

# THE FREETHINKER

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## CONTENTS

And the World Was—!—The Editor	-	-	249
The "Man" Jesus—H. Cutner	-	-	250
Intolerance—S. Gordon Hogg	-	-	251
A Book to be Read—Once—A. Yates	-	-	252
La Mettrie—Ella Twynam	-	-	256
If I were God Almighty—Wallace Nelson	-	-	256
Freedom and Power—Austen Verney	-	-	258
Prophecy: Ancient and Modern—George Wallace	-	-	259

## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### And the Word Was—!

I WAS trying to get from a Christian acquaintance, a man of rather more than average intelligence in many matters, a definition of Christianity. What did he mean by it? He declined to satisfy my curiosity. He said that if he gave me a definition I should misunderstand him, and with a "That's my story, and I intend to stick to it" kind of an air, advised me to read carefully the Gospel of St. John. I protested that I had read it. He advised me to read it again. So, I confess mainly to see what my acquaintance had in mind, I went to St. John. But I got stuck in the first verse. I turned to some well-known commentators and found great enthusiasm among them, but no enlightenment. When one reads Matthew and Luke, and discovers that Mary had a child by the Holy Ghost, that is tolerably clear—if one could form some idea as to what a "holy ghost" is like.

On this question I got some enlightenment from anthropologists. They gave me various illustrations of women being impregnated by the rays of the sun, or of the moon, or by swallowing something which contained an embryonic infant. Others took me still deeper into the subject by pointing out that amongst surviving primitive peoples all children are born as the consequence of relations between a woman and a tribal ghost or spirit. From the point of view of the anthropologists it was plain that the story of the divine birth was nothing but an advanced form of a once generally held belief by savages who had not yet discovered the part played by the male. The New Testament story was just a variant of a very primitive superstition.

### Sound or Sense

But while so much was clear, I remained puzzled by the first verse in the book I had been advised to again read if I would understand Christianity. Once more I turned to the commentators. They supplied me with much in the shape of ejaculations and exclamations, but nothing else. They said that this opening verse was "sublime," it was "overwhelming," and one said it was "one of the greatest passages in the world." Let the reader consider the verse.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. I expect this is what a "mystic" really would

call "sublime." For try it how you will, it seems to remain untouched. No one can disturb its "sublimity." Try it, by turning it the other way about. "In the beginning was God and God was with the word, and God was the word." It is just as intelligible. Or try, "In the beginning the Word and God were and each was the other." It is as intelligible as ever. It is as it was. I verily believe that if one were to shake the letters in a sack and poured them on a table they would display the same degree of enlightenment. One can add nothing to such a declaration. Neither can one take anything away. In imagination I can see the writer settling down the passage, and with the last word, and with a twinkle in his eye, saying to himself, "now let them deny that if they can."

This verse is the mostly completely theological one I have ever met. People have discussed it, wrangled over it, fought over it. No one has ever been able to prove either that the word was not God, that God was not the word, or that the two were not one. The writer of the Gospel of St. John knew his business. If he had said that God was first and the word was second, or vice versa there might have been a row. But in putting it as he did one detects the finger of genius. I fancy the late Ramsay Macdonald must have slept with that text under his pillow.

### Words

But, soft, fair reader. There may be a clue to the mystery in the expression "Word." When we moderns use such a term we wish it to signify something, to point to something. But in those far away days when babies were born without fathers, words had all the qualities of things. Almost any authoritative work on anthropology will supply numerous illustrations, and the average reader will find all he wants in Clodd's excellent "Magic in Names," Brinton's "Religions of Primitive Peoples," and, of course the indispensable "Golden Bough." In the gospel of Luke you will find the bystanders wondering by what name Jesus works his miracles. In cases of witchcraft it was always important to get the words in the right order. In many parts of the world parents still keep the real name of a child concealed from all who by the use of the word do the child evil. Jews still hang on their doorposts sacred words to keep away evil spirits, "Abracadabra" was a very powerful word in working magic. The exact use of meaningless words in exactly the right order is prominent in religious services of all sorts. Consider the power of "Fee-fi-fo-fum."

Lenormant says of the Chaldeans that assimilation to the God was brought about "by the power of the words themselves."

In ancient Egypt, says Brinton, it was believed that "by words the most powerful of the gods could be made obedient to the will of man." The Goras of North-West India believe that a man can become a priest if he learns the formula of three parts, his body, his soul, and his name. The last alone only reaches immortality. In the New Testament we have "And the word was made

flesh," An Egyptian papyrus makes a God say "I uttered my own name as a word of power." The Brahmins believe that certain words could bind even the gods. In the apocryphal Gospels Jesus holds a dispute with Zacharias on the power and qualities of names. The virtue of the Hebrew phylactery consists entirely in the power of the words it contains. The Jews did not give the right name of their God for fear one would work evil with it. The Choctaw Indians have the same practice. In the church service we have "Hallowed be thy name." Jesus works miracles in the name of God. The belief in the occult power of numbers flourishes in "psychic" circles to-day.

These are only a few examples that may illustrate "In the beginning was the Word." But they should be enough to put readers on the right track. The meticulous manner in which a religious service is performed is full of significance to those who understand it. But, as I have so often said, the choice lies between believing religion and understanding it. One cannot do both.

It may also be noted that this foolish meticulousness runs right through a religious service. The dress of a priest must be of a certain kind, the priest must preach in a particular way, the awful parsonic, moaning, adenoidal drawl is familiar to all. In ordinary conversation the priest may speak like a human being. But let him commence a service and he is a different man. He must mouth and moan in the stereotyped manner. Imagine the result of a priest going through a service using ordinary words in the ordinary way! The congregation would in turn behave like ordinary men and women, and the sacred atmosphere would disappear.

In a rash moment Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name?" The reply is it depends on circumstances. In religion a word means much, it always has meant much. The "name" must not be taken in vain. Consider a prayer for rain, which simply ran, "Lord we want rain, kindly send some." But surrounded with archaic words and ancient customs a prayer or a service becomes terribly impressive, as impressive as a child chanting a fairy charm.

Looked at from one point of view St. John is understandable. He may mean nothing at all to the modern religious mind, but to the student of the evolution of mankind from the most primitive times until to-day, St. John really "said a mouthful." He helps us to line up the God who is born without a father—on earth—and who was part of his own father as his father was part of his own son which brings Jesus into line with many other gods. I think that if we understand the real significance of "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God," we shall be on the right road to understand religion. But one will never understand it by reading the Bible in a prayerful spirit, analysing dates, and trying to make a modern politician out of an impossible character.

The only profitable way to study religion is to group beliefs as a naturalist groups animals or a botanist groups plants. Set on one side the consideration whether they are tall or short, white or red, but mark those features they have in common, and we are able to say, this animal is a cow, it may be bigger than any other cow, a different colour from any other cow, but in its fundamental characteristics it is a cow. Superficial differences do not matter.

And remember also that in the study of religion as in the study of animal forms dates have little or no relevance. The man mouthing in the pulpit with artificially acquired intonations and using

archaic words must, scientifically, be placed with the varieties one meets away back before the dawn of history. Differences in dress and phrasing simply do not matter. In the study of human development time and place are minor matters. It is the classification that is all important. And unless the whole of modern anthropology is a living lie the secret of the religion preached in St. Paul's or in St. Peter's is to be found among those savage peoples from whom we all descend

And yet again, we must revise our meaning of primitive. We must knock the date out of that. For the primitive mind is found in every age and in every social class from the throne to the gutter, from the dame's school to the university. It is with us in a nation praying for success in war, and in the wearing of charms and amulets blessed by priest or pope.

On the whole I am rather glad I followed my friend's advice and re-read the gospel of St. John.

CHAPMAN COHEN

## THE "MAN" JESUS

### III.

FAILING Josephus, the Christian, Jew, and (believing) Rationalist fall back upon the Talmud to prove that behind the Gospels there really was a man called Jesus Christ, who "went about doing good"—whatever that phrase may mean—who was nearly always having a row with Jews who resented his activities, and who really was crucified by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, very much in the way described in the New Testament; though, of course, the reality of the Resurrection is hotly contested by both Jew and Rationalist.

Now it is a fact that the Talmud does mention "a Jesus"—in fact quite a number of them, all pointing in some way to the Gospel one, and all differing from that deity in many other ways. The difficulty in accepting any of the presentations lies as much in the history of the transmission of the text of the Talmud, as in the absurd chronological mysteries which surround the Talmudic Jesuses. Most of the people who glibly talk about the Talmud not only have never read it, or the various passages in which a Jesus is mentioned, but they are also quite ignorant of what this enormous mass of literary material actually represents. To talk about the Talmud as if it were just a book is fantastic nonsense.

If ever the word "speculation" can be applied to the history of a literary work, it can be applied perhaps more to the Talmud than any other similar collection of books and tracts. Its origins are certainly lost in the mists of time. Jewish "authorities" have exhausted themselves and speculation in trying to account for a good deal of the Talmud, and in trying to fix possible dates for its compilation. And the truth is simply that nobody knows what the truth is. The picture we are given is that, both before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., large numbers of industrious and illustrious Rabbis were constantly studying the written and oral Law—mostly, that is, the Pentateuch—that their gems of wisdom were carefully recorded by hordes of admiring pupils, that from a large welter of manuscripts something like order was at last obtained round about the year 500 A.D., and that the Talmud almost exactly as we have it to-day was the result.

Now actually there are two Talmuds—one compiled in Palestine (as far as we know) and the other in Babylon, which is the one mostly revered by the Jewish peoples. Both these compilations

are, of course, studied but it is interesting to note that there was no love lost between the two schools of thought they represent. The Palestinian Talmudists seemed to have had the greatest scorn for the learning and ability of their rivals, and this religious sentiment was heartily reciprocated.

The nucleus, so to speak, of the Talmud was the Mishna, which was a kind of commentary on Old Testament passages, or a recapitulation of the Law by various Rabbis, and is supposed to have been finally collected by Rabbi Jehuda at Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee in the year 219 A.D. But the most interesting thing about the Mishna is that it shows the utmost vagueness about many things upon which it should have given us authentic and relevant details. The scholars who have studied it and the commentaries upon it which form the great part of the Talmud, point out that the old Rabbis say nothing about the historical development of the Old Testament—nothing certain about the fixing of the text, or who were the authors of the books which make up the Old Testament. They were not so much concerned with these things as they were in setting up a rigid orthodoxy which eventually made Judaism almost an unalterable religion—and which indeed helped to preserve both the religion and the peoples who adopted it.

But if the Mishna represents the teachings and the discussions of various Rabbis, say from the year 100 B.C. to the year 219 A.D., then the schools which produced them and their pupils must have come into contact not only with Christianity as an organized religion, but also with many Jews who were converted to the new Faith. It seems incredible that a movement which threatened to absorb Judaism, or finally to overthrow it, should not have made a profound impression on those Jewish teachers responsible for the Mishna as they had to be armed with arguments to combat the new religion, and were, as I have said, doing their utmost to guard the old one.

Moreover, one of the greatest names among the Rabbis was that of Akiba who probably had more to do with it than any other, and who was in addition a fanatical opponent of Christianity. It was he who was the great inspirer of the Bar Chochba rebellion against the Romans—a revolt they found exceptionally difficult to suppress, but which resulted in the end in the death of Akiba as well as of Bar-Chochba in the year 135 A.D. Certainly if there had been a real man Jesus living about 100 years previously, Akiba would have known about him and could not have failed saying something about him for the edification of his disciples in the Mishna. They would have been only too glad to have recorded for posterity what their illustrious teacher—one of the greatest in the history of Judaism—had said about the founder of the religion so strongly opposed to his own.

Yet there is not a word about Jesus or Christianity in the Mishna—except one small dubious paragraph which may mean Jesus, but which gives no name.

This is what Baring-Gould in his "Lost and Hostile Gospels" says:—

Now it is deserving of remark, that many of the Rabbis whose sayings are recorded in the Mishna lived in the time of our Lord, or shortly after, and yet that not the smallest reference is made to the teaching of Jesus, nor any allusion to him personally. Although the Mishna was drawn up beside the Sea of Galilee, at Tiberias, near where Jesus lived and wrought miracles and taught, neither he nor his followers are mentioned once throughout the Mishna. There must be some reason why the Mishna, as well as

Josephus and Justus of Tiberias, is silent respecting Jesus of Nazareth.

I am not concerned here with the reasons given by Baring-Gould as to why all these are silent about Jesus—the point I wish to emphasize is that they are silent, except for the aforesaid paragraph; and with regard to the Mishna it is a very surprising silence. For this part of the Talmud is considered almost contemporary with the birth and early progress of Christianity. It is in the other parts of the Talmud, that is, in the commentaries on the Mishna where we find the references to "a Jesus." And they are the products of much later generations, when Christianity was becoming very powerful, and when it was impossible for a Rabbi to say nothing about it or for his pupils not to encounter a member of the great enemy of Judaism—of Christianity.

The stories regarding Jesus became settled more or less in a number of Gospels, four of which were slowly taking their place as "canonical." Translations of them were appearing in many languages, and it would have been almost, if not quite, impossible for the great Hebrew schools in Palestine and elsewhere not to have put on record some of the current stories of the so-called founder of Christianity, embellished, or added to, or even perverted by opponents.

And that is exactly what happened. As Dr. Couchoud says in his "Enigma of Jesus":—

In Jewish writings, in the intricate and incoherent mass of the Rabbinical Scriptures, one might expect to find some definite tradition as to Jesus. No one shows any first-hand knowledge of him. The Jesus of the Talmud is nothing more than the distorted Jesus of the Gospels.

I shall deal with these "distorted" pictures of Jesus in my next article. H. CUTNER

## INTOLERANCE

SHAKESPEARE might have written, "Intolerance more strong than traitor's arms, quite vanquished him." He chose the word ingratitude which was sufficient for his purpose. On our part the altered quotation is more apt, because of its terrible significance these days, and to the fact that intolerance has caused great suffering and despair in the past, and which may in time to come quite vanquish mankind unless—but we shall come to that point later.

Several years prior to the war that was fought for the avowed purpose of ending war, a film was produced entitled "Intolerance." We saw how intolerance had caused great catastrophes throughout the ages and the misery that had ensued. We saw the results of intolerance as used by ruler and ruled alike. We saw how disasters might have been avoided, and we saw how history was made. Here, then, was a warning for mankind. The warning has not been heeded as we are now experiencing to our bitter cost. Despite the fact that the producer's efforts are fruitless as yet, it is hoped that some seed fell on good ground, and will come to fruition one day.

Judged by present standards this film was not a box-office success. Lacking publicity, sex appeal, and great stars, what was there to commend it? Idealism has been wedded to commercialism on other occasions, but the union has never been fruitful nor lasting. The producer's message was "as a voice crying in the wilderness." Modern publicity would, however, have brought the film widespread notice and support, and the significance of its message would doubtless cause a sensation. The producer is to be commended for his idealism, but his experiment was never repeated! For several years after the Great War this

theme appeared in a different guise. Intolerance became a box-office success, and was recognized in "Journey's End," "Suspense," "All quiet on the Western Front," and many others. We saw the effects of intolerance portrayed in the horrors of the battlefield, in the hate of contending nations, and in the cruelty of the individual. The popularity of these war films lasted several years, and many people were profoundly affected by the lesson indirectly learnt, and vowed they would never participate in any war again. War was so futile and senseless they said. The memory of the public is very short, and the time was to come when the lessons of the past would be forgotten, and passions would again be aroused and hate rekindled.

Once again intolerance is playing the major role in man's destiny. Witness the acts of the Dictators, and observe how terrible is its use! As with nations and dictators so with the humbler individual. Let us consider the effect of intolerance in the marriage sphere. In the so-called "upper classes" discordance between the two parties is described as "incompatibility of temperament." In other words this state of affairs is merely intolerance arrayed in dress clothes. Lower down the scale of activities in modern social order we have the "middle classes." Here marriage difficulties lead to "strained relations" and a "separation." In this case intolerance is seen in morning dress. Among the working classes (or artisan class) an unhappy marriage may lead to summons for assault. Intolerance in this instance may be discerned masquerading in cap and overalls, or, perhaps, threadbare clothes. Whatever the guise the effect is just as disastrous unless the intruder is recognized in time, and counter measures adopted.

But what measures can be adopted? Is it policy to be tolerant with a bully, or a tyrant, or, shall we say a dictator? Must intolerance be countered by intolerance? If not, must might beat right? How you answer these questions or how you react to their effect in every day life must be of tremendous significance, and the motive which determines actions for peace or war. Which shall it be? The point has now been reached when tolerance and intolerance are about to join issue unless a solution can be found.

The re-action of the aggrieved party to the affront must determine the outcome of the act or word. Tolerance or intolerance? Both words have been interpreted as weakness and retaliation respectively. One may act in good faith, but the act may be misunderstood or derided. On the other hand harmony may be restored if one says "If I said so"—or "If I did so"—and the other says, "Let's talk it over." As Shakespeare said, "There is much virtue in 'if.'"

We believe that a tolerant attitude betokens patience, charity and indulgence whatever the provocation. On the other hand an intolerant attitude means being unable to endure differences of opinion, and, also, being persecuting. Unless the gap can be bridged the result is disaster.

It takes two to make a quarrel, but this unhappy state of affairs may be avoided by compromise. A married man was heard to say that he always evaded words with his wife by walking into the garden when a quarrel seemed imminent. When asked whether this method was possible on every occasion, he merely smiled and said that the questioner must think it out for himself. In other words settle your differences your own way. It is sufficient if you compromise in some way or other, and the very pith and purport of this is by mutual concession.

S. GORDON HOGG

## A BOOK TO BE READ—ONCE

IN estimating certain literary works of the past, we are often unconsciously led to pay more deference to their reputation than to our own judgment. Our desire to read an old book is usually the result of the encomiums which critics and commentators have bestowed on it, so that, at the very outset, our minds receive a bias in its favour. It may happen—it often does—that, on reading the book for ourselves, we find that it does not answer the expectations we had formed of it, and we hesitate to impute the fault to the author or ourselves. But some books are so hallowed by praise, and hedged about by prescriptive reverence, that it is literary blasphemy to say anything against them, and in such cases, we usually settle the question by humbly acquiescing in our own want of taste and discernment. I don't know of any other book that roused in me such a feeling of dissatisfaction—at first with myself, but finally with the book—as the "Divine Comedy" of Dante. I can recall my first reading of the poem—the eager interest with which I began, and which, as I proceeded through the "Inferno" with its detailed description of "horrors heaped on horror's head," became gradually tinged with disgust. As I worked my way through the "Purgatory" and "Paradise," my interest faded away, and was succeeded by an utter weariness which lasted to the end of the poem. Since then I have read portions of the work quite a few times with a view to test my first impressions and see whether they might not admit of some correction. But my first impressions have always obstinately refused to be corrected. I am aware that by all professed admirers of Dante, I should be classed as a hopeless philistine. But I do not question the practical merits of the work, such as power of imagination, description and so forth. In Dante's case these qualities are undeniable, inasmuch as any account for such places as Hell, Purgatory and Paradise can consist of little else. It is the subject and sense—or nonsense—of the "Divine Comedy" that I am chiefly concerned with; and such have, it seems, been adequately rendered in Cary's translation.

The poem begins with a preposterous fiction. The pagan poet, Virgil, who lived about 70 B.C., is made to act as "guide, philosopher and friend" to the Christian poet through regions which, as described in the poem, are the highly-wrought embodiment of the superstition and credulity of medieval monkery.

No other work displays so forcibly the inherent inhumanity and absurdity of Christian beliefs. Dante brings into glaring prominence all the repulsive features of his religion. In the "Hell" we are shocked at the horrible fate of the victims of divine vengeance with its monstrously disproportionate penalties. If Christianity, as represented by Dante—that is to say Catholic Christianity which is the most consistent form of the superstition—were true the being born into this world would be one of the greatest evils that could befall humanity for it would mean to by far the greater part nothing but an eternity of the most frightful torments. On an even valuation, it would be infinitely better to be the meanest thing that crawls than to be a human being and run such a risk. The poet himself seems to have some notion of this, for he says (Hell, canto iv.)

Meanwhile

Those spirits, faint and naked, colour changed,  
And gnash'd their teeth, soon as the cruel words  
They heard, God and their parents they blasphemed.  
The human kind, the place, the time and seed  
That did engender them and give them birth.

When one comes to consider this gruesome portrayal of human suffering, one can hardly avoid speculating on the character of the mind that could conceive and depict it with such care and apparent relish for detail.

Dante seems to have been of a grave, not to say, gloomy temper which the circumstances of his life aggravated and embittered. He was a disappointed man, whose early ambition, social and political, had been nipped in the bud. Banished from his native city, Florence, he led a wandering life, dependent for his existence on the charitable hospitality of successive patrons. In addition, he had, it seems, early fixed his affections on Beatrice, who became the wife of another, and died young. He had evidently little or no sense of humour, I cannot recall a single flash of wit or pleasantry throughout the poem—a defect that could scarcely occur in so long and varied a work by one gifted with that saving quality.

In the "Purgatory" we are introduced to a number of historical personages—kings, philosophers, poets and others whose existence requires a footnote to explain it—who are all engaged in expiating various uncomfortable ways, the sins of which they were guilty on earth. This section of the poem is highly praised by certain critics who contrive to see in it a great deal that the poet never thought of. Carlyle, in particular, excels them all in point of praise and perspicacity. As I do not receive the Chelsea sages emphatic dicta either on this or other matters with unquestioning faith, I fell no hesitation in saying that the tedious colloquies and intrinsic absurdities makes very dreary reading.

On their arrival at Paradise, Virgil's job as conductor, is finished, and he goes back to his allotted place in limbo, a minor department of Hell, and a region of pervading gloom. Here, in consort with Homer, Plato, Aristotle and other eminent pagans, he is doomed to pass an eternity without hope, because:—

If they before  
The Gospel lived, they served not God aright;  
And among such am I. For these defects,  
And for no other evil, we are lost.

'Hell,' canto iv.

Beatrice is now the poet's guide and mentor. We are not informed of the extent of the lady's accomplishments on earth, but in Heaven, she has become a perfect blue-stocking. She discourses learnedly on the moon and its spots, correcting the poet's mistakes on that head, and making quite a few of her own. She explains all the complicated machinery of the spheres—the epicycles, the primum mobile, the various heavens up to the empyrean, and all the paraphernalia of Ptolemaic astronomy. For the poets' behoof, she resolves knotty points in scholastic divinity, treats of the Trinity, and of "predestination, fore-knowledge and free-will," with a great deal of other skimble-scamble stuff much discussed at that time. As they proceed through the various heavens they meet with the saints and doctors of the Church, the martyrs, the apostles and the patriarchs. How all these "blessed of my Father" occupy themselves, or in what their beatitude consists is by no means clearly stated. In fact, one of the chief difficulties of the poet—and it is a difficulty that has been felt by all who have attempted the same thing—is to give some idea of the state of felicity in which the inhabitants of Heaven are supposed to exist. But, though imagination has been strained to the utmost, the attempt is in this, as in other instances, a failure. The happiness is merely ascribed, not accounted for; the causes assigned being altogether insufficient for the pur-

pose. We are told with much repetition that so-and-so or such-a-one is in a state of shining bliss, but how, or by what means, is not demonstrated. The images and illustrations employed are, as a matter of necessity, taken from our earthly experience, and, as sources of happiness, are too meagre and restricted even for us. If "the heaven of each is but what each desires," happiness is as diverse as human character, upon which in every individual case it depends. Happiness and misery are, states of consciousness, and as such are inconceivable apart from the conditions under which they exist here. All descriptions of Heaven and Hell are consequently mere moonshine.

I might go through canto after canto in which the poet makes his paradisaical puppets the vehicles of his beliefs on a variety of subjects; for he was well-studied in the learning, "sacred and profane," of the period. But it would only make more manifest my own limitations. To those who can find pleasure in a hash of fantastic cosmology, scholastic futilities, antiquated genealogical and topographical references, with a plentiful admixture of Christian and pagan mythology, the pleasure is theirs, not mine; and to such I can only say in the well-advertised colloquialism—"Go to it!"

A. YATES

#### ACID DROPS

The Bishop of Rochester has discovered that "The Church cannot solve all problems and abolish all evils." But no sensible person ever believed the Church could, and none but Christians ever thought they should. It was the Church that claimed it must regulate life, and while it stood as the great advocate of totalitarianism its failure was patent. Whatever good the Church has done has been unconnected with its religious character. And now we have the confession that the Church cannot solve all problems and abolish all evils. The disastrous thing is that the Church, as a Church, was ever allowed to influence men and women in anything of a social character. For what good it did was due to its intrinsically non-religious activities, and the evil it did—and still does—is monumental.

There is little doubt that Church parade is, save for a small minority of a minority, the most obnoxious duty in the British Army. Were it otherwise the influence of Church and Chapel would not be so steadily used to continue it. There is something that is grimly sarcastic, and does much to support the charge of the hypocrisy of Britons, that in a war avowedly for human freedom and intellectual liberty, grown men should be treated like children in a Sunday School, and made to attend a Church parade. Leave it to the men themselves and we are quite convinced that not ten per cent of them would muster. And the clergy of all denominations know it.

But even to gain this common end it seems that Christian preachers cannot trust each other. Some Nonconformist ministers now complain that "something approaching persecution" is now practised in the army. The claim is that dissenters are often put on fatigue duty, while the more favoured Anglicans walk to Church and have an hour's rest—or sleep. The Rev. Tootell says this is happening all over the country. We do not doubt it, but all parsons must be aware that this has been a very common practice where non-Christians are concerned. But we have not heard of any Christian minister who ever protested against this punishment for showing a little intellectual self-respect. When will the clergy have enough self-respect to decline to preach to a congregation that has been driven like, so many sheep, to the service?

The "Church Times" is not without a sense of humour. It says that the Christian Evidence Society

"pursues" Freethinkers. To pursue may mean no more than to go after something that does not wish to be caught, and we can quite appreciate a Freethinker doing his best to evade the ordinary Christian Evidence speaker. It is always useless to waste one's time on anyone who lacks either honesty of purpose, or shows sheer inability to state a sensible proposition for discussion.

A religious paper threatens its readers with a series of articles on Church Reform. It is astonishing how frequently God's instrument on earth needs reforming. God had to reform the human race very soon after he made it and declared that everything was "O.K." Then, after a number of scattered efforts one-third of himself came down from heaven to see if there was any chance of reforming the people—ending in another failure. Next God established a Church, which soon broke up into warring fragments, and now for at least four hundred years he has been trying to reform the character of each of the Churches, and now God, through them, is having another try. Why doesn't he wipe out the lot and make a clean start.

The situation reminds us of the old lady who was lamenting to her minister his departure to another "call"—at a higher salary. The Minister modestly said she would probably get a better man than he was. "No, no," said the old lady, "we have had four ministers, and each one has been worse than the last."

The journal to which we have referred remarks that "The Church of England is partly clothed in medieval clothing and partly garmented in Victorian rags." The writer is too modest. The pantomimic exercises and general Mumbo-jumboism of the Church goes back much farther than Victorian and medieval times. It goes right back to beyond the dawn of history. It is deeply rooted in the ignorance and fear that so plainly operates in primitive life.

"Totalitarian" has become a very well-known word, and in politics a well hated one amongst liberal-minded people. It means something complete, something that omits nothing. It fits not merely a political or economic theory which covers social life, but any idea or teaching that positively compels obedience. Bearing this in mind there is no need to be surprised to find Canon Cockin advertising the aim of establishing in all our schools a "Totalitarian Christian Education," and saying that nothing else will do. From the Christian point we agree with him. If Christianity is to flourish it must dominate. It no more willingly permits rivalry than Nazi totalitarianism can. It makes it plain that all those who, with certain members of the Government, are working for and plotting for the domination of Christian teaching in the schools are Totalitarians in the most objectionable sense of the term. All children will be taught Christianity. The teachers will be compelled, either openly or in form to be Christians. It was once impossible for non-Christians to sit in the English Parliament. If the clergy have their way it will become impossible for any but avowed Christians to be teachers in the schools. If the war does not drag us to another 'Dark Age,' the Churches will try to re-establish one—that is unless there is enough public spirit abroad to kill the plot.

That this agitation belongs to the parsonry is plain. It is true that many parents are dragged into the ranks of Christian Totalitarianism, but the majority—the vast majority—of them are not interested in it. The Dean of St. Albans admitted this much. In the course of a speech reported in the "Hertfordshire Mercury" of May 9, he said, that "The average parent does not care a tinker's curse which school their children go to or whether they are taught religion or not. The same applies to teachers, some of whom are not interested in the subject, and the British public are certainly not very greatly im-

pressed." In other words, the demand comes wholly from the clergy. It is just a professional ramp.

Speaking of the rise of Hitlerism and its consequences the "Star," in a leading article for May 19, deals with the superstitious character of some of the leading Nazis, their faith in astrology, etc., and points out that history provides some analogy in the decline of the ancient Roman Empire. It stresses, as we and other Freethinkers have often done, the torrent of superstitions which poured into Rome (from the East) and that these were made possible by weakness from within. It rightly says that all kinds of "esoteric cults and practices are the corollary of corruption" and that "history's parallel for the Germany of to-day are the declining years of the Roman Empire," etc.

Readers of the "Freethinker" will be familiar with this point of view. It is historically sound. The successful irruption of Eastern superstitions into Rome would never have occurred had not Rome been taking a downward course. In other words the Christian superstition fattened on the defections of the social State.

That has been pointed out scores of times in relation to the growth of such superstitions as astrology, fortune-telling, the craze for "mascots," and so forth. Even to-day we can see the Churches trying to make capital out of the relative demoralization that always follows a state of war. Had peace continued, and if the social ills of the country had been boldly and intelligently handled we should not have witnessed such a return to the primitive as we trace in the religious developments of the B.B.C., and the confident air with which the Churches are attacking the educational system of the country. The last would never have developed as it has done had the existing conditions not been with us. The outcry of the priests to-day does indeed parallel that of the attack of Eastern superstitions on Rome. It will not, we are convinced, be followed by a like result.

We clip the following from the New York "Arbitrator":—

In order to force the legislature of Delaware to repeal ancient blue laws, the police arrested more than 500 people on March 2, charged with breaking the sabbath.

Good! It would be interesting, certainly it would be instructive, so far as the general public is concerned, if something of the same kind of thing were done with regard to many of the absurd survivals that we have.

Another item worth citing:—

The Bible has been treasured in all the belligerent countries without shedding much light upon human brotherhood or divine protection. But it does produce an income.

It really is surprising how many gems of wisdom come from the pulpit—provided one studies them from the right angle. Here, for instance, is the Rev. J. D. Boyle, Headmaster of Beaumont College, who says, in the course of a speech on Christian Education, "Difficulties are opportunities." That is a maxim well understood by all the churches. They openly complain that when man is enjoying "worldly happiness" he is inclined to forget God. Let him get into trouble, of a kind that it is not easy to remove, and he is very likely—if he is religiously inclined—to go down on his knees and ask for help. That is the attitude in which all preachers, Christian and non-Christians, love to see us. No Church in the world can afford to see people content and happy. As they warn us, it is then that men forget God. "On the knee" is the religious war cry. And a man on his knees loses half his strength—physically and mentally.

## TO CORRESPONDENTS

"The Freethinker,"  
(Temporary Address),  
68 Farringdon Street,  
London. E.C.4.

A. G. Gregory.—As you will have seen your hopes were not realized. We are glad to have your opinion that the "Freethinker" is important at this time, and at any time. We will try and keep it so.

For Circulating and Distributing the "Freethinker."  
—W. W. Pearce, £1.

S. Morton.—We cannot say exactly what we shall do in the immediate future. What is done will be determined by conditions, particularly war-time conditions. We believe we have secured other and better premises, and we are putting some items out for publication. And readers need have no fear as to the continuance of this paper. We had some hopes of taking a holiday this summer, but we shall be too busy for this year, and we were unable to get any last year. So we shall be getting used to doing without.

M. Vanstone.—We have taken your advice concerning a pamphlet on Christianity and Slavery. It will appear soon.

Mr. A. H. Millward writes: "Congratulations on your plucky struggle," and hopes that the paper will keep on, "even if reduced to a single sheet." Our old friend need have no fear as to the paper keeping on. If there will "always be an England," then we may reckon there will also be a "Freethinker." Nor is there fear of a "single sheet" issue. Our reduction in size, although not very much in matter, was due to the paper control.

W. J. Freeman.—We are not inclined to take Mr. Hannen Swaffer seriously. To do so would be to make the same mistake about him that he makes about himself. We do not suppose that very many people bother about what he says or how he says it.

Mrs. G. J. S. Wyon.—Thanks. Copies are being sent.

The offices of the National Secular Society and the Secular Society, Limited, are now at 68 Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Telephone: Central 1367. The "Freethinker" will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad):—One year, 15s.; half year 7s. 6d.; three months, 3s. 9d.

When the services of the National Secular Society in connexion with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, R. H. Rosetti, giving as long notice as possible.

Lecture notices must reach 68 Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4, by the first post on Tuesday, or they will not be inserted.

## SUGAR PLUMS

To-day (June 1) the Annual Conference of the National Secular Society meets at the Waldorf Hotel, Aldwych, London. The morning session opens at 10.30 and sits until 12.30. During the adjournment a lunch will be provided in the hotel at a charge of 5s 6d. per head. The Conference is confined to members, who will be admitted on production of their card of membership for the current year. Those who for any reason have not their card of membership should send in their name to the General Secretary. The Conference will resume at 2.30.

In existing circumstances the business will be confined to necessary matters, but there will be time and room for a general discussion on the work of the Society, which should be profitable. The number of representatives from the provinces is uncertain, but we hope to be able to report the presence of a reason-

able muster. The Annual Conference has never been held in such circumstances as now exist, but in spite of the state of affairs we hope to be able to report a good attendance.

We have little to say that is new concerning the "Freethinker," although we hope to have something to say of importance very soon. All that need be said for the moment is that new arrangements have been made for the issue of the "Freethinker," and we do not see that anything, short of a successful German invasion, will prevent its regular appearance. For ourselves, we need hardly say that it has been a very hard and a very trying time, but we do not feel any the worse for it. After all most need a tonic now and again.

Will all those people who have written us concerning what has been done be content, for the present at least, with this acknowledgment. These letters have been warm, congratulatory, and encouraging in every way, and we are exhorted not to refrain from calling upon friends of the paper for whatever support we need. If we had felt inclined to be downhearted at these successive blows of ill-fortune, it would have been cured by the letters received. But difficulties are situations that challenge conflict, and truth to tell they serve as a spur to renewed effort. Next week we hope to be able to say something definite and cheering. For the moment, in answer to many enquiries, we need only say that we are well, and that the numerous difficulties with which we are surrounded are interesting and not insuperable.

We do note one letter from an old friend for a special reason. Mr. W. Collins writes a lengthy and cheery letter, from which we take the following. "Things must be damnable for you I can dimly appreciate the mess, and the loss. . . . My sympathy, my help, when you are ready for it. . . . My greetings and good wishes for all concerned. If your files of the paper have been lost and you wish to collect a fresh lot, I have practically twenty years copies, 1920-40 I can send you."

We have had similar offers, and we certainly shall want all the help we can get in many directions. But we hope no one will send any volumes of the "Freethinker" until we ask for them. We hope to have news of new and better premises very soon.

We have received a curious story from Christchurch, New Zealand, which, if the facts are as presented to us, marks a curious state of affairs. One of our readers, apparently a shopkeeper (we do not know his line of business) was raided by the police. Among other things seized was a copy of "The Bible Handbook." When he protested against this being taken the police retorted that this was the "worst of the lot," and informed him that he would not get it back. We are awaiting further information on this matter, but in seizing the "Handbook," which we have sold for many years, and which has gone to all parts of the world, the action of the police marks a very serious act of intolerance. We hope readers of this paragraph will not write us for copies. We have none. The stock was destroyed in the raid of May 10-11. But we shall reprint it as soon as possible.

We have, by the way, a limited supply of some books and pamphlets, which were fortunately, stored in another place. Some of these items are advertised on the back page of this issue.

There seems to have been misunderstanding of a paragraph in last week's issue. Some readers have read that we should be issuing one copy of the paper per month, and of eight pages. Perhaps we did not make ourselves clear. But what we intended to convey was that owing to pressure from the paper control, we shall be obliged to issue once each month a copy of eight pages only. But the "Freethinker" will continue weekly. And we hope to make good some part of the missing four pages. There will in that issue be no advertisements.

We have a host of difficulties to face, but we hope soon to report some good news concerning the "Freethinker's" offices. We have also to acknowledge a number of donations that have been sent unasked. We appreciate very much the readiness of our friends to help in every possible way. Without the feeling that we have this supporting army behind us our task would be immeasurably hard, perhaps impossible.

From the "Two Worlds," an editorial note:—

I have often tumbled up against Chapman Cohen, editor of the "Freethinker," when he has criticized Spiritualism, but I recognize that honest criticism is essential to freedom, both religious and secular, and I extend my sympathy to him and his staff on the misfortune which has befallen them on the complete destruction of their premises in the recent blitz. Owing to careful foresight and duplication, however, they had the paper out as usual.

We need only say now that we have again taken precaution to secure the continuity of this journal.

### IF I WERE GOD ALMIGHTY

We recently had some appreciative notes concerning Wallace Nelson, a very popular Freethought lecturer in this country over fifty years ago, who we were pleased to hear is still living in Australia. Most of our readers, particularly the older ones, will be glad to have the following from his pen. We have to thank an Australian correspondent for them.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd never let a cyclone  
Destroy a ship at sea;  
I'd put an end to earthquakes  
As downright treachery—  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd snatch unbaptized babes  
From hell and set them free;  
Oh, how the little darlings  
Would dance in frantic glee!—  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd make good health infectious,  
As good health ought to be—  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd never dream that bugs and lice  
Proved my Divinity;  
As for skunks and rattlesnakes,  
They'd straightway cease to be—  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd fill all minds with wisdom,  
And flood all hearts with glee;  
And earth would change to Heaven,  
And Hell would cease to be—  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me.

If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me,  
I'd crush all ruthless tyrants,  
And set the peoples free;  
Now tell me, priest and parsons,  
Would you not merry be,  
If I were God Almighty,  
And God Almighty me?

WALLACE NELSON

### LA METTRIE (1709—1751)

(Continued from page 241)

IT is not surprising that this diatribe caused the ruin of La Mettrie as a public practitioner. The hostile hosts of priests and medical men combined to attack him with vehement rancour and scurrilous ferocity.

La Mettrie married late—in 1746—five years only before his death, Louise Charlotte Dréaune—the sole offspring being a daughter, although he addresses and advises a supposititious son in his "Politique du Médecin de Machiavel," and causes one of the characters in "La Faculté Vengée" to speak to him of his wife and children.

As these assumptions are purely fictitious, so also may be his emphatic expression of relief and thankfulness in the latter play, at the decree that his wife should be forbidden to accompany him in his exile. The comedy was probably written before—at the latest, very soon after—his marriage, and he had been married less than a year when it was published.

While yet at Leyden, pursuing the ideas which were so dear to him, having done so much destructive work, he set out to erect an enduring edifice on a firm foundation of scientific facts—hence he wrote his best known work "L'Homme machine"—a bold and original challengingly defiant treatise. Although it first appeared without the name of the author, it was generally known to be by La Mettrie—it was issued by the publishing house of Elie Luzac, at Leyden, towards the end of the year 1747. This audacious production with its innovating views and opinions provoked a tempestuous uproar of hatred and malignity against the author throughout ecclesiastical circles at Leyden and everywhere else. The work was translated and was read all over Europe; the English translation, as verified by our own copy, reached a second edition in 1750.

In his famous Eulogy of La Mettrie, already referred to, Frederick the Great summarizes the situation: "This work which gave offence to the persons who by profession are the declared enemies of the progress of human reason, stirred up all the priests of Leyden against the author. Calvinists, Catholics and Lutherans forgot in this moment that consubstantiation, free-will, the mass for the dead and the infallibility of the pope divided them; they all joined together to persecute a philosopher who had the misfortune to be French in a time when that monarchy made such warfare favourable to their great power."

La Mettrie, either in order to best preserve his anonymity, or to play a mischievous trick on, and to compromise an adversary of great learning, but with no sense of humour, decided in a satirical vein to precede this work with a Dedication to Haller, Professor of Natural Science at Göttingen: "a savant whom I have never seen, and whom fifty years have not delivered from all the prejudices of childhood."

This celebrated surgeon, anatomist and botanist, whose spiritualistic conceptions and profound piety were everywhere known, instead of being amused by this impudent joke, took the thing in tragic style—he was alarmed and horrified to think he might be ever so slightly suspected of any sympathy with the profane author—"the Aristippus of modern Materialism," as La Mettrie has been so aptly styled. The austere Haller was filled with wrathful indignation: he broke out into protests and lamentations, addressed a resentful letter to the Editors of "Le Journal des Savants," which was published therein, and even wrote to



Maupertuis, President of the Berlin Academy, a protest, declaring that he had nothing in common with the author of "L'Homme machine," and demanding reparation.

The influential Maupertuis, to whom Haller appealed for protection was born at St. Malo, in 1698. He was a man of great learning and won wide renown through his authoritative mathematical and astronomical works—he was elected Fellow of the English Royal Society at the age of 30. He was a born diplomatist and prominent among the brilliant band of Freethinkers attached to Frederick the Great's court. He enjoyed the friendly confidence of that monarch, who showered favours on him, and warmly defended him when attacked by Voltaire.

Maupertuis was naturally interested in the career of his 'concitoyen,' La Mettrie—especially as he was more or less a Materialist himself, as evidenced by a philosophic work he published anonymously in 1751. It is obvious which side shared his sympathies, and he must have been immensely entertained by the controversy. However, he did his best to tranquillize Haller, and to make him understand that La Mettrie (whom both knew to be the author of "l'Homme machine"), was not so wicked and vicious an individual as he imagined him to be. "He has written," replied Maupertuis, "against everybody and has been of service to his most cruel enemies. He has excused the most licentious morals, having almost all the social virtues. In short, he has deluded the public in a manner altogether opposed to that which usually deludes it. I know how much all this that I am saying to you is hardly credible, but it is none the less true: and one begins to be so convinced of it here that he is loved by all who knew him." This answer was, of course, written after La Mettrie's arrival at Frederick's court, which was brought about through "L'Homme machine" causing him to be hounded out of Holland. Those who shared the ideas of La Mettrie not having had the courage to declare publicly that of which they approved privately, his enemies had the field entirely free to themselves, and the violence of their vituperation, calumnies and imprecations knew no bounds. And yet, for all that, those who read "l'Homme machine" attentively, without prejudice or partiality cannot fail to admire La Mettrie for the acuteness of his intellect, the vigour and vivacity of his style, the consistent and rigorously rational method which he applies to very intricate problems, and the constant care he takes to authorize and enforce each and every one of his affirmations by facts derived from experience.

We have mentioned the gay voluptuous forerunner of the simple-living Epicurus, the Cyrenaic philosopher, Aristippus, and are glad to add fresh laurels to the garland on his illustrious brow by acclaiming him the intellectual ancestor of La Mettrie.

As regards Atheism, for instance, the teaching of both is indefinite, but their attitude is original, uniquely so; they are both absolutely indifferent.

In "l'Homme machine," La Mettrie writes:—  
I do not intend here to call in question the ex-

istence of a supreme being; on the contrary, I am of opinion that the greatest degree we can have of probability makes for this truth: but as this existence does not prove the necessity of one sort of worship more than another, we must therefore look upon it as a theoretical truth, which is but of little use in practice. As we may, therefore, say, after a deal of experience, that religion does not suppose strict probity, so the same reasons give us foundation to think Atheism does not exclude it.

Besides, who knows but the cause of the existence of man, may be in the very existence itself? Perhaps he has been thrown by chance upon some spot of the surface of the earth without a possibility of discovering why or whence he came; and with this knowledge only that he must live and die: like to those mushrooms which appear to-day and are gone to-morrow, or to those flowers which sprout up in ditches, or cover walls.

Let us not therefore lose ourselves in infinity, since we are incapable of having the least idea of it: it is absolutely impossible for us to trace the origin of things; it is a matter really indifferent as to our happiness, whether matter has been from all eternity or has been created; whether there is a supreme being or whether there is not. What folly then is it to torment ourselves so much in searching after what it is impossible to know, and which could not add anything to our present felicity even if it were able to gain our point.

In "l'Histoire naturelle de l'Ame," he writes:—

In vain you torment yourselves in order to know the nature of the soul: it is displeasing to your vanity, to your intractableness that it is necessary that you submit to ignorance of its law. The essence of the soul of man and animals is and always will be as unknown as the essence of matter and of the body; I say more, the soul released from the body by abstraction resembles matter considered without any form; it is impossible to conceive of it.

Rarely has any author presented so many problems in so short a space as that taken up by "l'Homme machine," or treated them in so frank and incisive a manner.

Instead of being studied and impartially examined as it merited, this book excited against the author a multitude of enemies who persecuted him with such frenzied malignity that even his very life was endangered. The work was publicly burned at Leyden, and orders were issued for his arrest.

La Mettrie was too vigilant to risk tamely surrendering his life or liberty to his ferocious enemies. Moreover, he ardently yearned to continue his work for Humanity. With great difficulty he managed to escape during the darkness of night, alone and deprived of all means of existence. Through the kindness of a Librarian at Leyden, who was his friend, he was enabled to cross the Dutch frontier and thus secured his personal safety.

The Emperor Frederick the Great, who heartily detested the theologians and honoured himself by offering his protection to the victims of their hounding fate, followed 'l'affaire La Mettrie' with great interest, and decided to summon him to his court. "A king," wrote Maupertuis—in concluding his letter to Haller—"who pardons faults and lays value on genius, wished to know him, and directed me to write him to come. I received the command without anticipating it; I executed it, and La Mettrie was very soon here." The actual date of his arrival was February 7, 1748.

ELLA TWYNAM

(To be continued)

## FREEDOM AND POWER

(Continued from page 213)

THE idea of Liberty as a working factor in living is largely of Anglo-Saxon genesis. There is hardly a parallel in national literature or expression elsewhere to the feeling thus set forth in a Scots poet of the fourteenth century:—

Ah! freedom is a noble thing!  
Freedom makes man to have liking.  
Freedom all solace to man gives.  
He live at ease, that freely lives.  
A noble heart may have none ease,  
Na ellys nought that may him please  
If freedom fail: for free liking  
Is yearned o'er all other thing.  
Na he that aye has lived free  
May not know well the property,  
The anger, na the wretched doom  
That is coupled to foul thralldom.  
But if he had essayed it  
Then all perquer he should it wit  
And should think freedom more to prize  
Than all the gold in world that is.<sup>3</sup>

The norm comes by way of the "free men" of the tribes and their elected chief or King and moots for the settlement of their affairs. Something similar existed in the Greek City States, their public assembly of citizens for the conduct of its business. And the Roman Republic developed institutions of a civic and responsible cast for the direction of policy. But these things did not persist in the "classic" world, and gave way to more autocratic systems. Yet the Republican tradition lingered in men's minds to reappear and influence thought in a later time. The Anglo-Saxon spirit through diverse vicissitudes survived the "Conquest" to emerge in the Parliament of the Plantagenets.

It had always been regarded in England as a principle that in grave and important matters, such as the making of laws, the King ought not to act without counsel and consent. The counsel and consent which the Saxon Kings sought was that of their wise men, and the Witenagemot of English constitutional history was a meeting of these wise men. It seems, says Maitland, to have been a very unstable and indefinite body. It was an assembly of the great folk. . . . The institution was not much of a safeguard against oppression. Still it was an important fact that, on the eve of the Norman conquest, no English King had taken on himself to legislate or tax without the counsel and consent of a national assembly, an assembly of the wise, that is of the great.

The Norman conquest made a great break in English Institutions, but not so great as was at one time supposed. In the first place William had to build with English materials and on English foundations. In the next place English institutions had, during the reign of Edward the Confessor, been rapidly approximating to the Continental type.

What William did was to emphasize, rather than to introduce, certain principles of what was afterwards vaguely described as the "feudal system," and to adapt them to his own purposes. He insisted on the principle that all land in the country was ultimately held by the King.<sup>4</sup>

It was the custom of the Norman Kings to hold, at intervals, Courts of their greater vassals to confer with the chief officers of State on public business. As this was mainly to do with money

<sup>3</sup> "The Bruce," Book I., John Barbour (1316-95), contemporary of Chaucer, "the father of vernacular Scottish poetry and Scottish history."

<sup>4</sup> "Parliament": Sir Courtenay Ilbert, Clerk of the House of Commons.

matters, the next step was to invite representatives of the generalty to take part therein through a conference which became known as Parliaments; so passing from a feudal to a national assembly. Such conferences were made a means for the redress of grievances or petitions for things wanted in return for "aids" advanced. To the "model Parliament" of Edward I were summoned representatives of the Knights of the Shire and burgesses of the towns and the greater prelates and barons; so dividing the assembly into two sections—the Lords spiritual and temporal and the Commons. These terms have a relative significance. Through varying fortunes it continued as a permanent feature of the Constitution. By stages the Commons advance to a dominating position, until in the eighteenth century they claim exclusive control over State finance. So Parliament as a whole passes from a critical function of Government to a Government-making organ and instrument, to which the Administration of the day is completely responsible, resting at length on full adult citizenship. Working more by tradition and precedent than a written code as the Supreme Law source, and by a singular relation of the Cabinet and the House, it remains now the most powerful and direct popular ruling force in the world; as aided by an efficient Civil Service, and supported through an informed potent Public Will.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For our present purpose we simply select certain features from the complex growth of the English Constitution.

Of such is the rationale of freedom in its political aspect; but the last point touches the essence of a Libertarian polity.

Parliament carries on through debate and dialectic; and once discussion is set going as a factor in public business it extends beyond the purview of a single institution. By the seventeenth century the printing press had become an important medium for circulation of ideas and books of all orders; and it was jealously watched and controlled by the obscurantists. The controversies which led to Civil War in England covered not alone material things, taxation, rights of the Commons, etc., but brought in bitter disputations between Anglicans and the rival sects arising outside the Establishment, if less ferocious than those of the previous Reformation. Confined at first to doctrinal differences and theories of Church government they allowed for a wider scepticism to enter the arena and demand for the abolition of press censorship. Thus we get Milton's trumpet call in "Ariopagitica":—

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: methinks I see her as an eagle nursing her mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance. . . . Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience above all liberties.<sup>6</sup>

After the "Glorious Revolution of 1688," the censorship was abolished. Before then, alarmed at the spread of free thinking, the Lawnsleaves inspired a fresh Blasphemy Law to buttress Revelation. Despite its menace the new spirit continued to work and its soul went marching on. A witness to its influence comes from the observations of an ingenuous Swiss visitor in the early reign of Geo. II. He notes the turbulent independent bearing of the London populace and their

<sup>6</sup> Thinkers like Milton and Algernon Sidney were deeply influenced by the classic tradition noted above.

pride in belonging to a free country—this, prior to "democracy." He remarks:—

In London there are a great number of coffee-houses. What attracts enormously in these coffee-houses are the gazettes and other public papers. All Englishmen are great news-mongers. Workmen habitually begin the day by going to coffee-rooms in order to read [or hear] the latest news. I have often seen shoe blacks and other persons of that class club together to purchase a paper. Nothing is more entertaining than hearing men of this class discuss politics and topics of interest. . . . I suppose this taste is cultivated by the liberty which the Government affords, and in which Englishmen take great pride for they value this gift more than all the joys of life, and would sacrifice everything to retain it. . . . This is the reason why so many sects are to be found in England, and also so great a number of persons with deistical opinions; who occasionally publish pamphlets against the established religion that in any other country would, together with their authors, pass through the hands of the executioner.

Yet this measure of emancipation was far from complete, and the last sentence has wide contemporary implications.

AUSTEN VERNEY

(To be continued)

## PROPHECY: ANCIENT AND MODERN

### ANCIENT

"IS Saul also among the prophets?" This question was asked because Saul was behaving like a prophet—"he prophesied before Samuel, in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night: wherefore they say, Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam. xix. 24.)

Saul was a king. And though he was daft enough to have filled the office of a full-time prophet, he could not do it and retain the dignity of a king.

The prophet, at best, was such a disreputable creature!

In the days of Isaiah, over-indulgence in wine and strong drink was common. . . . "the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment." (Isaiah xxviii. 7.)

And the book of Jeremiah, throughout, gives a sustained account of prophecy-mongering, lying, deceit, drunkenness, etc., etc., until one welcomes the summing up of Hosea—"The prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad." (Hosea ix. 7.)

Every prophet, whether king or priest, had to prophesy "in like manner" (keep up the traditions of the prophets)—get drunk; have a fit;

"Letters from England": M. C. de Saussure. After the strife of its predecessor, which at least bequeathed something of internal peace and toleration, the century is marked by progressive activity in numerous directions. Advances were made in Agriculture, Domestic Amenities and Architecture, in Craftsmanship and Art. Mercantile enterprise and colonization abroad extended British trade and led the way to sea power. A spirit of philanthropy tempered surviving brutality in Law and usage. The lighter forms of literature, touching every day concerns, strike a humanist note in prose and verse. A famous debating society, known to Fleet Street as 'The Cogers,' has continued from the mid-century on. In the greater fields of thought and inquiry men like Newton, Hume, Smith, Gibbon open the way to the expansion of knowledge and illumination in the next century. "J.M.R." gives us an admirable survey of its controversies in "The History of Freethought."

foam at the mouth and gnash the teeth; make weird noises; howl like a dog baying the moon; and strip off all clothing, while the prophetic inspiration lasted, be it for an hour, for a day, or for years, e.g., "Isaiah walked barefoot, and naked, for three years." (Isaiah xx., 3.)

Finally, ancient prophecy seems to have received its deathblow from Queen Elizabeth.

The English Presbyterians held meetings for prophesying (prayer and the exposition of scripture) at Northampton in 1570. But these meetings were forbidden in 1577.

In his essay "Of Prophecies," Bacon (1561-1626) tells us that almost all prophecies "have been impostures, and by idle and crafty brains, merely contrived and feigned, after the event past."

This opinion of Bacon's was reflected everywhere. And racial experience of prophetic values soon found crystallization in the old familiar adage—"Never prophesy until you know!"

### MODERN

O Tempora! O Mores! This Latin phrase lost much of its significance when man entered upon the modern stage.

Times and manners had changed remarkably. Man was at last learning to behave himself decently, and was unlearning all that became a prophet.

What's in a name? Words acquire historic meanings. Though many modern men have been real prophets, the word prophet—"a thought-reader, a reader of God's Mind"—as the old Highland Minister phrased it, seems to have died.

The modern prophet—a humble, cultured, silent man, seldom seen, and rarely heard, maybe the glass of fashion and the mould of form—in short, the very antithesis of the ancient prophet, seems worthy of some fitting, modern name.

Of those modern prophets we have had great store. To mention but a few—Byron, Carlyle, Scott, Ruskin, Tennyson. And one should surely be mentioned—Edward Bellamy—whose "Looking Backward" was full of prophecies, which, unlike most prophecies, have been fulfilled.

Space does not admit of a wide display of the prophetic gifts of the above-mentioned. An instance of the poet Tennyson's gift must therefore suffice.

Tennyson (1809-1892), in his poem "Locksley Hall," tells us:—

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,  
Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that  
would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of  
magic sails,

Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with  
costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there  
rained a ghastly dew

From the nations airy navies grappling in the central  
blue;

Then in MAUD: A MONODRAMA; after denouncing the mammonistic war which characterized the Victorian Period:—

Civil war, as I think, and that of a kind  
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the  
sword.

He urges us to:—

Put down the passions that make earth Hell!

Down with ambition, avarice, pride,

Jealousy, down! Cut off from the mind

The bitter springs of anger and fear;

Down too, down at your own fireside,

With the evil tongue and the evil ear,

For each is at war with mankind.

And he longs for some simple, great one, with heart, head, hand; one still strong man:—

Whatever they call him, what care I,  
Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat—one  
Who can rule and dare not lie.

And just as he had truthfully prefigured our material development, he finally shadows forth our mental state in language which might have been written yesterday. Of the defeat of our own evil past and the overthrow of our yet more evil enemies he thus concludes:—

Let it go or stay, so I wake to the higher aims  
Of a land that has lost for a little her lust of gold,  
And love of a peace that was full of wrongs and shames,

Horrible, hateful, monstrous, not to be told;  
And hail once more to the banner of battle unroll'd!  
Tho' many a light shall darken, and many shall weep  
For those that are crush'd in the clash of jarring claims,

Yet God's just wrath shall be wreak'd on a giant liar;  
And many a darkness into the light shall leap,  
And shine in the sudden making of splendid names,  
And noble thought be freer under the sun,  
And the heart of a people beat with one desire;  
For the peace, that I deem'd no peace, is over and done,

And now by the side of the Black and the Baltic deep,  
And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames  
The blood red blossom of war with a heart of fire.  
Let it flame or fade, and the war roll down like a wind,

We have proved we have hearts in a cause, we are noble still,

And myself have awaked, as it seems, to the better mind;

It is better to fight for the good than to rail at the ill;  
I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,

I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assign'd.

GEORGE WALLACE

#### THE UNPARDONABLE OFFENCE

There is nothing that revolts our moral sense so much as cruelty.

Every other offence we can pardon, but not cruelty. The reason is found in the fact that cruelty is the exact opposite of compassion—the direct participation in the sufferings of another, leading to sympathetic assistance to the effort to prevent or remove them. It is this compassion alone which is the real basis of all voluntary justice and all genuine loving-kindness.

Compassion for animals is intimately connected with goodness of character, and it may be confidently asserted that he who is cruel to living creatures cannot be a good man.—Schopenhauer.

#### TRUTH IS DIFFICULT

I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they are; dreading nothing but falsehood, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. . . . Examine your words well, and you will find that, even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings . . . much harder than to say something fine about them which is not the exact truth.—George Eliot.

#### NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Report of Executive Meeting held May 25, 1941

The President, Mr. Chapman Cohen, in the chair.

Also present: Messrs. Hornibrook, Rosetti (A.C.), Bryant, Preece, Seibert, Ebury, Griffiths, Mrs Grant, and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. Monthly Financial Statement presented.

The Executive's Annual Report was read by the Chairman and adopted. Details in connexion with the Annual Conference were discussed and instructions given.

The President reviewed the position regarding present office and other accommodation for the two societies and the Pioneer Press, and it was agreed to proceed with the acquisition of new premises.

Items of correspondence and of general routine were dealt with and the proceedings closed.

R. H. ROSETTI,  
General Secretary

#### PUBLICATIONS

**ALMOST AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY**, by Chapman Cohen. Fifty years of Freethought, with reflections on man and things. With 5 plates. Cloth gilt. Price 6s. Postage 5d. extra.

**BRADLAUGH AND INGERSOLL**. A Critical study of two great men. Portraits, etc. Price 2s. 6d., postage 3d.

**THE AGE OF REASON**, by Thomas Paine. Complete edition, with forty pages biographical study of Paine, by Chapman Cohen. Over 200 pages, paper 6d. Postage 2½d.

**PAMPHLETS FOR THE PEOPLE** (Two. All that is left from the raid.) By Chapman Cohen.

**Thou Shalt not Suffer a Witch to Live.**  
**Freethought and the Child.**  
One Penny each, postage 1d.

#### SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, Etc.

##### LONDON

##### Outdoor

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pondstead): 11.0, A Lecture. Parliament Hill Fields, 3.0, A Lecture.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park): 7.30, Thursday, Mr. E. C. Saphin. 3.0, Sunday, Miss E. Millard.

##### Indoor

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1): A Lecture

##### COUNTRY

##### Outdoor

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (Mound): 7.30, A Lecture.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Market Place): 7.30, A Lecture.