

THE FREETHINKER

▪ EDITED BY CHAPMAN COHEN ▪

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IEWS AND OPINIONS

Talking to God

WE confess that we approach September 7 with misgivings. That day was ear-marked for a day of prayer, and previous experiences of such days had not been encouraging. But this last day of prayer was said to have been at the desire of the King. This may be true, for the King is the head of the Church, and probably it was hoped that this might create in the minds of pious Britishers a "From-one-King-to-another" kind of feeling. But one can always safely ignore fifty per cent. of official jargon, and when religious cant is in question, very much more. We feel that the real figure behind this move was the Archbishop of Canterbury. The King merely serves as an advertisement. It may also be assumed that thousands of people praying together is more impressive to the heavenly listeners than an equal number praying separately. The wisdom of the crowd is so often the precipitate of the follies of the fool. Besides, the popularity of mass movements has been growing in all directions. We have even had what is called "mass-thinking" which so far as we can see, is only mass howling from behind.

God and Us

We recall the fact that some years ago a well-known Nonconformist preacher, Dr. Horton, advised his congregation that when a man wished God to do anything for him he must pray incessantly. Keep at it, he said, and God will respond. We think there may be something in that. God is our father, and it is the way in which children usually get what they want from their earthly parents. When an infant, the child just howls, and for the sake of quietude the parent surrenders. As it grows older it acts with greater circumspection, but the principle involved is the same. The child who knows what it wants and is persistent in asking for it generally gets its own way. Usually the father or mother—or both—is looking round for some form of honourable surrender.

So as God is our father and we are his children he may be more impressed by mass prayers than by single petitions. A massed prayer may have all the advantages over individual prayers that a resolution from a mass meeting of voters has with an M.P. over a personal letter from one of them. And if we are in the image of God, which means that God is in the image of man—for A cannot be like B unless B is like A—God may feel more impressed if a blast of prayer—not a blasted prayer—reaches the heavenly recording

apparatus from the "King and his people." It may show heaven that we mean business, and that we approach the throne with good recommendations.

But there is one other thing that needs saying. In issuing a public notice of the Day of Prayer, the Archbishop ordered that the printed prayer that was used on the last occasion should serve again on this one. We do not know the reason for this economy. It may be that as that National Prayer produced nothing in particular, its "Manna" is not exhausted. It may still retain its spiritual strength just as in the Roman Church (we think the rule holds good in the English one), a wafer once made "holy" continues holy until someone swallows it. In that case there seems no reason for throwing a perfectly approved prayer on the scrap heap. It may still be as powerful as it has ever been.

Still it may give offence. God may not be pleased with a second-hand national prayer when a brand new one ought to be used. It carries with it too much of the atmosphere of a tradesman's note to a customer who is late in cancelling his debt: "Dear God, we beg to call your attention to our national prayer of the seventh inst. and which has now been repeated, at the King's request, and is endorsed by the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other distinguished persons. We fear that our previous communication must have escaped your notice. We shall be obliged if the matter will receive your early attention, and so perpetuate the good relations that have hitherto obtained between us." I doubt whether a self-respecting God will be pleased with a method of approach which does not consider him worthy of a new address on each occasion. After all, gods have their feelings.

Besides, a new prayer might have pointed out that since the last national prayer orgy, Russia—Atheistic Russia—has appeared on the side of the Allies. It should be stressed that the Russians, without any national appeal to God have done magnificently, and have certainly eased the attack on the British people. There is the possibility of non-belief in God growing stronger as a consequence of the knowledge of the tremendous advances made in Atheistic Russia, social and otherwise. A new Russia has appeared before the eyes of the British people, and this makes more necessary some signal action on God's part. It might also be pointed out that there are some unpleasant developments in other directions. When Churchill said to America, "Give us the tools and we will finish the job," he did not even add "with the help of God." A gentle hint in a new prayer that God must look to his laurels might not have been without effect in securing an answer to the prayers of September 7.

A friend has suggested that perhaps the non-issue of a new prayer was due to the paper shortage. There may be something in this. One must remember that neither the Archbishop, nor even Cardinal Hinsley, can increase the quantity of paper by magical means as Jesus Christ increased the length of pieces of wood to oblige his mother's husband. Here is the account taken from the Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ, written in the second century of this era. Joseph had been ordered to make a new throne for the King.

And when the time came to fix it in its place he found it wanted two spans on each side of the appointed measure. And Joseph, afraid of the king's anger, went to bed without his supper, taking not anything to eat.

Then the Lord Jesus asked him what he was afraid of? Joseph replied, Because I have lost my labour in the work which I have been about these two years.

Jesus said to him, Fear not, neither be cast down. Do thou lay hold of one side of the throne and I the other and we will bring it to its just dimensions. And when Joseph had done as the Lord Jesus said, and each of them with strength drawn his side, the throne obeyed, and was brought to the proper dimensions of the place.

We are, however, afraid that if the Archbishop had pleaded a duty to economise paper as the reason for using an old prayer instead of a new one, and that he could not count on having the sheets of paper extended as Jesus and Joseph extended the throne, the reply might have been:—

Oh ye of little faith, who expecteth me to render harmless the huge armies of Germany, its immense air force and its incalculably powerful resources, before the Allies are able to do it without my help, and yet cannot trust me to perform the miracle of lengthening a mere ream of printing paper. So to what end have I called you to the place where you stand as my representative, and through whom I may make my will known, to what end have I called you? How can they have faith in me if those who speak in my name are without faith?

From all points of view it looks as though fresh prayers should have been devised, and God's attention to the new threat to status caused by the Russians joining the Allies. For even the dullest of believers, unless God intervenes, may find themselves asking why if Russia can do so much without God can we not also act independently? Are we in this country so much weaker in spirit that we cannot win the war without the help of God?

Rebuking God

From the religious point of view there is yet another consideration to be borne in mind. Days of National Prayer seldom occur unless we find ourselves in a corner. With great, or assumed, sorrow the *Church Times* remarks that "a day of thanksgiving is not so common in our national observance as a day of prayer." That seems to us to be an important observation. Perhaps it is a sarcastic reminder to God that we can see his hand more plainly in our mishaps than in our streaks of good fortune. In that case it is rather risky; for even gods may dislike being reminded of their shortcomings. We have already said that a God may be sensitive in certain matters, and no one likes an acquaintance who approaches us only when he wishes to "touch" us for something. We meet such with a "now-what-is-it-you-want" kind of look, and get rid of him as quickly and as cheaply as we can. And whether God is made in the likeness of man, or man is made in the likeness of God, they probably resemble each other in this particular. God—and man—may love a cheerful giver, but neither is likely to have a violent affection for a perpetual taker. We think that people do not make enough allowance for the susceptibilities of gods. Yet one need only reflect on the particularities of gods to realise how careful one ought to be in such matters.

What would, for instance, happen if instead of thee-ing and thou-ing, or thy-ing, one were to talk to God

whenever we were about to "touch him" for something we used exactly the language of everyday life? What would happen if a priest approached the altar of God in a red, white and blue costume, or a sports suit, or used wine that had not been sanctified, or turned to the North instead of to the East when saying certain prayers, or ceased to wear a specific uniform when walking abroad, or ventured on openly criticising—adversely—some of God's doings? And if God notes things of this kind, may he not regard critically the inwardness of these days of national prayer? May he not regard these intimations that there is a war on, as a reflection on his knowledge, and the implied suggestions as to what he might do, or what we expect him to do as little short of an insult? May he not on the evening of September 7, after having listened to the thousands of repetitions of an identical prayer that came rolling up to heaven, say to his son, and to Mary, and to Mary's husband, "Here are these humans at it again; telling me by implication that I do not know how to manage the world's affairs, pretending to believe me infallible in my actions and judgments, and slyly suggesting what I ought to do and which side I should help. So far as I can see the only country that does not, by implication, criticise my conduct is Russia. That Government does, at least, relieve me of responsibility. It even denies that I had anything to do with the war. They do not blame me under the thin disguise of a day of national prayer. My avowed followers seem to forget that gods live on praise, not on criticisms."

God is with us in this war, say the clergy. We are fighting for Christianity say the heads of religion in this country. God, they also tell us, must be on our side. But the responsible parties in our war do not overstress the power of God. Among our politicians Lord Halifax—who, judging from his face is not of a very jokeful nature—is the only one who has suggested that praying circles could help to win the war—a very qualified form of trust in God. But even Lord Halifax was packed off to the United States to see if he could speed up the supply of munitions, not prayers. The raucous-voiced Lord Beaverbrook has called for more arms, but not for more prayers. The Prime Minister has been very cautious in announcing any reliance on the power of prayer. And the Russian army, without chaplains or prayers has fought the Germans in a way that has commanded the respect of even its enemies.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

"RIPENESS IS ALL"

"WHAT is the purpose of this world?" asked Candide. "To drive us wild," answered Martin. There is wit and truth in that *mot* of Voltaire's; but it is not the whole truth or anything like it, nor do I suppose that Voltaire intended it to be. Life may be essentially a torture-chamber, as the worm may complain to the bird, the bird to the cat, the cat to the dog, the dog to his master, and the master to his Government—vainly! But "the human heart by which we live" will not rest satisfied with that verity. We crave for something better.

Again, we of our generation see as Voltaire saw: "A million assassins enrolled in regiments marching from one end of Europe to the other, committing, under discipline, licensed murder." Yet surely there is some good in life, murderous abominable life? "It may be so," answered Martin, "but I am not acquainted with any." Voltaire, like our generation, had seen the shedding of innocent blood on the lying plea of "necessity," and watched the acquiescence of thinkers in the crimes of their rulers.

Hear Saint Voltaire again: "Massacres, conflagrations, ruin, and devastation multiply: the whole world suffers and the fury still continues. Our own as well as the (other) Prime Minister often protests that they are acting solely for the happiness of the human race; and at each protestation, some more towns are always destroyed, and some provinces ravaged." He wrote that in *The Way the World Goes*, and you will observe that in the 200 years the world has not changed. Or the more it changes, the more it is the same thing. As cats devour birds, so men devour each other—as they always have done so they always will. Such is this word—a cannibalistic slaughter-house in war as in peace.

So what?—as a modern *cliché* says. Here the religionist is triumphant. "Another and a better world after death," he promises, and in that mirage lies peace of mind now and future safety and tranquillity. Do you wonder that humanity in its wretchedness and perplexity clutches at any figment that promises hope? And "there being another and better world to come," says Religion, "the aim and end of life must be to fit ourselves for that world." And how must we fit ourselves? By the service of God—and the crudest of raw curates or theological fledglings will tell us how to serve God. He knows. This is the strength of the religious appeal, to very many minds: the giving of certainty in the uncertain flux of a man's thoughts and material circumstances. Peace not only "at the last," desirable as that is; but peace here and now. All care, all questioning, finished. Peace that passes, surpasses—and by-passes—all understanding.

Now what has Freethought to put against that? Only the unpleasing stoical truth. That truth has never been better expressed than in Shakespeare's great word:—

... "Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither
Ripeness is all."

No more but that! Alas! no more. There you have one of the greatneses of William Shakespeare: that he would never fob off himself, or fob off his readers or hearers, with a lie on this terrible question of what is behind life. You remember how he ended Hamlet's life with: "The rest is silence." In the face of Death, Shakespeare flung the Christian religion in which he was brought up at Stratford grammar school, and every other religion, upon the rubbish heap. And Christian commentators understandably have noted this with disappointment and astonishment. The fact, indeed, is incontestable.

There is more, however, in Shakespeare's word than meets the careless eye. This ripeness is indeed the master-clue to life. There is a ripeness of infancy, a ripeness of youth, a ripeness of maturity, a ripeness of old age. There is many a mental as well as a physical ripeness. This ripeness is a truth to ourselves in all the changes and chances of this transient and transitory life. It is being oneself; ceasing to cudgel one's brains or one's body; ceasing to be, or striving to be, what others would have you; being one's own world and sufficient to oneself. "Be Thine own Deus." But most people are raw and unripe as much so in old age (when they are withered and well-nigh rotten) as in callowest childhood. Slaves! Slaves to their work, their worries, their wives, their money or lack of money, their friends, their fears, their circumstances, their occupation, their habits, their stomachs, their sloth, their very newspapers and wireless-sets, their Governments—what is there so despicable that a man will not enslave himself to it? Who said slavery is abolished in England?

The art of life—I paraphrase, and, I think, improve, on another writer—consists in knowing how to be, how to do (how to do with), how to do without (how to dream), and how to depart. In departing to the peace and dignity of Death one has come to a quiet place, a fortress raised high above the feverish stir of life. This quiet is better than John Bunyan's "trumpets" which sounded for Christian "on the other side." Would you choose rather than that serene Nothingness of before Birth and after Death, the puerilities of a fancied Christian Heaven of jewellery and music and emotionalism or a Mohammedan Paradise of caressing and jealous houris? For my part, I as a connoisseur, have suffered enough from ugly jewellery, inferior music, shoddy emotions, and variegated feminity, in this present life. I am unwilling to risk any repetition of any one of them in another. "For me—the Night!"—however deep the Night.

Or else you must give me a finer Heaven, a nobler place, and a nobler being, than the crude imaginations of theologians have yet pictured. Call back, with Baudelaire the days desirable. Or call still more hungrily for what is here unknown:—

... mellower fruits and bluer, lovelier bays
And warmer starrier night and idlier days:
No pain, no cruelty and no unkindness,
Peace and content and love that always stays."

Let Lazarus, secure in Abraham's bosom, watch the writhing of Dives in the flame below, but I have no liking for watching the multitudinous damned, even with a Dante for my guide. I have seen enough of the multitudes tortured by their worldly Governments—by the baseness of their sheep-like brains and wolf-like bodies. I will not say with Messer Guido Cavalcanti that here in this world "it is equally cruel and useless to think and to act." Nor will I pronounce whether death be the end of all illusions or the end of all reality. But I will say with Master William Shakespeare: "Ripeness is all."

You may object that "Ripeness is all" does not take you very far. True, not far on the road of "wishful thinking," as the cant phrase is. But it will take you as far as religion, philosophy, or anything else: from here to the grave. From this maxim you may acquire a sagacity which will teach you as much of metaphysics as has been known in any age, in any country, and by the greatest of mankind, even those who have enlightened the world that is to say, next to nothing.

C. G. L. Du CANN.

ACID DROPS

THE Pope asked for special prayers during August, says the "Catholic Herald," for the conversion of Atheists and anti-religious Secularists. Now we come under both heads, so that we have been attacked at the front and in the rear. We managed to get through these dangerous days all right; in fact, beyond our usual work we wrote half of a new book, and which we shall finish one day. And we have not yet heard of any striking answer to the Pope's prayer in any other direction. We did come across a Freethinking friend a few days ago who was looking particularly miserable, but on inquiry it turned out that he was suffering from acute indigestion. We believe there are cases where that has been mistaken for a spiritual awakening.

If we may venture to speculate on these very deep subjects, we would hazard the guess that the Pope was too general in his prayers. What is the good of praying to God to convert *some* Atheists and *some* Secularists. After all, the heavenly staff cannot well spend the time hunting up directories or making local inquiries to discover exactly who is an Atheist or a Secularist. Exact information should

be given—age, private address, appearance, etc. That would be a helpful act, and God could have no excuse for not complying.

Besides, God might well retort that he had placed the Pope where he is to convert people and to see that they remained "put" when they were converted. And when the Pope's prayer mounts to heaven, God might well retort, "What the devil are you for?" One must be reasonable in all things.

Now we offer the Pope a fair challenge. Let the Pope pray for a week for some people who are known to be Atheists or Secularists to be converted to Christianity. During the same week we will pray for the conversion of people who are known to be Christians to be converted to Atheism or Secularism, and then see who ropes in the most. That seems a fair offer. If we fail we will present the Pope with a complete set of our books. If he fails, let him give up his job.

Complaints in some of the religious weeklies are appearing concerning the shortage of Church of England chaplains in the Army. On the other hand, Nonconformist chaplains appear to be plentiful. But we do not observe that the shortage is felt or lamented by the soldiers. It is just a trade complaint. Each is afraid the other will grab more than their share of the trade in "souls."

We have a suggestion to make. Why not ration the chaplains, giving ration cards to the consumers—the soldiers—and let the rationing apply also to the demands for church or chapel services? We cannot imagine lines of waiting soldiers clamouring for their share, or complaining that some men are getting a larger share than others. We ration meat and butter and milk and many other necessities. Why not ration chaplains and make the supply depend upon the demand? The idea is worth considering.

There are a number of books being published concerning the "New Order" that is to follow the war. Many of them have as their motive the strengthening of Christianity. But for this feature many of them would not see the light. Here, for example, is one by Mr. K. Ingram, "The Night is far Spent." The author plumps for Jesus Christ, which is not a very original conclusion. He believes that it does not matter whether Jesus was or was not the son of God—"His teaching about Society is all that matters."

But with the exception of a number of well-known commonplaces Jesus had no teaching about society. We repeat the challenge we have often made, and which no Christian of any ability or standing has ever taken up. Can anyone show that there is in the reported sayings of Jesus Christ enough to build any society on? There is nothing about the family, about education, about science, about anything that is a genuine social reform. There are suggestions about a second coming, examples of curing disease by magic, or in "My name." There is the belief in demonism, but nothing about the real nature of mental diseases, and there is a preference for the celibate life strongly indicated. Perhaps Mr. Ingram would deal with these aspects of Jesus. Our columns are open.

"McAdam," who is one of the regular contributors to the "Church Times," says, "No hymn book that I know of contains a presentable group of hymns for children. Either the verses are priggish and unnatural, or boring and unintelligible." We think we can offer an explanation of this. Three or four generations ago these hymn books were neither unnatural, boring nor unintelligible. They represented Christianity as it was, as adults accepted it and as they wished children to have it. To-day we move in a different intellectual medium, with the result named by "McAdam." We give to children what we are ashamed to take as adults. And it is this that will continue to be given to children if the plot to capture the schools succeeds.

The "Tablet" (August 9) says that earnest recommendations are going to Russia from Washington and London that "a change in the Soviet attitude to the Orthodox Church and religion generally would do much to smooth the path of military co-operation." If that be true, it is a piece of impudence such as Christians only are capable.

Who, we wonder, is responsible for this attempt to break the alliance? And what kind of spirit does that show on which to build up an understanding between nations? What would be said if Russia asked England to repeal its blasphemy laws, its Sunday laws and its financial help to the Churches at the expense of the whole country?

A writer in the "Spectator" volunteers the information that the reason for Jesus Christ feeding 5,000 with a handful of bread and a few fishes was that he wished to show what love was. There is no evidence that we know of that this is so. It was an easy and profitable trick, anyway. And from a material point of view it was profitable, for after performing the miracle he had enough in hand to enable one of the disciples to start a fish and bread restaurant.

The Roman Church appears to have only two reasons for the family. One is furnishing children who will grow up members of the Church, the other is furnishing from these, nuns who will provide material for impressing the people with the good done by nuns among the poor. So we can understand the report in the "Universe" for August 22 that there is a "grave decline" in the number of nuns, resulting in a "serious shortage." It appears that most of the nuns come from large families—the largest number from families with more than seven children. This, says the "Universe," shows that "the marked decline in the size of Catholic families living in cities is having a proportionate effect upon religious vocations." So the Catholic urge is, "go on having larger and larger families." We shall get the poverty and misery among the lower-class Catholics, but there will be work for the nuns who will visit them with a mite of relief and an advertisement of the good we do. It is a nice vicious circle. But the Roman Catholic concern does not lie with that. It will be getting bigger and bigger congregations, even though the nation gets a poorer and poorer population.

Nepal is an independent kingdom—that is, as independent as any Indian State can expect to be. Yet with characteristic Christian impertinence, the Catholic Church has appointed Mgr. Gianora to Nepal and placed the country under his "jurisdiction," although Christian missionaries are not permitted in the country. Merely as a matter of principle we do not agree with this policy of boycotting any form of religion that conforms to ordinary rules of decency. But some of these States have good reason to regret the presence of missionaries, who are apt to become political agents and, when not that, are sources of trouble to the country. China has had much to complain of concerning the conduct of missionaries, as have many other native states.

In this country we have no concentration camps for unbelievers. We have no laws prohibiting heresy, or Atheism, or criticisms of religion. You may with complete impunity "go for" any other god than the Christian in whatever language you please, and you may even criticise the Christian God and his strangely related son, provided you do not "outrage" the feelings of Christians. Freethinkers have the same legal rights as Christians, but fewer privileges. No one is compelled to attend Church or chapel, but doing so helps considerably in business and in politics. The highest offices in the State may be held by non-Christians, but only on the understood, but unnamed, condition that he listens in silence to Christians introducing their religious opinions and beliefs on all kinds of irrelevant occasions and is careful to keep his own opinions to himself. We have no special taxes for the non-religious, neither do we vote sums of money for the support of the religious; but we do release places of religious worship from the payments of rates and taxes which amounts to many millions per year. And a not inconsiderable sum of money is paid priests who figure in the Army, Navy, prisons and other public institutions.

A Canon thinks that the wages of clergymen should be treated on the lines of the petrol allowance—so much as a basic payment and extras when necessary. But the Canon needs reminding that the petrol allowance, above the basic line, is only for cases where public service, or necessary service, justifies the extra allowance. How would the clergy like to be paid in accordance with the necessary work they do?

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

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SUGAR PLUMS

THE Editor wishes to thank all those who have sent him birthday greetings. If what he has done for the Free-thought movement deserves but a tithe of the complimentary things that have been said in these letters, that will be full repayment for his efforts. Doing what one wishes to do is not such a very arduous task after all.

Another paper order will still further reduce the amount of paper that may be used. We are now to be allowed just one-fifth of the amount, in weight, we had in 1939. If this process continues we look like ending up with a title-page. We may, in the near future, be compelled to issue an eight-page number every other week. We shall see.

We have now had a supply of the four volumes of the Editor's "Essays in Freethinking" delivered from the binders. They contain some of the best of Mr. Cohen's articles, and the set will be sent post free for 10s. There is only a very limited number of sets available, and we advise ordering as soon as possible. In existing circumstances they are not likely to be reprinted.

From the time when Nazism first loomed as a threat to freedom and stood as an outrage on decency and good-will we have insisted that it was essentially a religion. Both the Press and the Churches worked hard to convert Nazism into an outbreak of Atheism. Now the fact is rapidly breaking this characteristically Christian misrepresentation, and paper after paper (the "Sketch" is the most recent one to toe the line) proclaims that Nazism is really a religion. Of course it is; nothing but a religion could have brought bestialism and brutality to its highest degree and have given in the cloak of a national duty. The parallel between historic Christian teaching and practice with Nazism is very close indeed.

We should like to draw the special attention of our readers to Mr. Du Cann's new pamphlet, "The Faults and Failings of Jesus Christ" (Pioneer Press. 4d.). It is one that can usefully be placed in the hands of those who are on the border line, and by whom a plain and legally argued case would be appreciated. Mr. Du Cann writes well, with a simple clarity and a close and logical attention to the argument in hand. The whole gives an analysis of the teachings of the New Testament Jesus that is greatly needed at the present time. The good and gentle and wise Jesus theory is now being worked very hard. We commend it to our readers as a serviceable present to be made to a suitable Christian friend. There are a great many just on the border line, and this may help in the crossing.

It is not very much, but not being customary, notice is deserved. Most English papers when noting what America owes to Englishmen, after mentioning Fox, Burke and Chatham, would have stopped there, or would have filed certain safe names. The "Standard" has had the courage to mention "Tom Paine." But one may safely say that

independent America owes more to Paine for saving the revolution than it does to any other single person. His "Crisis" papers saved the army at a critical moment. Many Americans have recognised this, but few British historians. And no publisher of a cheap series of books has yet printed the "Age of Reason." They have printed the "Rights of Man," but that is quite safe. But the "Age of Reason"! That is too much.

We have printed a cheap edition of the "Age of Reason," and we think it is the cheapest edition ever issued. It is a complete reprint and with a 44-page Introduction. We sold out a very large edition before the war at 4d. We reprinted another large edition at 6d. And now that looks like soon being exhausted. When that is sold out it is doubtful if we can repeat the venture at the same price. But it is a book that is always in demand, and is always doing its work.

It seems difficult to get things quite right. Mr. W. Hickey, of the "Daily Express," apropos of Captain Ramsay still remaining a member of the House of Commons, says that the House of Commons has the power to expel an "unworthy member." He cites Bradlaugh as an instance, also Bottomley. Bottomley was convicted of an offence. And Bradlaugh was not ejected from the House because he refused, as an Atheist, to take the oath. He wished to affirm, believing that the law as it then stood enabled him to do so. When he was not permitted to affirm, he stated his willingness to take the oath, saying he would regard it as binding and, in substance, an affirmation. This was denied him, and that led to a struggle which Gladstone said rightly cast discredit on the House—not on Bradlaugh. Afterwards he succeeded in getting an "Oath's Amendment Act" passed which made the affirmation legal. It was not Bradlaugh who was an unworthy member of the House, but those who opposed him, among the leaders being Randolph Churchill. Bradlaugh had written a "History of the House of Brunswick" and had attacked the privileges of the British aristocracy. And in the seventies and eighties of the last century that was a very serious offence.

In the "Daily Herald" Hannen Swaffer warns Labour to take no part in assenting to the return of religious teaching in the schools. "The Churches ask," he writes, "for 'definite Christian teaching in all provided schools.' But surely parsons should agree among themselves as to what is 'definite Christian teaching' before they insist on the right to have children taught things about which they themselves differ. . . . Sometimes I fear it is time we began the education of some parsons." Unfortunately, we are afraid the education of parsons is an almost hopeless task.

Mr. Swaffer adds some interesting extracts from the "Parish News," Cudham, Kent. The local vicar, true to type, reminds his flock to thank God for "two very desirable changes of weather just when we needed them greatly." There are other things to be grateful for, too. The fact, for instance, that Russia "looks like weakening Germany . . . to make it far easier for us to give her the *coup de grace*." Our gratitude, however, must be strictly confined to God and not extended to Russia. For the dear vicar firmly believes that God is "answering our prayers by allowing the two anti-Christian powers, Nazism and Bolshevism, to destroy each other, just as in the Old Testament times He allowed Egypt and Assyria, both hostile to Israel, to do the same." This quotation is a pretty good sample of Christian intelligence in their own year of grace, 1941. We congratulate Mr. Swaffer for giving it publicity.

For some years the Trades Union Congress passed every year at its annual meeting a resolution in favour of Secular Education. Then the Roman Catholics got to work, and a motion was finally passed deleting this resolution from future agendas. They had assistance from others, and the incident offers a good illustration of how things are done. Now that the clergy of all denominations are uniting to gain control of the schools, we suggest that some of the branches of the Trades Union movement should replace the old resolution on the agenda. It would be a calamity to win the war and hand the schools over to the clergy.

The following appears in "John Bull" under the heading, "Should Church Parades be Stopped?":—

"What is the good of making a man go to a religious service unless he wishes? Compelled, he remains hostile all through the proceedings and, indeed, becomes more and more cynical.

Some officers show considerable tolerance in regard to this sort of thing. They excuse a man who objects to it.

Others, more realistic, say: "Well, if you won't go to church you must peel potatoes."

Some soldiers, to dodge church parades, invent a religion to which they say they belong.

"I am a Patagolian," said a colleague in the last war, "and the nearest church is at Greenwich, six miles away."

Allowed to go there, he went for a nice walk.

Another man I know said: "I always go to a P.S.A."

He was allowed to do this.

Few military chaplains know the contempt in which many of their flock are held by men who are compelled to listen to their dreary addresses. There are, of course, popular chaplains. But most of these object as much to compulsion as the men do."

The truth is that we have not yet reached the point of considering a soldier as a genuinely grown-up, responsible person. Otherwise, there is no greater reason for ordering men to a church parade than there is for ordering them to church and inflicting what amounts to a punishment if they stay away.

Birmingham Freethinkers and friends are invited by the local N.S.S. Branch to a ramble to Sutton Park and picnic tea. Meet at Town Park Gate at 3 p.m. to-day (Sunday), September 7, and bring sugar and butter; other tea necessities will be provided at a small cost. Fine weather has been arranged and branch members and friends of the movement in Birmingham should join the party and spend a happy half day.

A FORGOTTEN FREETHINKER

A LITTLE work was lately presented by a kind reader to the library which "The Freethinker" is trying to get together in the place of the one lost "through enemy action." It was new to me, and I could not ever remember having seen the name of its author. I was not surprised, however, to find a notice of both in J. M. Wheeler's indispensable "Dictionary of Freethinkers." Not much escaped that tireless worker in the Freethought field.

The title of the book is "The Task of To-day," and its author is Evans Bell. It was published in 1852 by that fine successor to Richard Carlile in the battle for a free Press—James Watson, who was twice imprisoned for his views on the matter, the first time as a young man for selling Palmer's "Principles of Nature," and the second time for selling Hetherington's "Poor Man's Guardian." Watson was left some money and his printing presses by another fine Freethinker, Julian Hibbert, which enabled him to print such classics as d'Holbaech's "System of Nature," Volney's "Ruins of Empire," the works of Thomas Paine, and many other well-known books issued under the general title of "The Cabinet of Reason."

Thomas Evans Bell was a major in the Indian Army and, says Wheeler, helped Holyoake's "Reasoner" with pen and purse, "writing over the signature 'Undecimus.'" He wanted to sell his commission in the Army and devote himself entirely to Freethought, but was persuaded not to do so. In the end he returned to India at the time of the Mutiny, and later became Deputy-Commissioner of Police at Madras. Retiring in 1885, he wrote several volumes on Indian affairs, dying in 1887. His "Task of To-day" seems to be his only Freethought work except for his articles in the "Reasoner."

The Preface shows how Bell was literally forced to write his book. He says:—

"There are many people calling themselves Protestants and boasting of their right of private judgment, who look upon open and searching inquiry into the truth of religion as wicked presumption. I could have no hope of convincing these persons of my modesty and good intentions by any apologetic or deferential professions. . . . I owe no apology to anyone for making my matured convictions public. . . . My opinion of the error and danger of such desertion of an obvious duty I have expressed in the concluding chapter, but I have laid little stress on the venomous and withering effect which such concealment produces upon the individual character. A penalty must and will be extracted in loss of self-respect, of temper and of a purpose in life. And this for my part I do not choose to endure any longer. . . . To me it is of infinite consequence whether I live a traitor and a coward, or a true man. Good or bad, this is my work; I found I had it to do and I have done it. May I ever do so."

This spirit has, I think, animated all Freethinkers, and indeed no better incentive than to tell the truth and shame the devil (or, if you like, Christianity) can be thought of. At all events, Bell, in a work of 17 chapters, covering 144 pages of small print, has concentrated not only a great deal of information on the case for Freethought, but has combined wide reading with excellent argument.

He saw that from the outset the Church was lucky to "command the services of many writers eminently qualified by their talents, wit and learning for the task of fighting the battle of their faith against the Grecian and Roman philosophers." This can always be counted against Christianity, for right throughout its history eminent scholars and writers have championed and defended it against the "assaults" of "infidels." At the same time, the arguments of some of these early "apologists" for Christianity, Bell contends, were such that no modern Christian could rely upon in a controversy with an unbeliever. And he shows that even Mosheim, writing in the 18th century, was obliged to admit that the Christian champions "frequently made use of arguments void of all solidity, and much more proper to dazzle the fancy than to enlighten and convince the mind."

Bell had to face the argument—he claims that it hardly deserved the name—known as "the authority of great names." The believer still uses it, of course, only varying the names. "If," it used to be said, "this religion has been believed and eulogised by so many eminent philosophers, scholars, statesmen and heroes, if such men as Milton, Sir Thomas More, Calvin, Locke, Sir Matthew Hale, Pascal, Addison, Newton and Sir William Jones were satisfied with the truth of the Bible and the Christian religion, how can you presume to set up your opinions against theirs and, in fact, to declare them to have been the dupes of a shallow system of superstition?" Bell had very little difficulty in exposing the hollowness of this "testimony," but it is surprising how often it is used even now to prove all sorts of things. When I was a boy expressing some doubt of a Bible story, I was invariably asked whether I had the brains of a Gladstone, and told that as he believed it without hesitation, I should do the same without the slightest demur. I was never impressed; just as I am not impressed these days when I am told the names of doctors who vouch for certain "anti-toxins," or the names of Shakespearean professors who are put forward as antidotes to the heretical anti-Stratfordians, or even those of "learned" theologians and historians who, while giving up the God Jesus, still stick to him as a Man.

Come next chapters on pious frauds, the evidence of prophecy, the New Testament and various other problems, all discussed with point and perspicacity. Space, alas, forbids what I should have liked to give—lengthy quotations. But Bell sums up as so many other Free-thinkers have done before and since:—

“Stripped of the ‘deceptive commentary of assumptions and attributions,’ what are the evidences of Christianity? We have shown that nothing favourable to the supernatural origin of the religion can be drawn from the writings of its early apologists. We have examined Leslie’s celebrated and vaunted argument of the four criteria, and claim to have proved it to be a fallacy. . . . We have inquired into the authenticity of the Gospel narratives, and have found the proofs of it fatally deficient. . . . We have proved the worthlessness of the Evidences of Prophecy, and have reduced them to an absurdity by showing that an equally strong case can be made for Mohammedanism. We have produced a sufficient number of instances of immorality, ignorance, cruelty, contradictions and discrepancies contained in the Bible, particularly in the character of the God of the Bible, to disprove its pretended inspiration. And what remains?”

And finally, what is “the task of to-day?” Says Bell:—

“Rationalism (the author thinks a better term would be Secularism) must become the acknowledged tenet of a powerful party, composed of all classes, which will make the movement against religion its own, mould it with all its concomitant truths into form, and will use it vigorously in promoting the extension of knowledge and moral culture among the people, and of harmoniously fusing all classes into a true brotherhood, with a common sentiment and a common interest.

This was his ideal in 1852, and I think it is still the ideal of all who count themselves as good Secularists.

H. CUTNER

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, Etc.

LONDON

Outdoor

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead): 11.0, Mr. L. EBURY. Parliament Hill Fields, 3.0, Mr. L. EBURY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park): 7.30. Thursday, Mr. E. C. SAPHIN. Sunday, 6.0, a Lecture.

COUNTRY

Kingston and District N.S.S. Branch (Market Place): 7.30, Mr. J. W. BARKER.

Blyth ((The Fountain), Monday, September 8: 7.0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Chester-le-Street (Bridge End), Saturday, September 6: 7.0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

North Shields ((Harbour View), Tuesday, September 9: 7.0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Newsham, Wednesday, September 10: 7.0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Darlington (Market Steps), Sunday, September 7: 7.0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Bradford N.S.S. Branch (P.P.U. Rooms, Morley Street), Sunday, September 7: 7.0, Mr. F. J. CORNA, “The Future of Freethought.”

WANTED FOR OFFICE USE

Volumes of the “Secularist,” Edited by G. W. Foote; volumes of “Reasoner,” edited by Holyoake; “The Diegesis,” by Robert Taylor; “The Intellectual Development of Europe,” by Draper (two vols.); Cudworth’s “True Intellectual System” (Mosheim’s edition); Mandeville’s Works (18th century); Scot’s Tracts (about 12 vols.); Carlyle’s “Deist”; Freethinking works published by Carlyle, Hetherington and others from 1820 to 1850. Anti-Nicene Fathers (24 vols., or any odd volumes); Giessler’s “Ecclesiastical History”; Bayle’s Dictionary; the Works of 18th century Deists; Scott’s Tracts (12 or 14 vols.). Any list of Freethought tracts or books will be appreciated. Prices must be moderate.—Write, Editor, “The Freethinker,” 2 and 3, Furnival Street, London, E.C.4.

CORRESPONDENCE

JESUS CHRIST

SIR,—Some recent articles in “The Freethinker” appear to me to pay an entirely undeserved compliment to Christianity. The account of Christ’s birth in Matthew i. 18 says (when put into plain English) that his father was a ghost and his mother a virgin.

The statement surely merits a broad smile, but to discuss it might lead to ribald laughter. I know that faith can reconcile opposites and believe both, e.g., God is love; God made hell; God is merciful. The smoke of their torment ascendeth, etc., etc., a system known to sportsmen as backing it both ways.—Yours, etc.,

EDWARD C. SAPHIN

PURITANISM IN PRE-REFORMATION TIMES

CARDINAL NEWMAN once acclaimed the unbeliever, Edward Gibbon, as the chief and perhaps the only outstanding ecclesiastical historian who has ever written in the English language. But were he alive to-day, the eminent Roman convert would probably add the name of Dr. G. G. Coulton to that of the illustrious author of the *Decline and Fall*. For with the Cambridge scholars *Five Centuries of Religion*, in addition to his invaluable subsidiary writings, he has successfully striven to raise the study and exposition of religious development to the rank of an almost exact science.

That Puritanism was the sour and sullen product of the Protestant Reformation, and that in Catholic centuries sacerdotal censorship and compulsion were never directed against the harmless amusements and recreations of the community, is still a very widespread belief. This misconception, however, Dr. Coulton has completely exposed. He proves that the dance on the village green met with almost universal clerical condemnation. Sabbatarianism, again, was far more common in medieval days than is usually realised. One of the most learned Churchmen of the 15th century, the Carthusian, Dionysius Rickel, denounces the dance in unmeasured terms. Referring to one of his writings, Coulton states: “The whole treatise might pass for the work of one of the severest seventeenth century Puritans. He quotes Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas . . . as admitting that human beings need a certain amount of relaxation, and that even the dance may be lawful under certain specified conditions, but he adds: ‘Since therefore these are very seldom or never kept at dances, it is certain that dances are seldom or never done without sin.’ He, like many of his predecessors, quotes Augustine as saying that it is less sinful for the peasant to break the Sabbath by digging or ploughing on Sundays than by dancing.”

But this and other diatribes were repeatedly disregarded, and the Pecksniffs and Chadbands of the time deplore the imagined obstinacy of the peasants. Strange to say, even the poet Petrarch was deeply tinged with the Puritan sentiment. Despite his marked ability and relative enlightenment, he contemptuously scorned the Terpsichorean art as a weariness both to mind and body, as well as the pathway to sexual sin. He asserts that the "unhappy maiden's fall is oft attributable to these gyrations and in the whirl of the dance and its sequel oftentimes has the matron there lost the honour she has kept so long." Nor did he restrict his condemnation to the sports and pastimes of his native Italy. He seems to address the world at large when he declares that equestrian exercise is no legitimate recreation for thoughtful men. Hunting and hawking, the sports of the privileged classes, are also reprehended. On the other hand, seekers of the higher life "may often find in their books how Plato was busy with philosophy, Homer with poetry, Cicero with oratory, Cæsar with triumphs; I doubt whether they will read that any of these were hunters."

When an eminent man of letters, more fully emancipated than the mass of his contemporaries could express such pronounced Puritan opinions, we can infer the influence of the official Church in the 14th century in suppressing the pleasures of the people. It is noteworthy that Petrarch, an artist himself, deprecated theatrical displays. Not only were the spectacles of the amphitheatre and circus degrading in themselves, but they demoralised those that witnessed them.

Roman apologists took grave exception to the charge of dour Puritanism urged against their medieval predecessors in Dr. Coulton's writings. An animated discussion ensued in which the late G. K. Chesterton participated. This brilliant, if superficial critic, attempted to refute Coulton's statements by an appeal to historical authority. But as Coulton points out in an important appendix on Medieval Sport and Dance in vol. II. of his *Five Centuries of Religion*: "Mr. Chesterton relies entirely on a single passage from St. Thomas Aquinas, which he has evidently not sufficient Latin scholarship to construe correctly; it is strange that the Editor of the *Dublin Review* or some theological friend should not have intervened to save him from such an obvious blunder. In *The Review of the Churches*, I appealed to him to name a single orthodox writer between St. Thomas and 1800 who understands St. Thomas in the sense required by his own present argument and he has made no reply. On the other hand, every medieval commentator I have met takes St. Thomas's words—or those of Albertus Magnus, from whom St. Thomas has copied almost verbally—exactly in their plain sense, as condemning the dance with only rare exceptions." Also, the leading Dominicans of the time, all familiar with their master's teachings, unreservedly denounce the dance as equivalent to the seven deadly sins. Dancing, the Dominican Nider declares "had its first beginning from the devil." Again, he is cited with saying: "To dance habitually . . . even though it be not done with corrupt intention, is a mortal sin."

No seventeenth century Presbyterian Puritan could have protested more strongly against temporal aids to happiness than Dionysius, a rigidly orthodox Catholic. In his *Directions for the Life of a Gentleman*, Dionysius deprecates the delight shown by the privileged classes in jousting, gaming, dancing and other forms of pleasure. The following passage translated by Dr. Coulton speaks for itself: "If we consider attentively and with heartfelt passion what, how many and what sort of torments our Lord and Saviour . . . bore for our sins, how he was nailed with outstretched

arms for our salvation to the cross, and hung there with his whole most sacred body most violently stretched and strained, with the most vehement dolour and torment—then we shall by no means be inclined to dances and the other vanities aforesaid. Similarly if any noble or powerful person wisely considers how the Son of God . . . vouchsafed to suffer so many and great mockeries and curses and blasphemies and insults, and to be mocked as a fool in a white garment, and thus to be led through the streets of Jerusalem, and to be crowned with thorns . . . and to be spat upon with the utmost contempt—then from the bottom of his heart he will utterly condemn that vain adornment of garments; nor will he with such pampering and adornment, so vainly and so delicately, treat his own vile and miserable body, which must so soon be resolved into dust and ashes, into corruption and stench, but he will afflict himself with the works of penance."

In addition to this lengthy passage, Dr. Coulton has rendered much more to the same effect which the interested student will find on pp. 443-4 of our author's second volume. The whole plea of Dionysius constitutes an earnest and solemn appeal for perpetual gloominess of spirit and sombre preparation for the life to come in what in the homilist's opinion is merely a state of probation in a vale of tears, ever overshadowed by the fell sergeant death. For not only does Dionysius deeply deplore the dance, but every known form of secular relaxation and enjoyment. We are sometimes assured that there are no long faces among the Roman Catholic laity to-day, and that religious gloom is the hall-mark of Protestant and, above all, Dissenting sects. Still, if Catholic laymen were not made miserable in the Middle and later centuries by the threats and admonitions of their pastors and masters, this was not the fault of the clergy.

In Germany similar sombre sentiments were expressed. Ruysbroeck, the celebrated mystic counselled good Christians against indulgence in jests and quips as a waste of time, as well as a serious dereliction of duty in worthy citizens. In the fifteenth century the Leipzig preacher, Morgenstern, reprobated the dance as "an infernal circle whose centre is the devil." Also, he urges that those are guilty of mortal sin who willingly permit playing with cards or dice in their dwellings. Moreover, most of the calamities suffered by the peasantry are punishments for the desecration of Sunday and other holy days, by their indulgence in frolics and kindred vanities. That Morgenstern's Sabatarianism was uncompromising, his doleful sermons demonstrate. He strictly interpreted the commandment to keep inviolate the day of rest. He assured his hearers that they should devote the entire day to divine affairs by attending church twice on Sunday to listen to the preaching of God's word. Also, after dining "they ought to discuss with their children and their servants that which they have heard preached by their pastor; and again at eventide they should visit the church and the graveyard to pray faithfully for those from whom they have received their goods."

It is not for a moment suggested that the Puritan spirit prevailed universally. Then, as now, sensible people repelled the mournful message that there should be no more cakes and ale. Despite the messengers of misery and woe, the majority tried to make the best of both worlds. Asceticism might be preached in the pulpit, but Popes, prelates, monks and nuns all succumbed to worldly temptations. Legion are the denunciations of pious Catholics of the notorious departure from the paths of virtue manifested by the clerical orders, both seculars and regulars. Still, instead of being the morbid outcome of the Reformation, Puritanism existed centuries before Calvin, Knox and Luther were born.

T. F. PALMER.