

# THE FREETHINKER

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Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

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## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### Christmas

EXIGENCIES of printing will put this issue of "The Freethinker" in the hands of readers before December 25; but one may write a review of what will be said in the churches on Christmas Day or at the New Year. The comments on current events may differ, but the Christmas story must remain unaltered. Note we say "must remain" the same. For the claim of the Churches is that Christianity is the only religion in the world that has been revealed by God to man; and a revelation from God there for all to read who will; as Mathew Arnold said, "it hangs round the neck of Christians as the Old Man of the Sea hung round the neck of Sinbad." And on this Christmas Day, as on others, the old story will be told with all the vigour of a politician trying to get votes on a very shaky programme. The clergy will pretend they believe the story as written, and in turn the congregations will pretend they believe in the parson. Neither wishes to hurt the feelings of the other, so both combine in the hope that those who are not in church will accept the joint performance at its face value.

Why not? After all, Christmas is the season of pantomime when fairies flourish, demons run their course, and pantaloons and clowns riot before the footlights. Our present-day clergy have a much longer pedigree than they know of—at least, older than they profess to be aware of. Long before the Christian Church was heard every one of the essential features of Christmas was known to the pre-Christian world. The newly born God, the stars bowing to the divine being—even the Christmas cake was there. In this respect the Christians took over a going concern, and the earliest generation of believers knew it. The originality of the Christian legend, with its god from heaven yet to be born of woman, was not claimed by the early Christians; it was merely a new version of an old tale. That great Christian, Saint Augustine, who had worshipped the Sun God, begged his brother Christians to remember that they were worshipping the *Son* of God; and Pope Leo the Great had to remind many of his people that the ceremony had been taken over by the Christian

Church. It was not until the end of the fourth century that December 25 became definitely Christian; and unity was established by much the same methods by which Hitler established himself as the Messiah of the German people.

So once again the Christmas of 1942 finds the clergy telling their people of an imaginary saviour who came from an imaginary heaven, performed a number of imaginary miracles, including a long conversation with an imaginary devil; who suffered an imaginary death, achieved an imaginary miracle by an imaginary resurrection, returned to an imaginary heaven, and there sits in imaginary glory for ever and ever.

Confronted with such a story, one might stand with eyes open in astonishment and a mind staggered into dumbness were it not for the consciousness that this kind of thing had happened before—from the miraculous birth to the miraculous resurrection—and that one ought to believe all these stories or none. Our difficulty here is that which Voltaire felt concerning the story of the saint who walked thirty paces with his head under his arm. Voltaire said he could believe twenty-nine of the steps. It was the first one he could not credit. We also could believe in the whole story of the life of the God Jesus if we could get over the miraculous birth. It is the presence of the mother that creates the difficulty. Having dispensed with the earthly father, why not do without the other parent?

### God and the Army

The clergy have lost no time this year in getting into their Christmas stride. Judging from reports, and from the B.B.C. subsidised pulpit, the war to them has its chief significance in offering opportunities to redouble their preaching of the gospel that man is a poor, miserable, unhelpful kind of an object unless he is always moving in the fear of God. This was strongly emphasised by a special preacher on December 12—the Rev. D. A. Owen—who had been in Egypt and explained how and why it was that the British Forces put the Germans on the run. The soldiers had been training in the desert, and in the desert, with the civilisation to which they are accustomed, they discovered God. Result, defeat of the Germans. Moral, if we wish to win the war we must at home turn to God and then things will happen. We must turn to God because nothing we can do without him is of any use or gives satisfaction. We wonder what our soldiers—the more intelligent ones—being told that no sense of duty to one's fellows or to one's country, no affection to one's family or loyalty to one's friends is of any use unless it is all manifested per God. Think of it! Churchill assured the British public that the battle was won because of the skill of our generals and the courage and steadfastness of the men. Perhaps Mr. Owen had better settle the matter with the Prime Minister.

And after all, with the overwhelming majority of English people, whether at home or abroad, whether in uniform or "civvies," Christmas does not awaken thoughts about a baby God—minus a parent—who was born with his sacrifice arranged, before he arrived. Their thoughts run to meeting friends, to family reunion, roast turkey and plum pudding, songs and a general jollification. And the thoughts of even the larger number of professing Christians on the day before Christmas and after are more taken up with meeting a pal in a pub than sinking on their knees in an Eastern stable. We are afraid these preachers do not keep to the strict truth.

But to those people who tell us how much the world owes to this Christmas manger let us put a very simple question. Suppose the legend of a saviour God, in either its Christian or pre-Christian form, had never existed, what would a profit and loss account look like?

Start from the world of A.D. 100. The later inroads of the barbarian world would have had its effect on Roman and Greek civilisation, but it would have certainly saved the severe inrush of the Eastern superstitions which include the Christian mythology. Rome had declined, so had Greece, but with all the invasions from the less socially developed peoples, there were certain other features to place on the credit side of the historic ledger. The pagan barbarians had no necessary hatred of either Roman or Greek civilisation. The Christian Church had. Rome and Greece were, so far as religion went, polytheists, and therefore would not and did not war against "strange" gods. Religious persecution as such was foreign to the Roman world, as it is usually with polytheistic peoples.

Next there would have been saved that age-long curse of a sacred book with its terrible "Thus saith the Lord." The pagan religions would have left the civilised world free to examine, to discover, to understand the world in which people lived. The non-appearance of the Christian religion would have left men free to study nature and to enjoy nature; to make the best of life without regarding human happiness as more or less displeasing to God. Every reader of the early Christian Fathers must have been struck by the absence of enjoyment of nature. Gibbon stated nothing but the cold truth when he said that it was not in this world that Christians hoped to be either happy or useful.

We may sum it up by saying that minus Christianity there would have been a period of stagnation in European culture had Christianity never been born; but it would have saved the world the long priest-ridden period known as the Dark Ages, the long warfare between science and religion, the teaching that celibacy was the higher condition of life—which contributed so greatly to the deterioration of the human stock—and the weeding out of so many of the best and most daring minds, and so placing a premium on mere conformity and mental cowardice.

And when the end of the Dark Ages—the name given by historians to a period when the Church was most powerful—came it was the revival of what Christian bigotry had left of the old Greek and Roman culture that opened the new period.

## The Moral of Russia

We are in the midst of a world war, and the "Christian conscience" has been roused against war—but not until war became so large as to be very, very dangerous. In war and preparations for war the Christian nations have led the way; and when even Japan wished to get more fearful weapons of slaughter it was to the Christian nations she came for instruction. But among these nations at war is Russia, until lately mainly Christian and, while a Christian nation, renowned for its intolerance and the brutality of the Government to the people. Twenty-five years ago Russia went into revolution, and in spite of the bitter opposition of the Christian countries, the slanders and deliberate lying, Russia made good. Then came the "great" war, and Russia became our ally—much to the disgust of the Roman Church and to the annoyance of many in this country who would have wished it otherwise. It is our good fortune that Russia became our ally. Its magnificent resistance to Germany was the condition of finding tens of thousands of our people alive who would otherwise have been blasted out of existence.

Now, I do not wish to dwell upon this phase of the world situation. I do not wish to eulogise what the Russians have done in the way of education, culture and social reform in the short space of time that the Soviet has been in existence. So far as my point is concerned, this work may be passed as either good or bad.

What I wish to point out is this. Constantly we have among us those wise fools who have met every movement for reform with that elaborate exhibition of human ignorance and thick-headedness which is expressed in the sing-song, "You can't alter human nature" or "It will take generations to alter" this or that state of things. In the face of this philosophy of fools, not in many generations, but in a brief twenty-five years—several of which were spent in fighting other countries and the last two of which have been spent in fighting as one of our allies—a Government *without God* has transformed nearly two hundred millions from a completely illiterate people to an eighty-five per cent. literate; it has given the people a sense of personal responsibility they never before possessed. It has taken huge areas of land which were "just as God left them"—and like most things that God left was messy and useless—and turned them into useful soil or established great cities. It has created a passionate love for the land that has fired men, women, and even children with a determination to make their country worth living in that will for ever defy any invader that has the courage to attack them.

But I do not wish any of these things to be argued on their merits as examples of planning. All I wish to point out—and so far as I know this cardinal point has not been stressed—is that the cry "You can't alter human nature" is not true: You can alter it for better or worse, and the older we get, the wiser we are, the more rapidly we can effect a change. Human nature is the most plastic material we know. We can make it what we will; we can mould it as we will. And if that is a source of danger, it is also a source of boundless hope and an incitement to fresh endeavours.

I think I will leave these last few sentences as a Christmas message to "Freethinker" readers.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

## RATIONAL POLITICS

THROUGHOUT history the selection and education of rulers, administrators and politicians has been regarded, by a minority, as the highest responsibility of society. Philosophers and thinkers from Plato to J. S. Mill and, in our time, Bernard Shaw, have reminded their contemporaries that the complexities of government are not likely to be solved by untrained demagogues. If it was necessary for Plato to stress the "philosopher-king" ideal in the comparatively simple form of society exemplified by the Greek city-states, how much more necessary are qualified politicians to-day!

Though the pronouncements of philosophers and scientists are generally received with polite interest, history is full of instances of good advice being ignored. The wisdom of Shaw competes with the expert mass psychology of advertising contractors, mindless entertainment and the dogmas of B.B.C. religion. Can one wonder that mass-man remembers Shaw's "Not bloody likely!" and forgets "The people must have a choice between the qualified."

A praiseworthy attempt to apply the "fitness for service" principle to current politics is described in this article. The Political Students' Union, which is dedicated to "the objective observation and scientific investigation of public affairs," stresses the absolute necessity for politicians and administrators to be thoroughly competent people of proved integrity. The incompetent administration and disastrous political errors exposed during the earlier phases of the war—bungling which our African successes should not expunge from memory—is evidence enough that the British educational system and its complementary political structure needs a thorough overhaul.

The efficiency of every profession depends upon the standards which it sets itself. In the case of the political profession there has been much doubt as to the standards with which politicians ought to conform. Indeed, the need for standards has too often been ignored. Yet in politics, as in other professions, the obvious requirements are specialised knowledge, practical experience and integrity of character. Politicians need to be informed in such subjects as political and economic theory, administrative practice, contemporary conditions and history. A good general education, or even a special education in one of these subjects, is not sufficient.

It is sometimes objected that politicians need only concern themselves with principles and can leave specialised knowledge to permanent Civil Servants. There would be some point in this argument if there were evidence that Civil Servants with expert knowledge were frequently consulted by politicians. If the average M.P. is judged by his speeches in Hansard there is little to suggest that competent authorities have been consulted. Hansard, for the most part, consists of an interminably long procession of overworked platitudes, inflated by personal reminiscences and irrelevances into inordinately long speeches. Right political principles can only be attained and understood in the light of special political knowledge.

It may also be objected that standards of political knowledge will inevitably be arbitrary. The same criticism could be advanced in the case of the medical and legal professions. When it was first suggested that unqualified doctors and lawyers should be excluded from practice, we may be sure that the knaves and fools protested heartily. Standards were nevertheless established and progressively altered as circumstances changed.

The Political Students' Union propose to set up provisional standards which will be periodically revised in the light of experience and criticism. There will be elementary and advanced standards suitable for beginners and advanced students respectively. A number of examinations and syllabi have already been prepared.

With regard to practical experience and integrity of character, it is obviously more difficult to set up standards and tests, but these aspects of political qualification are too important to be neglected. The equivalent of the jealously guarded reputation of the medical and legal professions must enter the sphere of politics. The P.S.U. intends to establish a Board of Guardians who will adjudicate in matters of practical ability and integrity of character.

The organisers of P.S.U. are not such facile optimists as to imagine that any considerable number of M.P.s or Town Councillors will immediately apply to join the union. Qualified politicians will be cordially invited to do so, and unqualified politicians who wish to become qualified by passing the union's tests—or equivalent university examinations—will be welcomed. The union's membership is likely to consist mainly of those many serious students of politics whose knowledge and experience is at present of little political significance; and members of the younger generation who are intelligent enough to dislike the clamour and rainbow-chasing of party politics may be prepared to join an organisation with no axe to grind and no "cure all" policy to sell.

The purpose of political standards is to discriminate between serious political students and idle talkers. Politicians who voluntarily submit to P.S.U. tests, or show evidence of equivalent qualifications, will receive support and recommendation. It is hoped that the public will gradually learn to prefer political candidates of proved ability even as they have learnt to prefer trained medical practitioners to "quacks."

So many voluntary organisations exist that their number was not lightly multiplied by the founders of P.S.U. An important reason for starting a society to publicise these ideas is the intention of the founders to apply to their organisation the principles they advocate for the State. Thus, the affairs of the union will be administered by those members who are best qualified for responsibility. The influence of members within the organisation will be proportionate to their practical experience and academic qualifications. It should be emphasised that the union is not envisaged as an exclusive hierarchy. Membership is open to everyone who is prepared to fit himself for public service by study, research and political activity.

Those who are content that politics should remain the "happy hunting ground of the untrained" will fight shy of the intellectual effort demanded of them. Those who believe that political and social problems should be attacked by those methods of investigation which have proved successful in the natural sciences will applaud P.S.U.'s enterprise.

In conclusion, it may be of interest to mention that a considerable number of public men have expressed their warm approval of this project. Mr. G. B. Shaw "entirely agrees with the union's basis" whilst fearing that "the old school ties" will kill the scheme. Mr. Vernon Bartlett (one of the few M.P.s who is honest enough to vote only upon matters about which he feels qualified to form a judgment) is "genuinely very interested . . . and much impressed by the examination paper . . . which does seem to represent the minimum of knowledge that should be acquired by a civilised man." Sir Richard Gregory (President of the British Association) concludes his long letter of commendation with these words:—

"I am well aware that emotional values are strong influences in political fields, as they are in those of religious beliefs, but in both it is desirable to face the facts and sift them before blindly following any teaching. . . . The objects (of the union) and the examination paper could be adopted appropriately by any organisation which desires to promote intelligent study of social and political problems from a world point of view."

Fuller particulars of the Political Students' Union are obtainable from R. Bathgate, P.S.U., Broomfield, Somerset.

JOHN DARKER.

## ACID DROPS

THE Hereford City Council has decided to open each of its meetings with prayer. We wonder why? Has there been local complaints as to the efficiency of the Council? Will any record be kept as to when this new co-opted member of the Council assists the Council in its deliberations? What we fancy will happen is that some parson will be appointed to speak on behalf of the co-opted deity, and the general public will remain in the dark as to whether the Rev. Mr. Blank represents God or himself.

The "Universe" is annoyed with the Russian Government because in one of its school text-books it says:—

Popes, rabbis, mullahs and priests of all religions teach that all the world, all the animals, all the plants and men were created by God. Science examined these statements and found out that they were all fables, that they do not contain a single word of truth. That no gods ever existed in reality.

But at all events this is nearer the truth of science than telling young children that God made them.

This is the way the Rev. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones puts it in the columns of the "Christian Herald": "Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He came from heaven miraculously. . . . His death on Calvary was not the mere result of political activity. . . . He was buried in the tomb, but on the morning of the third day He tore aside the bands of death and rose literally and physically from the grave and afterwards ascended to heaven." And the funny thing about it is the poor man appears to believe it. And some say that Christianity is dead! We do not wonder the paper asks for the prayers of its readers. We can't join them in prayer, but we do sympathise with the relatives of the Rev. Martyn Lloyd Jones.

The "British Weekly"—a very religious Protestant organ—warns the people of this country that the Roman Church still claims "to direct all men according to the principles of right-thinking and just living in public and in private life, in the field of sociology and politics, as well as in that which is strictly religious." We have said this many times of late, and it is a fact that many people in this country rave about Fascism—at least most of them do—and ignore that the claims as stated are of the very essence of Roman Catholicism.

By way of a footnote to what has just been said, let us also bear in mind that the Protestant Churches, in practice if not in theory, are out for the same end. One sees it in the religious boycott, still strong, and in the attempts to gain—with the help of the Ministry of Education and other local bodies—the control of the schools. It is with them just a question of opportunity, and it is almost certain that if the Churches do not secure the control of the schools before the present Government goes out of power, it is not likely to succeed with a new administration.

Silly customs die hard, and when they are religious the death is long delayed. The rule that women must not have their heads uncovered in church was laid down, for Christians, by St. Paul. But Paul also ordered that women were to be silent in church, and obedient to their husbands, and the husband was the head of the woman as Christ was the head of the Church. The chief Churches have stuck to that command with a foolish consistency. Our Established Church, in spite of its recent chatter about the liberty of the individual, has not a single woman preacher in the pulpit. They may take part in other church proceedings, but the pulpit is barred to them.

Recently there has been several incidents in the courts concerning women and their hats. Some of our Judges are sensible enough to ignore the rule that women must wear a hat in a court of law. Others have been pompously foolish enough to insist on the hat being worn, and now our great reformer, Lord Chancellor Simon, has decreed that women may go into court with the head uncovered. There is, so far as we know, no law on the subject. It is sheer custom, and if a Judge decides not to act as the Lord Chancellor says they may act, we question whether he has any power to prevent him.

Now comes the latest case. A land army girl came to church straight from her work and wearing trousers. This was the last straw. How can the attention of the congregation be kept if women come to pray in trousers? So the Vicar of St. Paul's, Slough, ordered her out, and out the girl went. She would have done better to have refused. But we are at war, and even war tends to make the clergy a little more sensible than they would be without it. For the case of the girl has been taken up, and the Vicar says he is now ready to welcome "these women" in his church. If "these women" are sensible they will stay away from church altogether. That, of course, is what the Vicar is afraid of, and the Church can ill-afford to lose in these days.

We wonder whether the Catholic newspapers are surprised when priests do something that is decently human? It would seem so by the way they carefully advertise that its priest was in favour of an allowance to maternity cases, or State help for old people. We are waiting to see some of the Catholic and other religious papers advertise the fact that many of the reforms in the Beveridge Report were in principle set forth by Thomas Paine about a century and a half ago. But that is not likely to happen.

"Any Catholic who has to deal with Communists and who is not carefully safeguarded against them loses his faith." So says Archbishop Williams, and we agree with the Archbishop. In fact, we extend the truth and say that it applies to all religionists. Begin by giving children the elements of a sound education and they will be armed against any religion that exists. Everything turns on the significance of "safeguarding." What all religious leaders mean by the term is to carefully guard the young—say up to sixteen or seventeen—against knowing the origin and nature of religion and they will be proof, not completely but fairly, against discovering what we know of the origin, the development and nature of religion, and they will not easily get rid of the twist that has been given to their minds. It is a terrible way to treat the young, but religion, ancient or modern, runs that way.

Archbishop Williams, addressing a Roman Catholic audience, laments that "God has been left out of University life, and this has affected the life of the whole nation." As it suited the sermon, this was said, although it is odds that on another and different occasion the Archbishop would say the exact opposite. But the statement is nonsensical. First of all, religion is not left out of the Universities, although we are pleased to note that the number of Freethinkers has greatly increased. And in the second place, the Universities do not now determine the intellectual life of the nation. In many instances they follow the most advanced thought, political and religious, and sociological. Of course, many of those who are known as the advocates of advanced ideas in this or that direction have been educated in the Universities, but it cannot be said that they received the impetus to become what they are as a result of University teaching. It would make an interesting study to take a number of leading ideas and trace the field in which they were cultivated. But there is still too much religion in Universities, and so much coercion on the side of "respectability" and orthodoxy.

Archbishop Amigo (R.C.) is seriously disturbed over the cases of unhappiness that follow "mixed marriages"—Roman Catholics marrying Protestants. We are quite certain that these cases owe their existence almost entirely to the activities of Amigo and his kind. It is the priests who are responsible for whatever unhappiness occurs in these mixed marriages. First there is the attempt to prevent the marriage. Then there is the securing of the undertaking that any children born shall be brought up in Roman Catholicism, and so save them from the wickedness of Protestantism. Finally, there is the constant prying of the priest into the family life of the married couple, and the suggestion that after death one will go to hell and the other to that more horrible place, heaven. And after all this Amigo laments that mixed marriage turn out unhappily. Of course they often do, and they always will while exploiters of human fear and weakness flourish. Peace will come when the priest is shown the door.

# "THE FREETHINKER"

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## TO CORRESPONDENTS

G. L. GREAVES.—The question put you as to Atheism and your family was quite unwarranted, and no more than an exhibition of religious impertinence.

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 2-3, Furnival Street, London, E.C.4, and not to the Editor.

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.

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, 17s.; half-year, 8s. 6d.; three months, 4s. 4d.

Lecture notices must reach 2 and 3, Furnival Street, Holborn, London, E.C.4, by the first post on Monday, or they will not be inserted.

## SUGAR PLUMS

FROM a review notice of an autobiography of Mr. Fenner Brockway, M.P., we gather the confession that he has seen men's characters deteriorate more in Parliament than in prison. We have noted and said this more than once. We have seen men who might have played a useful part in life gradually give way to the desire to carve out what they call a "career." Then the great thing becomes, not what ought to be said, but whether it will meet with not much dislike from party leaders. A pat on the back from a Cabinet Minister is often the first step downward. What is needed in Parliament is a small body of men who are not afraid to criticise and who are not on the look-out for a "job." In a democracy the majority will rule, but it is the independent minority that will keep a democracy healthy.

"Jail Journal and Other Writings by Richard Carlile," Edited and arranged by Guy A. Aldred (Strickland Press, Glasgow, 2s.) gives nearly a hundred pages of sketches by Carlile, one of the most fearless of English Freethinkers and Radicals, and will be welcomed by many. There is a fine example to be found of the way the work of these pioneers is neglected and forgotten in almost any standard history of the early 19th century that one cares to pick up. If their names are mentioned, it is in such a way as to give the reader the impression that they are not of great consequence. Our scholastic system sadly needs overhauling.

Mr. Arthur Woodburn, M.P., speaking at Glasgow, said that "some of the history taught in Glasgow to-day is rubbish." But some of the history taught in most countries is rubbish. The history upon which the people feed, the history given in our elementary schools, is partly rubbish. Suppose, for instance, that in a very few years someone turns up a school history to discover why Edward the Eighth vacated the throne, or to find out the real character of Queen Victoria, or the real cause of the education quarrel of to-day, or seeks to gain from official economic agitation of to-day, or sources the truth about the Indian situation, etc. What they get will be largely rubbish. Suppose an inquisitive student wishes to get a real history of the work and influence of Paine or of Carlile, or Bradlaugh, or Robert Owen, in what official history will they get reliable and educational information? The industrious student, to get what he wants, will have to do his own digging. The material will not be, as it should be, mined for his use. He must do his own mining, and in the end it is often given up.

Speaking in the House of Lords, the Archbishop of York hopes that the Government will ensure retribution for the crimes Germany has committed. That is very wrong—from a Christian point of view. For Jesus said that his followers should return good for evil, and if a man smote them on the one cheek, they should turn to him the other. And the Archbishop gets £10,000 annually to keep that lesson in front of the people. He will surely get into trouble when he faces "Our Lord in the next world!"

It is a pity that Sir W. Dobbie, who did useful work in Malta, does not refrain from publicly venting a lot of nonsense now he has returned home. His latest example—out of many—of downright foolishness is to inform the world that our victory in North Africa was due to the last day of National Prayer. But we had quite a number of days of National Prayer. What happened to the others? Were the recording angels out, or was God otherwise engaged? Perhaps Sir W. Dobbie will inform the world why so effective a method of winning the war, and so preventing the terrible slaughter of human beings, is not more generally made use of. The General appears to forget that Christians are always praying for peace, and it is a pity that the heavenly microphone does not function more frequently. Or is it that God prefers to have a first-class bloody mess before he will interfere?

In the course of an Advent sermon Canon Rees of St. Paul's explains to all concerned that the Christian is an inhabitant of two worlds. But that is not correct. Theoretically and on the grounds taken by Canon Rees, the Christian is an inhabitant of three worlds—one above, one below and the earth in between. The Christian resides, temporarily, in the middle world, and displays a strong dislike to visit either of the others. So if we are to state the situation correctly, following the Canon, we should say "The Christian is a person who lives in one of three worlds. He prefers the middle one, but if he must leave this world, chooses the upper one, the chief attraction of which is that it is some degrees less painful than the lower region."

The Canon also says "Unbelievers often point the finger of scorn at Christians because they profess to have no regard for death and yet cling feverishly to life." But this is not correct. The unbeliever does not blame the believer for clinging to life, but for distorting the nature of both life and death. He does not realise that life and death are two phases of the same fact, and that the finest aspects of life are dependent upon the existence of death. The Christian, whose mind normally functions on the level of the savages, sees death as something due to "sin," the Freethinker sees life as a great natural fact, from which are developed some of the finest qualities of human nature. We hope that is not too abstruse for the Canon, but we lack the space for further elaboration.

"Nobody," says the Rev. E. S. Woods, of Glasgow, "should forget to thank God for what is happening in Europe to-day." Presumably, Mr. Woods is thinking of the advance made by the Allies. But what of the myriads of men, women and children who have been tortured and killed with not even the chance of defending themselves? Was God waiting till our battleships and other instruments of warfare grew more powerful and we could do without him? Just now Hitler has announced his intention to kill a couple of million Jews of all ages. Why doesn't God lead the way in preventing this? What is the use of waiting till we are strong enough to check the slaughter ourselves? We think, if we believed in a God, we should be inclined not to mention him, for fear of calling attention to his uselessness.

## THE BIBLE HANDBOOK

For Freethinkers and Enquiring Christians

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## THE PLAINTS OF THE PROPHETS

"Thus do I make my fool my purse."

—SHAKESPEARE.

"Some for the glories of this world, and some  
Sigh for the prophet's paradise to come;  
Oh! take the cash and let the credit go,  
Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum."

—FITZGERALD'S "Omar."

"Since it is reason which shapes and regulates all other things, it ought not itself to be left in disorder."

—EPICETUS.

PROPHECY, according to George Eliot, is the most gratuitous form of error. It must, however, be a paying game, for the prophets are always with us. Some of these seers were busy in Charles II.'s time, and Samuel Pepys noted in his diary that "some of the fanatiques do say that the end of the world is at hand, and that next Tuesday is to be the day." A great many Tuesdays have passed since then, but, undeterred, present-day prophets are still predicting disaster and reaping golden rewards.

Civilised dupes appear to be more greedily credulous than savages: Rain-doctors and prophets of uncivilised people are kept to their contracts. They are expected to bring rain when required, and if they do not the consequences are summary and unpleasant. Civilised folks are vastly more complacent. If the prophet is unsuccessful they ignore the mistake; if he is correct they put it to his credit. A glance at some 19th century prophets reveals some of the extent of the association of faith and foolishness.

In the early years of that century, Joanna Southcott was a popular prophetess in the time when the first Napoleon was identified as "Satan." Joanna was a whole-hogger, and she predicted that she would be the mother of a new Messiah. A costly cradle was actually prepared by her dupes, and the seer's death from the mundane disease of dropsy stemmed their enthusiasm only for a season.

Another 19th century Messiah was Lieutenant Richard Brothers, a half-pay naval officer, who had his portrait painted with rays of light descending on his crazed head. Dick was puffed up in another sense than Joanna. He imagined that he was to be revealed as the King of Jerusalem and Ruler of the World. There was method in Dick's madness, too, for he invited George IV. to deliver up his crown and ordered the Houses of Parliament to receive his sacred message. This was far too good to last, and this particular Messiah was led away to that house of bondage where so many sons and daughters of heaven have suffered restraint at the hands of sceptical keepers and unbelieving doctors.

The Rev. Dr. Cumming appealed to a later generation. He was the William Whiteley of the prophetic business, and was remarkably successful. He contended that the Pope of Rome was "Anti-Christ," and that the French people were the naughty persons aimed at in "Revelation." He demonstrated that the Biblical prophecy of the locusts, whose sting is in their tail, was fulfilled by a Turkish general having used a horse's tail as a standard. This modern Jeremiah preached before Queen Victoria, and the avenues of his church were as crowded as the approaches to a theatre. But Nemesis came at last, as he fell from his pinnacle of prosperity. Intoxicated with his own verbosity, he named the year 1861 as that in which most awful events were to take place. The year was not uneventful, but it failed to fill the prophet's programme, and from that time his fame declined. His dupes, however, subscribed handsomely to place him above difficulty and want, and he passed his last years in comfort, "basking in the sunshine of the countenance of God." Truly, a flowery ending to a highly-coloured career.

There was still money in the prophetic business, and Cumming's mantle was soon on the shoulders of another man.

For many years the Rev. W. Baxter's name was a household word in religious circles and a cause of merriment in Fleet Street. To large multitudes he was a heaven-sent seer, commissioned by a benevolent deity to receive the light of prophecy and throw it over a saucy world. That quintessence of nonsense, "Forty Coming Wonders," was purchased with unabated credulity, although the error of Baxter's pretensions was proved again and again by the logic of facts to the satisfaction of all reasonable people.

Few prophets would find it easy to go on year after year delivering a succession of silly prophecies destined to utter failure. But Baxter's dupes were as credulous as little children. The prophet gravely announced the ascension of 144,000 Christians without dying, in 1896, and the great Persecution from 1896 to 1901. The Second Advent of Christ was fixed for the same year. The prophet once had an amusing adventure with the City Corporation. He applied for the lease of a site for a newspaper office, and it was pointed out to him that he had asked for a lease extending a quarter of a century beyond that he had fixed in his prophecies for the end of the world. But nothing daunted the prophet—business was business. If he didn't care for principle, he did care for interest.

These are notorious cases. Cumming and Baxter found fortune-telling a pleasant and profitable profession. They did not advise women how to find husbands, or furnish any of their congregations with the names of "winners." They made bolder dashes into futurity, and their courage met with its golden reward. But they were as much imposters as racecourse fortune-tellers. They pretended to possess that which neither they nor other people possess. So do thought-readers, clairvoyants, mediums and the whole troublous tribe of dabblers in the alleged "Super" natural. But, whereas an ordinary person who tells fortunes is fined or sent to prison, the same fraud may be practised with impunity if one uses the jargon of the Christian Religion. The Vagrancy Act provides that all persons professing to tell fortunes shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment. Such is the modern and merciful form of the Divine commandment, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Selden, in his "Table Talk," says that the old laws against witchcraft do not prove witchcraft to have existed. That is so, for it never did exist. As a fact, tens of thousands of women, perfectly harmless and innocent, were legally murdered on fantastic evidence, which ought to have been incredible, for doing what was physically impossible in supposed obedience to a legendary command of a doubtful deity. Fortune-telling to-day means fines and imprisonment for poor vagrants, but the careers of these portentous prophets show how it may be turned to the best account by Christians who remember the soothing fact that a very large number of their co-religionists are half-educated and foolish sheep to the shearers.

MIMNERMUS.

(Reprinted)

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### Report of Executive Meeting Held December 6, 1942

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

Also present: Messrs. Clifton, Bryant, Ebury, Horowitz, Griffiths, Miss Woolstone and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. Financial statement presented. New members were admitted to the Parent Society.

Progress was reported in the matter of the Society's interest in the will of the late Walter Payne, and of Michael Slater. Reports and arrangements of lectures were received from Blackburn, Glasgow, South London, Messrs. Brighton and Clayton.

Cases in which the regulations were applied in a doubtful manner were before the Executive from members of H.M. Forces concerning religion. Drawing the attention of the authorities to such cases usually meets with satisfaction.

The next meeting of the Executive was fixed for January 17, 1943, and the proceedings closed.

R. H. ROSETTI,  
General Secretary.

### "YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM IT"

(Concluded from page 527)

WITH what does this unemotional reason leave us? Surely, it must be admitted that with our comprehensive knowledge of God's pathetically human birth, growth and life, we are left with no alternative but to recognise our responsibility for having created him, and dismiss him from his realm in our minds. At least, the atheist, by not believing in him at all, absolves him of all blame for the wars, rapes and massacres that the credulous Christian believes him to have sanctioned; for this, at least, God, if he exists, must count the atheist as an ally.

There can be but one answer to all our questioning. It is superfluous to postulate the existence of a god which must remain by its very nature unknowable, when we have all around us a universe that is, at least for all practical purposes, solid and tangible. The theist's "God" is eternal and timeless, which is very impressive but quite meaningless, and he created the universe, which was apparently the greatest mistake of his life.

What good is this hypothesis? It is more logical to regard as eternal and uncreated the atheist's universe of understandable matter and energy than the theist's God, about Whom we can never know anything. Can it be called a good result to personify the sum of all things and call it God, just as in a smaller, but precisely identical, way thunder and lightning, wind and rain, earthquakes and echoes, and every aspect of nature, has been in the past ascribed to the activity of less important deities?

Why should we subject ourselves to a tyrannous dictatorship of cause and effect just because everything we see around us seems to be so ruled? Certainly for all practical sub-universal purposes, the so-called "law" of cause and effect holds good. But the fact is that there are no laws in nature at all. A law implies the existence of a law-maker and also the possibility of that which is governed preferring to do otherwise. We feel assured that things exist and happen in certain ways, not because they are ordered to do so, but because the ways adopted are the only ones in which their existence is possible. What we term laws are nothing but assumptions that certain events which have always occurred in certain ways, on every occasion on which they have been tested, will always occur in the same way in every future experiment. The theists work back along the trail of cause and effect and conclude with God. If we examine this argument we find that the universe could not have been caused, as this would require an extraneous force, and therefore the word "universe" would be rendered inapplicable to the effect alone, but would have to include the external influence. The terms "cause and effect" can never be applied to an act of creation, as a cause cannot be such unless it has an effect, and an effect cannot exist without a cause. Each depends upon the other for its existence. Applying this reasoning to our God, we find that he must have had the materials already at hand before he could play his part as First Cause and initiate the universe. Why continue with these pseudo-philosophical absurdities?

It is at least more reasonable to ask how life ever came into being without God. We cannot, at the present state of our knowledge, "make" life, as it seems the theist would require of us. Neither can we "make" electricity, or even know what it is; but we can introduce forms of electricity into matter under certain conditions. There is no reason to believe that we will find it impossible to control this principle of life and introduce it into matter that was previously without it. It is certain that

bio-chemists are nearer the heart of the problem than they were a century ago. Possibly, a more comprehensive knowledge of the nature and effect of cosmic rays will lead to the solution. "Why can we not make life?" will then cease to be the rather pointless, and somewhat "backs to the wall," question of earnest Godites.

It is not very often realised that our knowledge of the existence of life on this earth goes back hundreds of millions of years, and there is little doubt that there was life in abundance millions of years before a type was produced solid enough to leave its record in the rocks. Over these mind-staggering eons, the earth, and indeed, the whole solar system, has been changing. When life started the sun was younger and no doubt emitted many types of radiation that are no longer traceable. The atmosphere of the earth was quite different from that which we have to-day. It is by no means beyond the bounds of possibility that certain substances were in existence on the surface of the earth that may have played a vital part in the initiation of life. If these were highly radio-active, it is only to be expected that they have, after the lapse of ages, broken down into lower forms far less active. To duplicate the conditions under which life came into being will require possibly centuries of painstaking and heartbreaking experiments, for it is an unknown goal. It may be necessary to await the achievement of sub-atomic transmutation of elements, a field of scientific endeavour which is receiving close attention at the present time, especially in America. Until the day when the life-chemists are successful, we will always have with us the question-begging people who say: "You cannot explain life without God." Personally, I fail to see why a god enters into the argument at all. He is not allowed any part in theories for the explanation of electrical phenomena or of gravitation fields. Why should this "awful" mystery of life and no-life be left to God as the last fraction of his once mighty kingdom? Do the theists think that we have made our last territorial demands? The time will come when their ingenuity will be taxed to the limit to find a new haven, or heaven, for a god with a notice to quit.

The most foolish of all so-called arguments against the atheist is surely that stating that he has nothing to live for. "If I lost my belief in God and a life after death, I would no longer have any purpose in life" is the usual form in which this sickening debasement of human intelligence is presented to us. Why it should be necessary to live for ever is not often explained, although it is certainly not obvious. Can it be believed that our enjoyment of the good things in life depends upon their being unending? It is childish and cowardly to whine about this life being useless without another to follow it. Is it not true that the real pleasures are in anticipation and remembrance? The loveliest things we know would drive us to suicide if experienced in perpetuity. All sorts of question-begging, verbose semi-arguments try to explain why God has provided another world in which, after death, we are to be compensated for the hardships suffered during the present existence. Why are there not perfect conditions in the world now occupied? Perhaps we are in heaven now, having died in another plane! Is there yet another world to make up for the shortcomings of the next, and for how long has this been going on? There is no end to the absurdities suggested by the heaven fable. It is probably the most potent of all religious drugs, the Christian version being particularly acceptable to the slaves in the Roman Empire, having sprung from the squalor and poverty of persecuted desert wanderers.

To say that life cannot be worth living without a belief in God is sheer unadulterated nonsense. I say quite definitely and from personal experience that there is not one man in a hundred who gives any thought to the existence of a god in any aspect of his practical life. Not one in a hundred, or even more than a hundred! If he believes uncritically, and is a church-goer,

he almost invariably leaves his God in the church. He has to, for gods are not of much use in business affairs. Yet they say his life is useless without this god who is, for reasons of security, somewhat restricted in his activities.

The atheist, whose wife and family mean more to him than any god, is said to have no purpose in life. A more complete inversion of the truth can hardly be imagined. The atheist loves life and living, while the theist discards this world for the next, calling himself a miserable sinner and recommending immediate repentance to all who will listen to him. We all of us know the story of the dog who lost his bone in the water when he grabbed at its reflection, but would he have let his treasure go without seeing the desire-magnified image? I think he would have settled down to enjoy the one in his possession and to await future bones in their turn. Changing the metaphor, the atheist is in a reasonably well-stocked orchard at the moment and he will not be fool enough to worry about the invisible other side of the fence, which the theist says must hide a better orchard than this "because some of this fruit is rotten!"

You can't get away from it! "Love your life," advises the atheist, "bring up your family of clean, decent citizens, and when you vacate your place in the world, try and leave it a bit more pleasant for the next man, so that he can love his life even more than you do yours!"

R. GAUNTLETT.

### THE TASK BEFORE FREETHINKERS

THE task before Freethinkers, as I see it, is to promote a scientific attitude to the problems of the world, and to fight everything which stands in the way of such an attitude. Belief in an infallible Church, belief in an infallible Bible, and the more recent Fascist belief in a supreme race and an infallible leader are all, in their different ways, fit objects for Freethought attack. This, I imagine, is not likely to be disputed by any supporter of our cause.

The object of this article is to suggest that we should keep our eye on the ball. There seems to be a danger that arguments among ourselves on such topics as the historicity of Jesus may distract attention from our real task. It does not matter two hoots to us as Freethinkers whether there was a Jesus or not; and any writer, whether he be I or another, who conveys the impression that it matters, is doing an ill service to Freethought. Personally I have never contended that the existence of an historical Jesus could be certainly established: the utmost I have argued for is a strong presumption of an historical basis. Some have taken me to task for that.

They are hard to please. It seems to me merely honest to admit uncertainty when you are not certain. Those who think that historians should deal only with certainties can never have given a serious study to history; still less can they have tried, as I have tried, to write it. There are riddles in history, ancient and modern, which are likely to remain riddles as far ahead as we can see. Those who insist on certainty and nothing but certainty should go to mathematics, not to history; and even there they may be disappointed.

The only feature that marks off the riddle of the historicity of Jesus from other historical riddles is his identification with God by the Christian Churches. Since the belief in God, in the sense of a person external to man and intervening in some fashion in human affairs, is opposed to a scientific approach to life, we Freethinkers have to fight it; and since the Churches identify God with Jesus, we have to fight that identification. That fight is necessary, whatever we think on the historical issue, not because we are interested in the man Jesus, but because we are out to fight Theism. We do not believe in the God of the Churches—neither in "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," nor in "Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God," nor in "the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life." We believe this threefold being to be a myth; and we believe the public privilege accorded to that myth, and above

all, its inculcation on children, to be pernicious and against the interests of mankind.

Against the myth of the Churches we set up the scientific approach to the world—an approach determined, not by revelation, but by experiment, and making no pretence to anything but a progressive approximation to truth. It is an attitude which learns by mistakes and treats its theories, not as dogmas demanding belief, but as tools to be tried out in the service of man. To promote that attitude and to secure its public recognition as the basis of our civilisation is task enough for Freethinkers. To split our forces by disputes that have nothing to do with the war of science against supernaturalism, to erect a disputable theory into a kind of negative orthodoxy, and to brand fellow-Freethinkers as "theologians" because they do not toe the line, is feeble, frivolous and fatuous waste of time.

ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON.

### THE SUNDAY QUESTION

THE recent letter addressed to the editor of "The Times" and signed by 69 leading actors and actresses, complaining that they were unable to give any more charity performances on Sundays owing to the conditions of the Law, has revived public interest in the Sunday theatre opening controversy.

The real question, however, is not whether the theatres should be allowed to open on Sundays, but whether the views of a small body of people should be forcibly imposed on the whole public in a country which is—in name, at least—a democracy.

The "strike" by the theatrical profession was caused by the actions of the Lord's Day Observance Society, who have made it their business to deprive the people of the harmless enjoyment of watching a play or variety show and many deserving charities of quite considerable sums of money.

That the general feeling runs toward allowing Sunday performances is proved by the speeches of the clergy, deploring the empty churches and the general pursuit of pleasure rather than spiritual edification. It is also proved by that remarkably accurate system of gauging public opinion—the Gallup Poll. In a poll at the end of April, 1941, the number of persons definitely for the opening of theatres was 67 per cent. and the number who approved of Sunday cinema shows was 71 per cent.; yet for all that, people may not attend a play on Sunday—the Lord's Day Observance Society object.

When I telephoned Mr. H. H. Martin, the secretary of this body of 16th century Puritans, he told me (and there was a note of triumph in his voice) that owing to his efforts, a number of "worldly secular and God-dishonouring performances" had been abandoned. (It may interest Mr. Martin to know that the Merchant Seamen's Charities estimate that they have lost over £300 as a result of the actors' strike.)

The L.D.O.S. Year Book, 1942, records the names of places where games in parks, cinema shows, concerts and theatrical performances have been banned on Sundays owing to Martin's efforts. A perfect example of the restrictions imposed on the civil liberties of the public by the Church and its allies.

We are constantly reminded that we are fighting for freedom, yet here in England the freedom of the individual to spend his one complete leisure day during the whole week, is fettered by taboos and prohibitions based on the Bible-to-the-letter policy.

Throughout the whole of the New Testament there is not one single commandment forbidding harmless entertainment on any particular day; even more, there are the words uttered by the founder of the Christian faith to the effect that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.

Democracy has been defined as meaning government of the people, by the people, for the people. This country is called a democracy; notwithstanding this, the Churches, with the encouragement of Parliament, hold the people in chains—chains that are daily growing weaker, but are still far too strong.

"X."