctrine of the faith in its integrity and with full accuracy", and (b) the problem of dissent — which it sees as a "temptation", rejecting the claim that the duty to follow one's own conscience can legitimate dissent.

The *Catholic Herald* — hardly noted as a dissident organ of the Catholic Church in this country — commented in its editorial of 29 June:

The *Instruction* alludes to the magisterium as residing with bishops, but the suspicion is that what in effect the document means is that teaching authority belongs to those bishops in the Roman curia. This has been a central complaint of theologians, and this confusion is a vital area to clear up. By being vague, the *Instruction* will doubtless provoke yet further controversy among those same theologians with whom it seeks to affect a reconciliation.

The same issue contained an "analysis" of the *Instruction* by Michael Walsh (librarian at Heythrop College), who, after pointedly recalling the "shameful period" of the reign of Pius X, went on to give an outline of the new document:

The *Instruction*, after a brief introduction, consists of four parts and a conclusion — all written, one must add, in the discourtesy of exclusivist language. The first part, "The Truth, God's Gift to His People",

and the second, "The Vocation of the Theologian", give positive recognition of the role of the theologian in the Church. They will be much appreciated for their insistence upon the need for an understanding of philosophy and of history when reflecting upon the word of God. Practitioners of the sacred sciences will be particularly pleased with the acknowledgement of the necessity for "freedom of research, which the academic community rightly holds most precious". Problems arise, however, when that "freedom" is interpreted in the following two sections, "The Magisterium of the Church's Pastors" and "The Magisterium and Theology".

Throughout the document there is an apparent belief that the Truth (much talked about) is a known commodity, a given, not something still to be searched for. And the possessor of that Truth is the magisterium. Now what precisely the magisterium may be is never clearly defined. There is a passing nod in the direction of the bishops, but their role is a little iffy, yet to be clarified, as footnote 19 has no hesitation in pointing out. No such doubts about Roman congregations: "All acts of the magisterium derive from the same source, that is from Christ who desires that his people walk in the entire truth. For this same reason, magisterial decisions in matters of discipline, even if they are not guaranteed by the charism of infallibility, are not without divine assistance and call for the adherence of the faithful. The Roman Pontiff fulfills his universal mission with the help of the various bodies of the Roman curia and in particular with that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in matters of doctrine and morals. Consequently, the documents issued by this congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter (18-19)."

We now have theological justification for what used to be called "creeping infallibility".

Dr Walsh continues with the following trenchant comments:

Dissent is out. The Congregation accepts that not all the teaching of the magisterium is "irreformable". Yet even if the validity of the magisterium's view is not evident, or the opposite opinion is more probable, disagreement cannot be justified. The freedom of research so proudly proclaimed early on becomes a freedom to conform to the "truth" — an unexceptionable proposition in itself, were the "truth" not identified with the teachings of the magisterium as interpreted to the faithful by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The meaning of the word "freedom" has been stood upon its head.

The following week, the same newspaper included an equally hard-hitting comment on the *Instruction* from its Rome correspondent: "Negative reaction in Rome . . . suggests the paper will do little to attract dissenting theologians to the Roman fold."

Even the *Herald's* more conservative and populist rival in this country, the *Universe*, included in its front-page news item (1 July) the following sad comment from a theologian "who preferred not to be identified":

Any criticism of a document from the CDF is for-

Navigating in

bidden, so I can't comment officially. In practice, the effect of this document means the level of theological disagreement and debate in the Church is to be taken out of the public arena. I think it rightly wants to get rid of public campaigns, but its purpose seems to be to make the theologian extremely wary of expressing his own views. They will fear that even showing moderate disagreement will be seen as disloyalty.

In its next issue, the *Universe* published an article headed "Vatican opens an old diet of worms", reporting the "mixed reactions" of Catholic theologians in Britain, concluding with the scathing response of Dr Geoffrey Turner, Head of Theology at Trinity and All Saints' College, Leeds:

The CDF is certainly flexing its muscles. Its model of theology is that the magisterium makes definitive statements on faith and practice, and theologians must agree — even on reformable matters. . . . This is a political ideological document about the power struggle in the Church. The tone is totalitarian — especially chapters 36 and 39 about how the magisterium can override human rights and civil democratic debate. It's certainly not a piece of theology!

However, readers of the *Universe* among the laity could be counted upon to redress the balance in their letters to the editor. One letter opined:

True, we know that theologians have a duty to explore aspects of the Faith to their limits, and have never been noted for humility (with honourable exceptions). But does this not highlight the massive disloyalty shown to Pope John Paul II, Christ's Vicar on Earth, by those who should be leading the faithful to harmony with his responsible, and surely inspired teachings?

But another, the same week, took a more liberal line:

It is particularly poignant at a time when the whole world, including the Vatican, has welcomed the greater freedom of expression in Russia and her former satellites that the Church does not allow freedom of debate on matters of Christian doctrine. Does this mean that the Church now remains the only large institution in the present-day world that does not allow its members free and honest debate?

The latter correspondent, however, has overlooked the "large institution" of fundamentalist Islam. In fact, the resurgence of theological repression in most of the major religions around the world contrasts strangely with the collapse of political totalitarian regimes.

Maybe this upsurge of religious fundamentalism is a symptom of the general decline of orthodoxy. But while the world awaits the final demise of Jehovah/Allah/Christ, it suffers cruelly — non-believers as well as believers — from the activities of those cardinals and mullahs and fundamentalist pastors who are engaged in desperate efforts to prevent the divine corpse from lying down.

We read with distressing frequency of people who risk death rather than agree to medical treatment they regard as prohibited by their religious faith. Even children's lives are endangered by their parents' refusal to allow a blood transfusion. Yet criticism of any religion, however cranky or dangerous, attracts hostility and attempts to silence the critic. Dr McKee, an Edinburgh GP, recalls a conflict of religious and medical ideas.

In today's sophisticated world, it seems we can talk about anything. Ten-year-olds have a detailed knowledge of the role of the condom; magazines catering for every age group cover a huge variety of sexual problems in explicit anatomical and physiological detail. We can discuss alcoholism, incest, baby-battering, or homosexuality, or attack the Royal Family, and no one bats an eyelid — a Roman Catholic can even play for Rangers. Truly we are living in a liberated society.

Or so I thought until I had the temerity to write about religion.

At the time, I was editor of a monthly medical magazine aimed at British GPs. Most of the contents were clinical but the editorials were often used to direct criticism or advice at one target or another. I doubt if the recipients of these shafts lost much sleep but there was some satisfaction to be gained by attempting to keep authority on its toes and the readers seemed to enjoy the arguments that occasionally flared up.

In this particular month, I remarked on the effect that religion has on some of our patients. Not on any individual religion, or I might by now be as famous as Salman Rushdie, but on the relationship between the dogmatic fundamentalists that exist in most denominations or sects and those patients who are especially vulnerable. The editorial pointed out that many if not most major conflicts in history had their roots in religious differences, but whereas this was plain for all to see, the damage that was done to individuals was normally hidden and that GPs, who had more knowledge about this than most, should speak out when it occurred.

The editorial was intended, as they all were, to be fairly provocative and I expected a lively correspondence but I was completely unprepared for the response that followed. GPs telephoned me demanding that I resign; telephoned my publisher demanding that I be sacked. When he stoutly defended freedom of speech, one reader, so angry that I had not been punished for criticising religious intolerance, contacted every single advertiser in an effort to have the publication put out of business. Several major British companies expressed their concern to the publisher and one withdrew all its

the Stormy Seas of Faith

IAN McKEE

advertising solely on the grounds of this complaint but I am glad to say that the majority of advertisers resisted this pressure.

When the first onslaught of criticism had died down, letters flowed in from other readers supporting the proposition that religion could harm patients. One consultant psychiatrist wrote that more than half the long-term patients in his wards had suffered as a result of earlier religious experiences.

Other doctors cited similar instances in individual patients. A distressingly high number revealed how they personally felt they had been injured by religious experiences in their formative years. More letters were received and published on this subject than the total of all the letters received by the magazine in the previous two years and yet many of them could not be published because they were too highly personal.

Though we now live in what is widely regarded as a secular society, it is interesting to see what passions can still be aroused when religion is discussed. Those who were most annoyed plainly saw what I had written as an attack on their beliefs, yet surely the word "religion" covers a multitude of widely differing beliefs. A passionate advocate of a holy war, for example, would seem to have little in

common with a pacifist Quaker and voodoo is very far removed from Buddhism.

The implication that it is preferable to follow any religion however way-out, and that to criticise one of them is to criticise all, appears to carry ecumenism to some fairly ridiculous conclusions.

My experience, after several years of medical practice, is that a strong religious faith can sustain people through troublesome times and enable them to help others. It can also, alas, cripple, wound and hurt.

Religion is a magnet for the vulnerable who are enormously influenced by it. He who holds office, whether he is called priest, pastor, minister or mullah has awesome power and responsibility. There is no doubt that this power is sometimes abused, there are some leaders who need to bolster their self-esteem by being able to influence others, by forcing the impressionable to twist and turn as they desperately attempt to conform to a stream of damaging edicts from above.

It is not always healthy to point this out, however!

Reprinted by kind permission of Ian McKee and The Scotsman.

Government Cuts Cloud FPA Celebration

Celebration of the Family Planning Association's 60th anniversary has been clouded by the Government's assaults on the National Health Service, compelling local authorities to close down many clinics. The present occupant of 10 Downing Street is of a different mould to those magnificent ladies who opened the first clinics back in the 1920s.

The clinics were often situated in run-down areas, and the premises tended to be rather grotty. The women who set them up were almost without exception from the upper middle class. In the early days they paid for everything. In addition to funding the service, they had to contend with calumnies heaped upon them by religious and political critics. Women who visited the clinics were harassed and insulted by "anti-contraception zealots" — an early example of "pavement counselling" being conducted of late by Father James Morrow and his pious thugs.

In the 1920s the average married woman gave birth to eight children; one mother in a hundred died in childbirth. Having a baby was statistically more hazardous than going down a coal mine. Working-class women, often underfed and living in a slum with shared amenities, were most at risk. Many resorted to the back-street abortionist, often with fatal consequences. The Bishop of Southwark

responded to this misery with the words: "The only thing that justifies ultimately the intercourse between the man and the woman is the purpose and the desire to have children."

In 1930 the clinics amalgamated and became the National Birth Control Council. Nine years later the name was changed to the Family Planning Association. The Association's work was still being fiercely attacked during the post-war years, and under Roman Catholic pressure, the authorities banned an FPA advertisement from London Underground.

During the 1970s the FPA was incorporated into the NHS. The pioneers' aim to provide a nationwide, free contraception service had been achieved.

In Britain (and the United States) there have always been close links between freethinkers and birth controllers. A hundred years before the embryonic FPA was being established, birth control propaganda was being published and distributed by freethinkers like Richard Carlile and Francis Place. The movement developed throughout the 19th century. There were highlights like the Bradlaugh-Besant trial over publication of *Fruits of Philosophy* (1877). But for the most part it was the dedication and hard work of now forgotten pioneers that made family planning acceptable.

BOOKS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLASPHEMY, by Richard Webster. The Orwell Press. £3.95

George Orwell still stands for something, forty years after his death, or rather for several things. For example, what does his name mean in Southwold, the small town on the Suffolk coast where his parents lived between the world wars? He himself stayed there only when he was ill or on holiday or between jobs, and he disliked the place (caricaturing it bitterly as "Knype Hill" in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, the novel he wrote there in 1934). As a result there hasn't been much of an Orwell cult in Southwold, though there is a misleading plaque on his parents' old house in the High Street. But further down the High Street there has since 1985 also been an Orwell Bookshop, whose owner Richard Webster has written a book on the *Satanic Verses* affair which is published by the Orwell Press at the same premises. Despite the Orwellian aura, however, there are only a couple of references in the book to George Orwell; it is intriguing to wonder what the old eccentric would have made of it.

To begin at the beginning, the title is misleading, since Webster hasn't actually produced "A Brief History of Blasphemy". What happened was that in May 1989 the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie and His Publishers published a pamphlet called *The Crime of Blasphemy: Why It Should Be Abolished*, whose final section was indeed "A Brief History of Blasphemy" (mainly derived from my earlier research). When this was widely circulated in the book trade, Webster considered it was so misleading that he wrote a reply, which was widely circulated as a draft pamphlet with this title in January 1990. He then revised and expanded it and in June 1990 published it as a paperback book with the old title, although the historical material (still mainly derived from my earlier research) is very brief indeed.

A more accurate indication of the book is given by the subtitle: "Liberalism, Censorship and *The Satanic Verses*". Webster has really produced a polemic against the prevailing opinion of the "liberal" establishment about freedom of expression in general and about freedom of expression about religion in particular. He does criticise the various arguments for the suppression or withdrawal of the book and the violent threats against the author and publishers, but he is more interested in criticising Rushdie and his defenders and anyone who has ignored the complex background of the affair or who disagrees with his interesting if irritating interpretation of it.

Some of the criticisms are valid. Rushdie and

FREETHINKER

several of his supporters have been as simplistic and arrogant and intolerant as successful writers and Left-wing intellectuals often are, and Webster has no difficulty in finding silly remarks in their comments on the affair. But he ignores the equally silly and much more unpleasant remarks of Rushdie's opponents — let alone their actions — and he makes some silly remarks himself. He says that "one thing I have feared more than the bombs of Islamic fundamentalists . . . is the harm that can be done by the machine-gun bullets of liberal self-righteousness"; self-righteousness is indeed unpleasant, whether in liberals or their critics, but it isn't as harmful as guns or bombs. He says that "words are not, as is sometimes claimed, neutral and harmless instruments" but "can be as lethal, almost, as bullets"; no one has claimed that words are neutral, but it is a misuse of them to pretend that they can be anything like as lethal as bullets. He says that "the authority of the individual conscience has gradually been accorded the same position . . . as the authority of scripture in earlier centuries"; this is nonsense. He says that the *Satanic Verses* affair is "a clash not between religious authoritarianism and freedom but between two kinds of rigidity, two forms of fundamentalism"; this is nonsense too.

There are too many vague references to "liberals" and "liberalism", "liberal rhetoric" and "the liberal position", "liberal intellectuals" and "liberal historians", "extreme liberals" and "authoritarian liberals", "Western liberals" and "Western intellectuals", "the Western media" and "the Western conscience" — followed by wild accusations which demand qualification. To put the matter simply, most liberals don't think that freedom of expression is sacred, whatever may be said by a few people in the heat of controversy, and the advocates of the freedom to publish *The Satanic Verses* are not as intolerant as the advocates of the right to ban it (and kill its author).

There are also several serious confusions. In particular he attributes the reluctance of unbelievers to blaspheme in the presence of believers or the reluctance of publishers and broadcasters to offend religious susceptibilities to what he calls the "internationalisation" of "tabus" about religion — when it is simply a matter of private courtesy or of public taste; we don't make rude jokes about God when they might cause gratuitous offence, but we certainly do among ourselves or when they might make a point, and the fact that we recognise the existence of tabus doesn't mean that we share them.

Some of the background material is readable and valuable, especially his demonstration that *The*

REVIEWS

Satanic Verses belongs to the tradition of Western propaganda against Judaism and Islam and to the combination of religious and racial prejudice which infects Western culture, though these points aren't as unfamiliar as he suggests. Nor is the historical material entirely reliable. In his summary of the Christian-Muslim conflict he says that "some parts of what had once been Christendom remained under Turkish rule" until the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War; but some parts of what had once been Christendom still remain under Turkish rule today, since Christendom included the whole of modern Turkey as well as much of the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, and the Crusades were seen by Christians as defensive rather than aggressive wars to recover lost territories rather than to conquer new ones. In this area historical perspectives are more evenly balanced than he realises.

He is on strong ground in emphasising that our society has a history of repression and intolerance and is still far from free, with severe limits on expression in such sensitive areas as religion, sex, race, politics and personal reputation; but this is hardly news, and is spoilt by his slighting references to the civil liberties organisations which work to extend what freedom we have. He is also on strong ground in criticising fanatical religion; but again he weakens it with claims that "rationalism is itself a profoundly blasphemous religion" and that humanist organisations don't "discriminate between the freedom to impart information and the freedom to insult, offend or abuse". He is on strongest ground of all in insisting that freedom of expression cannot be absolute but must involve responsibility; but he then abandons it by refusing to say how this responsibility should be exercised and how far it should be regulated by law or otherwise — for example, how would he like censors or vigilantes examining his writings or the books in his shop?

A particularly disappointing aspect of the book is that much of the revision consists of the addition of detailed discursive arguments about various articles which appeared in the press earlier this year. This is the sort of journalistic polemic which belongs not in a book but in a magazine, and indeed a long extract was published on 16 June in *The Spectator* — the Right-wing magazine which had already published scurrilous attacks on Rushdie and his defenders — marking the abandonment of any serious discussion of the affair.

A particularly disturbing aspect of the book is that when it is specific it tends to become misleading. He refers to the support given by Lord Scarman and Archbishop Runcie to the existing blasphemy law;

but he doesn't mention that they have both changed their minds. He rightly invokes the valuable historical work of Norman Cohn; but he doesn't mention that Professor Cohn also supports the abolition of the law. And at no point in his criticisms of *The Satanic Verses* for its attacks on Islam does he mention its attacks on Britain; the point of Rushdie's supporters is that all such attacks are now acceptable in this society and should be accepted by everyone who lives here.

NICOLAS WALTER

A Brief History of Blasphemy, by Richard Webster, price £3.95. Obtainable from The Orwell Press, 64 High Street, Southwold, Suffolk IP18 6DN.

THE EXTENDED CIRCLE — AN ANTHOLOGY OF HUMANE THOUGHT. Compiled by Jon Wynne-Tyson. Cardinal, £6.99

"Yes: cruelty would be delicious if one could only find some sort of cruelty that didn't really hurt." *Hesione Hushabye*, "Heartbreak House", by Bernard Shaw.

My personal journey to the blessed and redeeming state of atheism began when, as a six-year-old, I was shown a series of four photographs, each depicting, in increasingly hideous stages, the public mutilation of a man in pre-war China. Tied naked to a stake, both chest muscles were cut off and then both thigh muscles. Young children of my own age were amongst the passive and fascinated onlookers. So traumatic was this experience upon me, that to this day, half a century later, I still have that man's face etched upon my memory. About five years after this, an invitation to tea from a school chum led me to meet his anti-vivisectionist mother (who had also, in case we forget the struggles of yesteryear, done time in prison for refusing to have her sons vaccinated), and in her window she displayed a poster showing equally hideous mutilations performed on a dog. The two incidents immediately fused in my mind, and I instinctively knew that barbarism is barbarism, no matter what pious or "progressive" disguise it might wear. As Bernard Shaw once said, the arguments used to justify vivisection are those which could be used to justify any atrocity. And indeed history constantly shows this to be so. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were excuses for vivisection on a human scale, far too exciting to miss, and, as another wise man once said, we can all bear the sufferings of others with fortitude.

These biographical and philosophical ramblings on my part might seem an odd way to open a review,

but I suspect that Jon Wynne-Tyson's wonderful compilation, *The Extended Circle*, might similarly dredge up half-forgotten memories and feelings from most rational and humane people. Leaving aside mankind's often abominable treatment of his fellow species, this catalogue of atrocity towards non-human beings might well convince a visitor from another planet that the human animal is indeed the scum of the earth. And yet, in mitigation, we at least have these eloquent, moving and magnificent dissenting voices, like Brigid Brophy's, who refuse to bow to any sadistic or fascistic dominant ideology, and who are not ashamed to value feelings, compassion and empathy as much as pure intellect.

Interestingly too, there is a colourful cross-section of humankind from whom quotations have been taken, and, on this issue at least, the out-and-out atheist marches shoulder to shoulder with the sincere religionist. This of course has its own logic since some causes (like that of slavery), find minority champions from all spheres, when it finally dawns on people that, collectively, society has sanctioned the intolerable.

However, I think one theme that the secularists pursue more keenly (and in this respect, mention must be given to Maureen Duffy's contribution), is the notion of just what the casual acceptance of atrocity does to us. How it irritates and angers when you hear pompous pronouncements about "pornography" depraving and corrupting from those who never once consider that sanctioned atrocity might do just that more powerfully. The horrors of the last war should have shown that once you consider others as belonging to an inferior species, then you can morally square the circle to your own satisfaction, and justify anything.

The rationale of the pro-divisionist really is that of the Final Solutionist who, having invented fictitious calumnies against the Jews, soon finds the means to justify what they consider to be a beneficial end. And, to show just how fiendishly clever the subconscious mind can be when bent on sadism, it did so as it simultaneously passed laws which were very pro-animal in order to further disguise its depraved long-term appetites. We should perhaps remind ourselves from time to time that the wickedness of the Holocaust would not be diminished one jot even if all the Nazis said about Jews were true.

Over 600 pages long, *The Extended Circle* is simply one of those books that are essential reading, because somehow, some way, mankind really has got to reform the almost psychotic view it has of other sentient life forms, and bring respect and humaneness to our dealings with them. This book will provide a most useful tool in that most worthy struggle.

DAVID GODIN

THE MORMON MURDERS: A TRUE STORY OF GREED, FORGERY, DECEIT AND DEATH, by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith. Sphere, £4.50

When in October 1985 bombs began to go off in the capital of Mormonism, Salt Lake City, it was not only individuals who were under threat. The murder of Kathy Sheets, wife of a Mormon financial consultant, and that of his former partner, Steve Christensen, appeared business-related. But a third explosion, which injured Mark Hoffman, a dealer in rare documents, pointed investigators in a different direction. Contrary to his claim of finding the bomb in his car, the evidence indicated that he was trying to set it when it exploded. Nor was he merely a trader in historical artefacts. Instead, it transpired, Hoffman was a forger of documents that themselves were explosive, threatening to blow apart the powerful and rich Mormon Church by demonstrating that its founder, Joseph Smith, was a fraud and their faith built on falsehood. According to one, for instance, it was a magical white salamander and not the Angel Moroni that Smith had first claimed to have revealed the Book of Mormon to him. Desperate because such revelations would destroy the faith of Latter Day Saints, Mormon leaders paid out for latter day forgeries and Hoffman was able to sell his "finds" to the Church, either directly or through intermediaries such as Christensen, so that they could be buried in a secret archive. The bomb victims had been killed in an attempt by Hoffman to save himself as he wove more and more complicated deceptions.

Naifeh's and White Smith's book, based on interviews with 170 people, police reports and other sources, is a fascinating account of a remarkable forger and an even more remarkable religious hierarchy. For a British audience, the book could do with a greater sense of what the Church stands for and how it has developed in wealth and power as it has moved away from such earlier practices as polygamy and Blood Atonement (the killing of apostates and other such sinners). It would also be helpful to know where their account differs from another study (Linda Sillitoe's and Allen Robert's *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*), recently reviewed in the admirable *New York Review of Books*. The Church itself claims to be untouched by its critics and has accused *The Mormon Murders* of containing "scurrilous descriptions, accusations, and wilful misrepresentations of the actions and motives" of Church leaders. The very events this book describes, however, suggest that the Mormon hierarchy are none too qualified at judging what is authentic.

ALAN GROVE

JOURNALS

THE SKEPTIC, July-August 1990

This journal's brief is to take "a rational look at Pseudoscience and the paranormal in the British Isles". It is badly needed in an age of mysterious circles in wheat fields, miracle cures and moving statues. In only four years *The Skeptic* has developed into one of the world's best debunkers of tall tales.

The current issue carries a wide range of interesting material. In addition to articles there is Donald Room's caustic review of the recent Festival of Mind-Spirit-Body which is suitably headed "The Charlatan's Market". In his "Hits and Misses" column, Steve Donnelly treats the reader to recent examples of dottiness among the spiritually inclined.

The articles and reviews are of a consistently high standard.

Basically serious, but not stodgy.

The Skeptic, PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, price £1.50.

AMERICAN ATHEIST, September 1989

Don't be put off by the fact that this issue of *American Atheist* was published a year ago.

A large number of its 72 pages are devoted to the menace of Islam. Barbara Smoker, president of the National Secular Society, has contributed a long article on the *Satanic Verses* controversy, with particular emphasis on the reaction in Britain. She gives an eye-witness account of the disgraceful scenes when thousands of Islamic fanatics went on the rampage in London on 27 May 1989.

Happily, Miss Smoker's article is out of date in one respect. She refers to the Archbishop of Canterbury's proposal that blasphemy law should be extended to Islam. Dr Runcie has since changed his mind on this question.

American Atheist pulls no punches, and eschews waffle about "respect" for religion: "It is a basically absurd doctrine that ideas should be respected just because they are sincerely held."

American Atheist, G. W. Foote & Co, 702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL, price £1.

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.

LETTERS

BATTLE OF THE BOYNE

It is understandable that the Freethinker made comment on the 300th anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne considering all the religious connotations associated with it (News and Notes, July). It is however unfortunate when the item, "The Blight on Ulster", perpetrates historical error or perhaps reiterates historical myth.

The Battle of the Boyne was of considerable importance in both Irish and English terms and indeed even in Scottish terms. In Irish terms, if the battle had been successful and the natural consequences had followed that the Williamites were defeated in Ireland, then James would have been poised to invade Scotland so that he could retake England. In Irish terms this would have meant the continuance of the Catholic parliament in Dublin, and Catholic supremacy. In British terms had James re-established his crown (with French aid) then there is little doubt that parliamentary democracy would have been suspended and the King would have returned to being supreme in the matters of civil law.

While it is often quoted, there is no historical substance to the comment "that when the news of William's victory reached Rome the Pope celebrated by ordering that illuminations be lit and a Te Deum sung". When he heard that a Te Deum had been sung in Austria ruled by Hapsburgh, one of William's continental allies, the Pope was scandalised.

D. BOYCE, Hamilton

THOSE MYSTERIOUS CIRCLES

I am writing in response to Toby Howard's article, *Skeptics at Large* (June).

Despite being author of many (hopefully serious) books on strange phenomena I do have some sympathy with *The Skeptic* journal, and support many of editor Steve Donnelly's views on the UFO subject, as he knows. However, I am concerned about the misrepresentation in Toby Howard's piece regarding crop circles.

I have been involved in the scientific study of these marks for a decade (you can see me speaking out for common sense and rationality as long ago as July 1983 in the *Daily Express* coverage). I have long contended that there are two basic solutions; a long-standing, natural and environmental effect (which is wind-borne and electrical in nature and has produced circles in twenty-two known countries from the year 1678 onward) plus a rapidly expanding plague of "crop hooligans" utilising the modern splurge of publicity to promote both themselves and their esoteric viewpoints. There is extensive evidence for both of these statements and it is developed at length in the book on the subject that I have written with geographer and statistician Paul Fuller (*Crop Circles: A Mystery Solved*; Robert Hale).

I would happily elaborate, but presume lack of space so will merely point out that the statement by Toby Howard "at the moment no-one knows for sure" whether the solution is wind vortices, fungal, UFO exhaust fumes or hoaxing is just not true. Those who bother to study the evidence will see very clearly that we do know what is going on. The evidence in favour of both hoaxing and atmospheric forces is (to me) beyond dispute. Of course, it is widely misreported or never recognised, swamped beneath the obsessive media hype that "alien powers" are drawing "messages" on our fields to "warn" our "ravaged" earth (which would be lovely if true, but sadly is devoid of

any awkward little things like solid evidence to support it).

The major error made by Mr Howard is his statement "no one has ever seen . . . (circles) being formed". Evidently he has allowed himself to be hoodwinked by the media hype and the esoteric myth-makers because this is fundamentally incorrect. In fact the number of excellent cases of eyewitnesses seeing crop circles being formed is now well into double figures. They cover many years and come from all over the world. Most are not in Wessex where the current hype is focused. These witnesses very consistently describe the mechanism that generates the circles, completely supporting those of us who contend that the genuine ones are the result of atmospheric forces. If we are wrong then someone has to explain: (a) why no witnesses exist who have seen circles being formed by any other type of "strange" force or a spaceship; and (b) why these data from eyewitnesses to atmospheric vortices describe something other than a "real" crop circle under creation. Until then where is the mystery? In the mind?
JENNY RANGLES, Stockport

MADAME BLAVATSKY

In response to David Tribe's letter (July), I am a member of the Theosophical Society but hold no position in it. I am also a member of the Society for Psychical Research. The Society holds no corporate views, therefore none on Madame Blavatsky. What laymen call the SPR Report on her, and members call "the Hodgson Report", is imprinted, like everything else that it publishes, with the warning: "The Society does not hold or express any corporate views. Any opinions expressed in its publications are, therefore, those of the authors alone".

Nevertheless, the Hodgson Report has, for some time, been a cause of disquiet within the Society. Leslie Price, of the SPR Library Committee, was the first to express, in print, in talks and in letters to other members, the opinion that it was unjust to her, and that, in view of the tendency of the general public and encyclopaedias to treat it as though it enshrined the official view of the Society, something should be done about it. Then Dr Vernon Harrison, who is by profession an expert on handwriting, sometimes consulted by firms in cases of suspected forgery, wrote a paper expressing the view that the handwritings of the Mahatma Letters could not be those of Madame Blavatsky. He impugned the methods used by Hodgson. Dr Harrison is not a Theosophist, and the purpose of his article was not, therefore, to establish, positively, the genuineness of any claims made by Madame Blavatsky, but to demolish the credibility of the Hodgson Report as a basis for attacking her.

Dr Vernon Harrison's paper was published in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, a momentous event, of which David Tribe is obviously unaware.

It happened while my biography of Blavatsky was going through the press, so that I was unable to include a reference to it in my bibliography.

JEAN OVERTON FULLER, Rushden, Northamptonshire

HUMANISM AND RELIGION

Many are the nights that I turn fitfully in my sleep, concerned once again with the definition of "Humanism", the fearful problem of a correct life stance, and the world shortage of dictionaries.

If Harry Stopes-Roe (Letters, July) and others haunted by the fatuous, referred to a dictionary, they would find no confusion with the word "religion". If Humanists and the exotic brotherhood of life stances

are faithful to an imagined creator and ruler of the universe, then they have a religion.

Can anyone see any value in the convoluted rubbish served up by Dr Stopes-Roe and the International Humanist and Ethical Union? If this is the best they can do I thank God that I am an atheist!
ROBERT SINCLAIR, Coventry

"Absurd" Ban on Film

The Campaign Against Censorship has described as "absurd" the British Board of Film Classification ban on the video of *International Guerrillas*. This is a film made in Pakistan, depicting the death of Salman Rushdie by means of a bolt of lightning hurled by God at the novelist.

While the CAC believes that the film makers are "at best misguided and at worst wilful collaborators with religious bigotry and intolerance", it nevertheless supports their right to be heard. The case against *International Guerrillas* should be heard in public, not behind closed doors.

The BBFC said the film was banned because they had been informed that it presented "a *prima facie* case of criminal libel on a British citizen, Salman Rushdie, and that the libel is a serious one". Salman Rushdie opposed the ban and declared that the film "should be in the public domain so that any libel or offence may be dealt with according to the due process of law".

It appears that the only supporters of the ban on the video are the British Board of Deputies of British Jews, who lobbied the BBFC. Greville Jenner, Labour MP for Leicester West and a vociferous campaigner for Jewish interests, called for the film to be banned. Their objection is directed at a scene in which the fictionalised Salman Rushdie murders Muslims with the help of Israeli bodyguards.

Nicolas Walter

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EVENTS

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. New Venture Theatre Club, Bedford Place (off Western Road), Brighton. Sunday, 2 September, 5.30 pm for 6 pm. Daniel O'Hara: From Anglican Priest to Secular Humanist.

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.

The Humanist Society of Scotland. Information obtainable from Robin Wood, secretary, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, KA3 2JD, telephone (0563) 26710.

Sutton Humanist Group. Friends House, Cedar Road, Sutton. Wednesday, 12 September, 7.30 pm for 8 pm. Keith Gimson: Do Humanists Need Marriage?

Norwich Humanist Group. Programme of meetings obtainable from Philip Howell, 41 Spixworth Road, Old Catton, Norwich, NR6 7NE, telephone (0603) 427843.

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 071-831 7723 for details.

Warwickshire Humanist Group. Friends House, Hill Street (off Corporation Street), Coventry. Meetings on the third Monday of the month, 7.45 pm for 8 pm. Information: telephone Kenilworth 58450.

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

National Secular Society

Sunday, 9 September

ANNUAL OUTING

The Hellfire Caves,
West Wycombe, and
Stowe Gardens

Cost (including entrance fees) £8

Details from the NSS,
702 Holloway Road, London N19 3NL
telephone 071-272 1266

“Advancement of Religion” Worries MPs

In its latest report the All Party Parliamentary Panel on Charity Law has again raised the question of organisations which register as charities because they work for the advancement of religion. The Panel, under the chairmanship of Tim Boswell, MP (Conservative, Daventry), says it “shares the Government’s concern about some of the contemporary consequences of the fact that ‘advancement of religion’ is one of the MacNaghten classifications of heads of charitable purpose”.

It is nearly a hundred years since Judge

(continued from front page)

code for a tremendous variety of events, ranging from school assembly of a secular nature through attempts at multi-faith observance to straightforward church services.

He added: “It is clear that there is no educational or political justification for enforced observance in any non-denominational school. The more the issue is pushed, the greater will be the build up of resentment and resistance among parents and teachers.

“The matter must be tackled in the only way that will produce any form of consensus — by abolishing compulsion, which has never worked, and by allowing each school to come to its own decision.”

The EIS represents around eighty per cent of Scotland’s teachers. It has members in all sections of the profession from nursery to higher education.

The Humanist Society of Scotland has also criticised the Scottish Office Circular which, it declares, emphasises “the importance of increasing the quantity of both Religious Education and Religious Observance.

“This is a mistaken emphasis . . . it must be counter-productive to increase the quantity of a product of poor quality.”

The HSS points out that the Circular “makes no effort to take into account the rapidly changing attitudes towards religious matters in Scotland. Nor does it consider whether the guidance it wants to issue will be acceptable to teachers, or to parents, or to pupils. If the amount of time devoted to Religious Education and Religious Observance has been diminishing over the years, this is because they have been seen as of diminishing relevance to the educational process.”

Describing official insistence that more time be allocated to Religious Observance as “particularly regrettable”, the Humanist Society of Scotland says: “If parents want their children to experience the emotions which are aroused by religious worship, they can accompany them to the religious services of the church of their choice; it is not part of the function of a modern educational system to provide such experiences for young children.”

MacNaghten’s ruling, based on the Statute of Charitable Uses, 1601, which has determined the outcome of charity cases since 1891. Like so many of his time and status, whether he believed it or not, MacNaghten acted on the premise that religion is a good thing. Scientologists, Christian Reconstructionists, the Moonies or the Jesus Army had not yet appeared on the scene.

Under the present law, there is a presumption that a body which applies for charitable status on the ground that its objects are for the advancement of religion, is for the public benefit. The onus of proof is on any person seeking to show that this is not the case.

The Panel considers that “there is no longer any reason for this presumption, and every reason for it to be removed. Religious charities should have to establish themselves on the same basis as other charities.”

The Panel mentions two categories of misconduct relating to trusts held by religious groups. First, there is activity which constitutes a criminal offence, and secondly, activity which, although not a criminal offence, is not in accord with the objects of the trust.

Alarm is expressed at the activities of some religious groups “who appear to be involved in forms of proselytising which amount to criminal offences, which are frequently visited upon impressionable and vulnerable young people”. The Panel declares that when a religious group engages in activities which are nothing short of kidnapping and brainwashing as a means of securing converts, they should be dealt with by the ordinary criminal justice process.

The Panel declares that “the desire of the Government to control the misconduct of some trusts held by religious groups is right and laudable”.

However worthy the Government’s “right and laudable intentions”, they seem unable to translate them into firm action. Of course any attempt to reform charity law will be fiercely resisted by sects and cults. This is to be expected from charlatans who have built up religious business empires in addition to brainwashing and indoctrinating their dupes. And while condemning such activities, when the chips are down the mainstream churches and religious organisations, anxious to defend their own wealth and privilege, will support their bizarre competitors in the superstition stakes.

More than 1,400 Muslim pilgrims were suffocated and crushed to death in a tunnel at Mecca. King Fahad of Saudi Arabia said: “It was God’s will, which is above everything.”