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Demented Dogma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is the message to be delivered on the doorsteps of Britain. What view should humanists take of it? It may help if we distance ourselves. Suppose this Nationwide Initiative were planned to take place in some humanist paradise of the future, in which religious history had been lost. An advance copy of the agreed statement falls into the hands of the administering authorities, who commission a civil servant to write an objective appraisal for the Assembly.

The civil servant's report:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a test of our basic doctrine of freedom of speech. We believe that it is a blasphemy against the human mind to interpose censorship. No one can be sure of the truth, so we must be open to all possibilities. Brainwashing is indeed outlawed, but that requires a captive audience. The

Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism has no captive audience. It relies solely on persuasion. Admittedly it appeals to basic needs. Many of us feel we need a father in-the-sky to replace the earthly father who took care of our requirements in youth. Many would also like a mother-substitute. Death is an anxiety, and the destruction of our unique Self is hard to accept. Those who pander to these needs will get a ready hearing. Some who are gullible may be deceived, for a time. Many will be distracted from the real problems of life and their solution.

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

Back to the present

The seven heads of the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism were fully set out on the court page of *The Times* of July 28. Printed alongside was the obituary of the late Shah of Iran. He was, said the obituary, a well-intentioned monarch whose sincere attempts to modernise his country and improve the social and economic standards of his people were overcome by religious opposition. "When the work of liberalisation eventually and belatedly began it took place against a current of revolutionary ferment and repressed religious fundamentalist passions which simply overtook it". The protagonist in this was an elderly fanatic called the Ayatollah Khomeini, who fomented disturbance and revolt in the guise of a defender of "the purity of Islam".

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

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