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VIEW AND OPINIONS

Approaching God

OUR readers will remember that in the autumn of 1938 we were threatened with war against Germany. The Prime Minister, Mr. Chamberlain, went to Germany to persuade Hitler to withhold his hand. The people at home got busy, the clergy particularly so. There was not merely a day of national prayer for peace, but it was kept up through the night. Whether we had war or not, God was to have no peace. If we were to lose a night's rest, at least the full staff of the recording angels should be kept awake—that is, unless they palmed off on the chief of staff one of the many similar petitions of which copies are, we presume, preserved by the angelic civil service. Then Mr. Chamberlain returned brandishing a bit of paper which contained Hitler's signature that he would not go to war. Mr. Chamberlain said he could trust Hitler's word, the people got up from their knees, the King went back to the counting house and the Queen to her domestic duties—as in the other fairy tales—the clergy advertised a new and unmistakable instance in which prayer had been answered, and—we set to work to manufacture armaments as quickly as possible.

God, as per the clergy, having given us peace long enough for Hitler to grab some important territory and, after that, to conquer Poland, withdrew his restraining hand and war, real war, was with us. It was plain to everybody that it was no use praying to God for peace and then leave him to bring it about. Those who behaved in this way would have been imprisoned under the Defence of the Realm Act, and even the clergy recognised that it was not a propitious moment to stage the "I say unto you, that you resist not evil" of Jesus Christ. Still, following the example of the hawker who came one day with an absolutely indelible pencil, and the next week with an eraser which rubbed out any writing that existed, the Churches rose to the occasion. The prayers for peace not having averted war, the Churches rose to it by staging several days of national prayer for a successful war. As no date was given for the manifestation of divine power to operate, the clergy could lean back with satisfaction for

whenever peace came, and whatever the peace was like, they could claim that an answer to their prayer had been given. "Heads we win, tails you lose."

Now we wish to propose another way of making an approach to God, and it may be taken as our contribution to the religious front in this war. It is quite clear the present plan is losing the Churches a great many supporters. The old plan of asking God to do something, and trusting that this something will be done "in God's good time," simply will not do. The mother who is watching her child gasping for its life during an attack of diphtheria will not be satisfied by being told that all will come right "in God's good time." What she is hungering for is the recovery of her child, and the statement that the matter is in God's hands will evoke only the resignation of despair. To pray, with the qualification "Thy will be done," is very unsatisfactory. Presumably God can have his own way in any case, and the only excuse for interference, or offering suggestions, is to advise him of something that would not be done if the said advice was not given. In any prayer that is not one of mere thanks for favours received—and even these may indicate a lively desire for more favours to come—the main idea is to point to something that we believe God might do, or ought to do, but which he will not do unless we can convince him of the necessity for action. Merely now and then to praise God for the wisdom he has displayed might gratify him for a time; otherwise it would grow very monotonous. There must be a saturation point for even gods when the same praise in the same words, generation after generation, reaches them. There must be occasions when gods weary of constant praise and would welcome criticism, however ill-founded and however saucily expressed. We know that even the House of Commons—that repository of the country's wisdom—is the better for lively criticism. The possibility of adverse criticism is good for those in power. "Yes men" are not really helpful to anyone—least of all to those in authority. So we venture to offer a few suggestions as to a method of approaching God. Whether it will do the trick or not is more than we can say. Men will certainly feel that it is more dignified and, therefore, more profitable.

Meeting the Situation

Most people who listen to the 8 a.m. news listen also to the 7-55 a.m. terror. Not because they wish to listen to the latter, but because they tune in a little before the terror disappears. I do not know how many swear at this five-minute preacher, but I feel certain that many owe their proficiency in hearty, variegated cussing to a man who has probably one of the largest and least appreciative audiences in the world. We are ourselves immune, because we happen to be able to read and listen at the same time. But the poor one-way folk must suffer terribly—when they are past the stage of laughing at the performance.

But looking critically at the B.B.C. method of approaching God we think it is ill-devised. That the vast majority of God's followers are poor things—weak, thoughtless, short-sighted and unable to make the best of life—God should be quite well acquainted with. To insist upon these features, to suggest that his own pet plan of saving mankind by the theatrically staged sacrifice of his son, has been an unmistakable failure and is more likely to arouse anger than to bring favours. After all, from the point of view of Christianity the world, and man, are God's handiwork. If God had made man with a stronger bias for doing the right thing, instead of an almost incurable tendency to do the wrong one, the world would have been better than it is. If we can see that every time we grovel before God and explain to him that we are a weak, bad lot, and so indirectly indicting his judgment and his goodness, may it not be that he sees through our not very ingenious way of finding fault with his guardianship?

Gloves Off

Now we suggest that instead of this moaning and groaning, and blaming ourselves for not being better than God made us, suppose the 7-55 terror adopted a more sensible, a more manly plan. Suppose that instead of going on their knees these survivors from the primitive ages stood erect, dropped the Thee's, Thou's and Thy's, and moans of their weakness and worthlessness, and spoke to God in plain, current English in something like the following manner:—

"Oh God, we beg to remind you that for over three years your people have been at war. The war is not of the ordinary kind, which usually ended in a mere redistribution of territory to which neither side had any claim, other than that of the strong arm and wily tongue, and which, above all, left your territory untouched. For both sides believed in you, prayed to you, and when war was over either grovelled before you in repentance or slyly praised you for your good taste in helping them to win the war, while the vanquished sought to regain your favour by promising greater praise in the future. This war is vital to you no less than to us, for while the Germans are as religious as they ever were, they are resorting to the "old German God" whom your followers have led you to believe had faded out of existence.

"Hitherto, O Lord, we have acted as allies; but we would remind you that the services of allies should be mutual to the extent of their several powers and opportunities. We have done our share. We have dethroned other gods wherever and whenever we could, and have given you more than a liberal share of credit for the victories in war that we achieved. A great Chinese sage said many centuries ago that the greatest word in human relationship was reciprocity. We ask, O Lord, for reciprocity, that you shall treat us as liberally as we have treated you. We ask for your help, not with the usual whining petitions of the beggar craving for food, but in that feeling for reciprocity which is the cement of civilised life.

"On earth, O Lord, there is a clamour for a second front, for even a third or fourth front. Why not,

O Lord, give us a heavenly front? You cannot have forgotten that once upon a time that heavenly front was in operation. You took direct action against the Egyptians when your following consisted of a single people—without a country. You, over and over again, as we find in "sacred" annals and Church records, evidenced that heavenly front by scattering your and our enemies. If that be not true, then are the records of your fatherly care for your children, and your loving concern for your followers, so much nonsense. If you are on our side then your actions should be clear, not merely to your friends, but also to your enemies.

"Let us, O Lord, remind you of one more thing. The greatest single help that has been given to your people who are fighting has come from the Russians, who deliberately rejected your power and denied your very existence. We therefore warn you that it will not do to count this war as previous wars were reckoned when you stood safe whichever side won. The side that won praised and thanked you for the victory. The side that lost grovelled a little lower, confessed their sins and shortcomings, and set about praising you and flattering you with renewed energy. To-day the picture of Russia leaving God out, and the picture of the rest of the Allies with God in—officially—is one that is already attracting notice. Our leaders tell us that this war is a fight for very existence. To a very considerable extent it is a fight for your existence also. After all, the history of the gods shows that none of them is endowed with immortality.

"We have been told over and over again that in dealing with our enemies we must take off the gloves. I think that it is good advice for our accepted friends—including yourself."

We really believe that if there is any god to listen, a morning address on the lines above suggested may do some good. It is at least more manly, more dignified, and certainly more truthful than the daily grovel, crying to God what worthless, helpless creatures we are, and then rise to our feet ready to pitch into any man who makes the same allegation in answer to our saying how weak we are, how wicked we are, and how incapable we are of looking after ourselves. If the way in which the 7-55 terrors describe us morning after morning be true, then of man we may say what Byron said of kings: "It is poor economy to save the like."

CHAPMAN COHEN.

SEX REFORM IN WAR TIME

WAR always brings about certain abnormal conditions in matters of sexual relationships. Abnormal stresses of life produce strange results; the strain of living reacts upon the whole personality. The present war has intensified these conditions. Conscription is on a larger scale than ever before; men and women are brought together under unsettling conditions; large-scale movements of population have taken place which are without precedent. The result has been that social life has undergone an upheaval; morality, in the accepted sense of the term, has been shaken. If this were the whole of the story, resulting problems would not be very severe. It could be admitted that

ethics have been upset so far as the theological pattern is concerned and that a new social morality, adjusted to suit the changing temper, would have to be thought out in order to guide human relationships. For almost a century morals have been shifting over to a fresh foundation, grounded upon scientific methods of comparison and experiment; the present crisis would mean no more than that an upheaval within civilisation has caused the final crack in the old theological scheme which founds right conduct upon acceptance of certain religious beliefs and dogmas.

Unfortunately, this is not the whole of the story. The actual state of affairs is serious in that venereal disease has increased by some 70 per cent. since the war started. The Government have found it necessary to introduce Regulation 33b in order to provide for the compulsory treatment of persons who have rendered themselves sources of infection. These diseases have become a scourge within modern civilisation; it is said very frequently that they are due to the lax sexual ethics of the times. The Churches reply by urging chastity—a policy which, whatever may be said for it in theory, has clearly broken down so far as practice is concerned. The parliamentary debates upon Regulation 33b reopen the whole subject of sexual morality and the attitude which the State should adopt concerning it.

In the past the prevailing sex ethic has been determined by a coalescing of two distinct attitudes of mind. The Churches have laid down an absolute moral standard, demanding that relationships should only take place within the marriage tie. This ethic has been founded upon certain theological beliefs. At the same time, it has been supported by a second point of view, that of the conventional citizen who represents a hangover from the theology of the past. He does not go to church himself, but he accepts and propagates the Church viewpoint in moral relationships. Both attitudes have been supported by prudery, which dislikes any discussion of the whole subject, and propriety, which treats marriage as a contract and is annoyed by anything which may disturb its commercial aspects. A fusion of these two standpoints has prevailed so far as conventional moral propaganda has been concerned; the semi-religious synthesis must be blamed for any disaster which has now overtaken society. A rational and scientific attitude towards sexual relationships and eugenics has never held sway. The prevailing viewpoint has brought about the situation which prevails.

The Christian ethic has been framed by a sharp asceticism in morals; it has always tried to insist with rabid intolerance that its own ideals should govern legislation. At no time has it been successful in controlling social life; disease and prostitution flourished as much during the ages of faith as at any other period! In more recent times the Churches have expended their energy in a positive policy of "hush-hush" by seeking to close down upon any free and impartial discussion of sexual subjects. Books and plays to which objection has been taken by the parsons have been attacked; laws affecting marriage and divorce or the spread of contraceptive knowledge have been made the subject of clerical petitions and opposition. The ecclesiastics have not sought to legislate solely in the interests of their own members; their aim has been to establish a general ban over society. In the Irish Free State the ecclesiastical party have succeeded and a general censorship prevails. A resulting ignorance has led frequently to tragic results. Sex has been regarded as "sin"; disease has been treated as the fruit of wrongdoing. The sufferer has been avoided as a moral leper, with the result that an artificial theory of chastity has covered the rapid spread of disease in the world of fact. Both the prude and the ecclesiastic have assisted in maintaining a moral pattern based upon theology unspiced by any consideration of national health and general happiness.

During the last war Dr. Havelock Ellis spoke of the subject in his "Essays in Wartime." He pointed out that venereal diseases will increase under war conditions and that they demand a specialised remedy based upon science. More recently, Professor Haldane has called attention to the comparative easiness of both prevention and cure. Yet every step in this direction has been opposed by the ecclesiastics as conducing to immorality. In Manchester some years ago it was largely their protests which led to the closure of municipal "cleansing stations." The Mothers' Union and kindred bodies have poured out a flood of merely silly propaganda in opposition to contraception and divorce. The general attitude has been supported by various divines in numerous publications. One result has been that the subject of venereal diseases have never been regarded objectively by the public eye. They have always been in the nature of a mystery associated with dire, and yet common, sin! Prevention and cure have been so hedged around by theological morality that an increase has now taken place and society has been unprepared to meet it. Incidentally, the vast drop in case-statistics during the inter-war years was the outcome of a scientific and medical approach which the Churches did nothing to assist.

Remedies are to hand and, in the general interest, must be applied. The whole field of morality needs to be viewed rationally. The law is restricted in its rights to social ethics where acts and conduct determine mutual relationships. Private conduct is not of public interest and should not be made the subject of legal interference. Morals must be regarded from a non-theological angle. They should be shaped by a scientific attitude to the universe, be regarded as relative to given conditions, and be open to tests of comparison and experiment. Where conduct does affect society, as in certain extensions of sexual relationships, the subject should be approached objectively, without theological prejudice, and sifted in the light of scientific remedies or preventatives. If the theological barrier had been pulled down 25 years ago the present outbreak of venereal disease need not have happened.

The Churches represent a small percentage of the population; it is an undemocratic procedure to allow them to extend their influence over legislation which is intended for the community as a whole. They bring to the subject an obsolete theory of sin and redemption which fails to fit the facts and is cruel in its general effects. It is monstrous that these minority bodies should seek to ban books or to maintain an attitude generally which could only be justified if sex and sin were equivalent terms. They maintain a general position which is no more than a resuscitation of primitive taboos. The clearest remedy for the present situation is that of a sane and healthy humanism which desires to evolve on earth the kingdom of man, and which is ready to use science to that end when determining the limits of social, or anti-social, conduct. A short-term policy should also be demanded which looks facts in the face and which establishes a scientific policy capable of treating venereal disease in an objective and medical way. As the old theology of sin has faded, the unhelpful social and moral attitude maintained by the Churches should fade with it. A free discussion of the problems of sex should be accompanied by determined efforts to utilise innate urges in a social manner and, in the case of disease, should be undeterred by talk of sin from seeking to improve the health of society through every remedy which may lie to hand. It is futile for the Churches to maintain that such a policy would lower the moral tone of society. The war conditions, and the need for Regulation 33b, provide ample evidence of the actual sequels to their attitude. It is impossible to obtain good ends by mere repression, fear or distortion, and this is a lesson which the ecclesiastics have yet to learn.

ACID DROPS

WE are all familiar with the old tag that there are lies, damned lies, and statistics. Equally illustrative would be the maxim, "There are lies, damned lies and religious truths." Here, for instance, is a passage from an editorial in one of our leading Christian papers, the "Universe." The writer says (December 23):—

"The very first plays were performed by the clergy in church, and in the 16th century St. Philip founded, with the help of Palestrina and others, and instituted 'musical oratories'—sacred concerts—performed in the oratory which St. Philip founded. His idea was that people should have entertainments and amusements, and one of his favourite statements was, 'You cannot have recreation apart from the Creator.'"

The last sentence is just religious rubbish. The rest of the passage is, in substance, just not true—or, one may say, it is a Christian truth. For plays were performed in the earliest periods of human history. They begin in magical rituals for the purpose of securing for man the gratification of his needs. As civilisation develops they begin to assume more what we should understand as plays, but still with the aroma of religion around them. There is not a part of the world in which religious and semi-religious plays are not found. It has even been held, and is still held by many that the whole story of Jesus Christ is part of a religious play, of the same quality and calibre of our own Passion Play; and the literature of Egypt, Greece and Rome provides us with many examples of plays, religious and otherwise.

It was probably because these ancient religious plays were so saturated with religion—non-Christian religion—that the Church strove so hard to suppress plays altogether. They were discouraged almost to the point of extinction, and even when they became more prominent, actors were in this country legally described as rogues and vagabonds. But anyone who takes the trouble to look up the history of plays and the theatre will soon find the truth of the matter. "The great lying Church" runs true to form.

But again we must protest against the supposition that Catholic religionists are the only ones who distort truth and create a history that will suit the occasion. There is the Radio Padre—financed, we believe, by the Government—and full of assumed experiences and startling adventures that never happened, who in his broadcast for December 23 stepped aside from his usual sugary commonplaces to inform the world that when they received presents at Christmas time, or enjoyed themselves, they should remember that they would never have had presents given at that time of the year but for Jesus Christ. Now if there is one thing clear—the readers will find it in Frazer, or in any competent work on these ancient customs—the giving of presents on the birth of the new God, and the general jollifications, were in full swing in the ancient pagan world centuries before the Christian Church was heard of. The Radio Padre cannot, even for a comfortable salary, be so ignorant as not to know that the Christian Church took over these ante-Christian customs. No wonder that preachers talk so much about "Christian truth." It really is quite a distinct brand from that which is current among ordinary folk.

Having bombarded heaven with several days of prayer for victory, and nothing having happened than would have occurred had all the clergy stood on their heads simultaneously, preparations are being made for a special attack on God Almighty for January 31. There is to be a day of prayer for the Channel

Islands, solo. There can be no mistake about this. The Channel Islands do not total a very great amount of territory, and if heaven arranges something special it should be noted at once. All that is needed is for the clergy to fix a time limit, and to announce that if God does nothing severe steps will be taken. For the sake of human dignity, pleading without promised reprisals is a very poor form of diplomacy.

We are a free people, but—as a famous music-hall star would have said—with knobs on. We believe in freedom—all of us—but all cannot go to a Sunday performance because we have an Established Church. We believe in freedom of thought and movement, but the law is often there to see that we do not take the assertion too seriously. We believe in every man having whatever religion he pleases, or going without any, but in business and politics we are warned to go slow or he loses his job. Certainly we are a free people—but in the words of a now dead whimsical entertainer—with knobs on.

Here is an example of how we go to work—in an Army that is fighting for freedom. The story is taken from the "Church Times." A soldier wished to go to church one Sunday. But on that Sunday there was no church parade, and permission to go was refused; so the gunner took French leave and went to church on his own. For staying away from his company without permission he was placed "on charge." The soldier complained to the vicar, the vicar to the officer—and the man was not punished.

Now suppose it had been a case where a Freethinking soldier wished to attend a Freethought meeting, and suppose the soldier had appealed to the President of the N.S.S. Would he have been let off? We have a very slight suspicion he would not. We really are a free people—but still with knobs on.

Another notable discovery comes from Cardinal Hinsley. Dictatorship, he says, is a direct result of Protestantism. That is not only nonsense, but it must have been said with quite a bulge in his cheek. Dictatorships existed, of course, before Christianity was heard of, but from the outset the Christian Church was a dictatorship and remained so for many centuries. The Roman Church has but one example of election in its system. That is the election of the Pope, and even with that the Cardinals solemnly assure the world, truly with their tongues in their cheeks, that it is God who leads them to elect the Pope. What confidence Cardinal Hinsley must have in the gullibility of his followers.

Lest Protestants should suddenly be attacked with a feeling that they may claim to be the real guardians of liberty, we may point out that in nearly every instance when a particular form of Protestantism has been in power they have been just as intolerant as was the older Church. Look for examples of Protestantism when it established itself in the newly discovered North America, or at Geneva, or Scotland, or elsewhere. Everywhere will be found suppression of freedom of speech where religion was concerned. Of course, the very development of Protestant sects made some degree of toleration necessary. The development of commerce also told. But all dominant Christian bodies have manifested intolerance and practised dictatorships whenever conditions were favourable; and our Sunday laws and Blasphemy laws are other examples that come to hand.

There was an outbreak of fire at Grays Parish Church, Essex. The organist rushed to warn the choir at practice and then managed to beat out the flames before they became serious. God looked on.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

H. SPENCE.—Very pleased to hear from you and to know you are keeping well. Notes appear this week. We do not forget old friends, although we have so much writing to do that personal correspondence has to be put in the background.

L. ROBERTSON.—Will see that a bound volume is set aside for you, but we run the printed issue very close. Your note about the other paper is what one might expect.

S. G. MASON.—A good letter, and one which, added to the large number of similar ones on the same theme, will gradually bring results. We have shown in these columns that where religion is concerned, the B.B.C. has little regard for either truthfulness or fair play. The pretence that the British public must not be permitted to listen to opinions on religion with which they do not agree is impudent and insulting.

G. I. DEAS and T. G. ROGERS.—Received with thanks. Will appear as soon as space permits.

T. W.—We believe that only a churchwarden could take the steps you suggest. Ordinary citizens would be without status.

IAN YULE.—Your order for bound volume for 1942 has been booked; thanks.

WAR DAMAGE FUND.—R. Holmes, 3s.

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

WE beg to thank very heartily the many who have sent us greetings and good wishes for 1943. We would like to write to each one, but we are very, very busy, and must content ourselves with this note of acknowledgement. If we were looking for encouragement and appreciation we have both in plenty, and if we deserve but a small part of the kindly things said, we feel proud of getting it.

A new edition of Mr. Cohen's "Materialism Restated" is in the press and, we hope, will be on sale in the course of a few weeks. The author considers it as one of his most important books, an opinion that is shared by those who have read it.

The Catholic Directory shows a falling off of Catholics in England and Wales of 79,575 members. In relation to the growth of population the falling off would be still more serious. For we must bear in mind the care with which the Catholic priesthood watch their people from year to year, guard them against intermarriage, and see to it as well as they can that children are handed over to the priest so far as the shaping of their minds are concerned. No wonder the R.C.s join the cry for more State pressure to see that all children are branded deeply enough to make every parson feel that in due time the sheep will come to be sheared.

Stalin, says the special Moscow correspondent of the "Daily Telegraph," "tirelessly instils the idea of self-help into the Russian people at war." Our clergy assert that "self-help" will not carry British people without God. Which leaves us with an unanswered problem. Are the Russians so much superior, as men and women, to we Britishers that they can do without God what we cannot do without God's help? We submit that query to the Brains Trust—not that any such question would ever be permitted. The one who doles out the selected questions would take great care that such a question never sees the light; and probably the General Intelligence class would also be shocked.

A Roman Catholic U.S.A. chaplain writes to the "Universe" that he found his brother priests in England "a fine body of men . . . most cordial, offering the best help they can." We are not surprised, but we are quite certain that had the report been exhaustive and fair he would also have found many who were neither good nor useful; and in that case we would wager the "Universe" would never have made that part of the report public.

Besides, we can assure the "Universe" and any other interested party that no Freethinker ever dreamed of denying that there are many good, kindly, honest, helpful and generally worthy men in the Roman Catholic Church, and in other Churches. Our case against the Christian Churches as a whole, whether R.C. or of any other brand, is not that it has blackguards in their ranks, but that they get hold of good men and women, distort their sense of social justice of right and wrong, and make them a general nuisance where they might otherwise have been wholly useful citizens; and the real question we should like some responsible Christian to grapple with is, not the good people among Christians, or even the bad ones, but the number of good men and women who are outside the creeds of all the Churches and do not bother their heads about any kind of a God. We should welcome the attempt to deal with that problem. Our columns are open to any Christian who can speak with any degree of authority.

The Birmingham Branch N.S.S. report many items of useful work accomplished during the past year under trying conditions. Rambles, discussions, contacting members and likely members, searching for suitable lecture halls have been part of the activities. Fortunately, in Mr. C. H. Smith, the branch has a secretary who cannot be kept away by closed doors and who is continually exploring any likely channel for renewing local activity.

Not so very long ago the Pope received a Japanese envoy—much to the bewilderment of a number of American and English Roman Catholics, who were not altogether persuaded that everything was quite in order. On the strength of this the Vatican sent £100,000 to be used for the relief of people in Japanese internment camps; and now news has just come along that the Japanese military authorities have "retained" £40,000 of this sum for their own army. The way the Japanese newspapers and radio put it is that the Pope sent £40,000 for the comforts of Japanese troops "in recognition of our righteous mission." We would dearly like to be present at the next meeting of the Pope and the Jap—though we have no doubt whatever that they will get along quite well, provided that the Roman religion is not badgered too much in Japan. But what have our own Roman Catholics to say?

Two letters have reached us expressing thanks for our introducing them to "The Philosophy of 'As If,'" by Vahinger. We congratulate both on their liking for a very useful piece of work. We would like to force the Brains Trust to study the main thesis of the book, and their understanding tested by a competent teacher. Huxley would enjoy roasting them.

TOO MANY INCARNATIONS!

It is sad indeed to think that once again at this festive season thousands of ignorant and consequently misguided people will have been worshipping Jesus Christ as the Son of God born of the Holy Ghost without the aid of an earthly father.

This fact reveals, as many similar facts do, how very little intensive thought is engaged in on the part of "God's elect." (I use the orthodox capital "G" more by force of habit than anything else.) The majority of Christian people I know—and having been a minister of religion for four years before becoming a convinced Atheist I know a good many—have no idea how many religions claim a virgin birth for their "God-man."

Christianity is one of the latest attempts in history to put this fable over on a credulous people. The same thing was put forward by other religions before Christianity, and recorded in earlier "holy books" than the New Testament.

Some, of course, will say that the subject is too delicate to discuss. It is almost too ridiculous, I admit. But, as Macaulay said, "Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely." So here goes. We will glance at the parallels in other religions with the story of the birth of Jesus of Bethlehem (?).

I need not, of course, recount the New Testament story, as most of my readers will be fully aware of its content, and will immediately see the analogy between the various accounts.

Krishna was acclaimed to have been a miraculous incarnation in the womb of Devaki. A company of angels announced his birth before the event took place and spoke of it as a deliverance. The birth was indicated by a star in the heavens. The babe was born in a cave (Justin Martyr, who lived less than 100 years after Christ, placed the scene of the Christian nativity in a cave). The child was adored by cowherds. His life was threatened by the ruling monarch at the time. All male children of the same age were slaughtered by the King's decree; and so on. Four centuries before Christ, Krishna was declared to be an incarnation of Vishnu.

Gautama Buddha was held, many centuries before Christ, to have been born miraculously of the holy Maya. He descended from heaven into her womb. The Devas in heaven sang of his birth, declaring that he would bring peace and joy to men. The babe was recognised by the aged Asita as the one sent for the world's salvation. Buddha's life was threatened by the King. As a child Buddha was found to be amazingly clever and to dispute with learned men.

Chinese legends inform us that Fohi (3468 B.C.) and Lao-Kiun (600 B.C.) were born of virgins. In Persia the famous Zoroaster was born miraculously. In Egypt, Horus, called the Saviour, was born of the virgin Isis—and, let it be noted, the Egyptian Bible is the oldest in the world. To the above may be added Hercules, Bacchus, Mercury, Amphion, Apollo, Perseus, Acolus, Plato, Baldr the Good, Quetzalcoatl—and in the case of the latter, which took place in Mexico, it should be noted that that country was not discovered until 1,500 years after Christ.

It seems that woven around the leaders of almost all religions can be found such tales. Why then should Christianity be looked upon as an exception? Why should she claim Divine right to the Virgin Birth? Surely the copyright should go to the first to claim a virgin birth? And that was certainly not Christianity! As a matter of fact, many scholars, who are not to be put off by a lot of sanctimonious talk, are of the opinion that in all probability Christianity derived many of its "best seller" stories from the mythologies of other and older faiths.

And, of course, it cannot be disputed that there are many older virgin-birth stories than the one in the pages of the New Testament.

Indeed, comparative religion is a very interesting study, enough to give any Bishop a headache.

LLOYD COLE.

NOTES ON NEW YEAR'S DAY

CHILDREN in the east end of Newcastle-on-Tyne 70 years ago escorted a new King of Shieldfield on New Year's Day round the streets of the district.

The king, dressed in his regal robes and wearing a tinsel crown, was mounted on a gaily caparisoned horse.

The good townsmen, especially the publicans, provided His Royal Highness with copious draughts of beer; so much so that the king was completely intoxicated by midday.

Children in Egypt 7,000 years ago saw a new King of Egypt on New Year's Day perambulating the streets of the district. Beer brewed from the barley of the bloodstained Nile gladdened the hearts of gods and men. The children of Egypt and of Newcastle-on-Tyne were both civilised. Their parents were "food-producers," to adopt Professor Perry's useful term. Professor Perry divides mankind into two classes—viz., food-gatherers and food-producers. The people of Egypt were the earliest food-producers (by almost 1,000 years) before the rest of mankind. All other men were food-gatherers. Only a few such people exist to-day, such as the Eskimo, Tribes of Terra del Fuego, and Veddas of Ceylon.

Men, in passing from a food-gathering life into a food-producing state of existence, are leaving an uncivilised method of living and entering into a civilised way of life. Egypt offered the best place on earth for men to settle down to a peaceful life. Egypt meant the Nile Valley. This is protected from enemies on the east and west by immense deserts. The north has the Mediterranean and the arid peninsula of Sinai; the south the highlands of Abyssinia and Nubia. The climate is also favourable. The Nile not only supplied water but was a highway for thousands of miles. On its banks there was abundance of game, and from its waters fish could be taken for food.

Wild barley grew near to the river. The ears were plucked and the corn stored. The earliest civilised man planted it near his hut and looked after it and was rewarded by finer grain. The great story really begins when some genius—perhaps the chief of a tribe, maybe even a king—taught his people to dig trenches to conduct the Nile flood into suitable hollows to form reservoirs of water for future use. Gradually a complete irrigation system was developed. The peculiarity of the Nile flood is the result of the source of the water being so far away that it takes months for the flood to travel down-stream. In Mesopotamia the sources of the water are not so far away and the flood comes on at the beginning of summer. It subsides quickly and the young plants are scorched and die. The waters of the Nile subside so gradually that wild vegetation has time to take a firm hold and live. Under such conditions an elaborate system of irrigation had time to develop, but in Mesopotamia we must presuppose a system borrowed from someone else. This is why the irrigation system of Egypt must have been the parent of that which dominates the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris.

These people who lived on the banks of the Nile and were the aboriginal inhabitants, are called Proto-Egyptians by Professor Elliot Smith and were followed by the people of pre-dynastic days. Egypt was now divided into two kingdoms, the "Two Lands" of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Just at the point where the Nile splits up to form its delta, Heliopolis had sprung up in pre-dynastic days. Heliopolis means "the town of the sun," because in its temples Osiris was worshipped under the title Re-Osiris and was an embodiment of the solar deity. Osiris is a mysterious god who seems to have probably been one of the earlier kings. Like Julius Cæsar, he became a god. These people had learned the art of embalming, so when the corrupt body was made incorruptible, the mortal man became immortal and was worshipped; thus religion arose with its temples, priests and priestesses.

Osiris was identified with the Nile and associated with its flood. The priests of Heliopolis saw the Dog-Star Sirius rise in the eastern sky just before sunrise on July 19, 4241 B.C. It coincided with the inundation that year and, as Breasted points out in his "History of Egypt," "it is the earliest fixed date in the history of the world as known to us."

July 19, 4241 B.C. is thus the first New Year's Day authenticated by history.

HENRY SPENCE.

ROGER BACON AND THE AWAKENING OF EUROPE

(Continued from page 5)

THE difficulties in the way of a student in the 13th century were enormous. From the Christian world around he could get nothing. To turn to the Jews and Mohammedans was to invite the charge of heresy; to study the stars was to hold intercourse with Satan; to know more than the ignorant rabble of monks around the most unforgivable of crimes. Books were often not to be obtained and, when obtainable, only after much difficulty. Bacon himself complains: "The philosophical works of Aristotle, of Avicenna, of Cicero, of Seneca and other ancients, cannot be had without great cost; their principal works have not been translated into Latin, and others are not to be obtained in ordinary libraries or elsewhere. The admirable books of Cicero de Republica are not to be found anywhere, so far as I can hear, though I have made anxious inquiry for them in different parts of the world, and by various messengers. I could never find the works of Seneca, though I made diligent search for them for 20 years or more." Few words, but they help us to realise vividly the intellectual vacuity of his age, and the immense injury done by Christianity to the world of letters.

Unable to find what he required in Christendom, Bacon turned elsewhere. Moslem and Jewish doctors became his instructors—whether by personal contact or by writing only is not clear, save that their influence is plain. Through him we again trace the influence of the East on the West, and it is for that reason that I have selected him as the incarnation of the new spirit. Disheartened by 20 years of disappointing labour, ruined by the money spent upon purchasing of books and manufacturing of instruments, disgusted at the ignorance of the monks, whom he describes as knowing no more of the properties of a circle than its power of keeping away evil spirits, despairing of making any impression upon the thick wall of ignorance, behind which Christianity had entrenched itself, Bacon joined the Order of St. Francis, among whom books and study were looked upon as hindrances to a pious life.

His new masters forbade him to write anything under pain of imprisonment, and Bacon does not appear to have disobeyed for some time. But the craving of his mind was not to be suppressed. "Some few chapters on different subjects, written at the entreaty of friends," called down the attention of his superiors. Deprived of writing materials, Bacon was sent to Paris in 1257, like a badly-behaved schoolboy, to await the pleasure of the General of his Order. His pleasure was soon expressed. To prison Bacon went, and remained there for ten long, weary years, deprived of writing materials, books, instruments; the first in modern times to be persecuted for a philosophic heresy; the first also of that long list of victims that Christianity sacrificed upon the altar of its ignorant idolatry.

Bacon's first term of imprisonment endured until 1267—a period of ten years. During his imprisonment the malice of his enemies indirectly led to the writing of the books by virtue of which he still lives. Reports having reached the ears of Pope Urban IV. concerning the heretical nature of Bacon's work and writings, one of his chaplains, Gui Fulcodi, afterwards

Clement IV., was commissioned to inquire into the matter. Whether Fulcodi was favourable to the poor, imprisoned scholar is uncertain. Several writers are of that opinion, but Professor Adamson dismisses such an opinion as a "pure conjecture." Whatever be the true motive of Clement's interference, it is certain that, immediately after his election as Pope, he commanded Bacon to supply him with a "fair copy" of all his writings. The issuing of such an order was easier than its execution. The bare materials required would cost about £60. The Pope had sent nothing, and Bacon was penniless. From people in position he could get nothing. The Franciscans were too powerful to be crossed. "How often," he laments, "was I looked upon as a shameless beggar! how often was I repulsed! Distressed above all that can be imagined, I compelled my friends, even those who were in necessitous circumstances, to contribute what they had, to raise money at interest, to sell much of their property, to pawn the rest." It was by such struggles as these that Bacon was able to comply with the Pope's demand, and in the extraordinary short time of about eighteen months wrote those treatises, the "Opus Majus," "Opus Minus" and "Opus Tertium," which mark him as the first Englishman to mark out the proper course for a scientific study of nature.

These three essays are, as Green says, wonderful alike in plan and detail. With many of the scientific idiosyncrasies of his age Bacon had not quite parted company. He accepts alchemy, astrology, and even appears to have speculated on the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone and the elixir of life. But in nearly all other respects he belongs to the 17th century rather than to the 13th century. At a time when the introduction of mathematics into physics was being protested against by Albertus Magnus, the "Ape of Aristotle," Bacon wrote: "Physicists ought to know that their science is powerless unless they apply to it the power of mathematics, without which observation

* Green says ("Short History of English People"): "Some of the brief writings of Bacon had been brought under the notice of Pope Clement IV. by one of his chaplains. The chaplain was Clement himself, serving Urban in that capacity."

(Continued on next page)

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, Etc.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead): Sunday, 12 noon, Mr. L. EBURY.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1): Sunday, 11-0, Professor G. KETON. M.A., LL.D.—"Some Makers of Modern England (4) Chatham and the First British Empire."

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. Meetings every Sunday at Laycock's Café, Kirkgate, 7-0.

Glasgow Secular Society (25, Hillfoot Street, off Duke Street, Dennistoun, Glasgow): Sunday, 3-0, a Lecture.

Leicester Secular Society (75, Humberstone Gate): Sunday, 3-0, a Lecture.

Waterfoot, Lancs. (85, Fairfield Avenue, Edgeside): Sunday, 3-0, Mr. J. CLAYTON, a Lecture.

languishes and is incapable of certitude." And again, he complains that the neglect of this instrument of research has paralysed all efforts, "For he who knows not mathematics cannot know any other science; and, what is more, he cannot discover his own ignorance or find its proper remedies." While Thomas Aquinas and his school were spinning metaphysical subtleties, discussing questions that fully realised the child's definition of a parable as "A heavenly story with no earthly meaning," Bacon was striving to introduce a new method into philosophy, insisting upon the uselessness of speculation unless brought into line with experience, warning his contemporaries that "The shortness of life requires that we should choose for our study the most useful objects, and exhibit knowledge with all clearness and certitude." At a time when to question the authority of the Church meant imprisonment or death, he would declare that "Authority is valueless unless its warranty is shown; it does not explain, it only forces us to believe. And, as far as reason is concerned, we cannot distinguish between sophism and proof unless we verify the conclusion by experience and practice."

A theoretical musician, geometrician and geographer, Bacon stumbled upon many truths, the full value of which was not seen for centuries later. Whether he discovered gunpowder as the result of his own researches, or simply gained a knowledge of its manufacture from the Mohammedans, is uncertain, but his writings show him to have been acquainted with it. He also describes a substance (phosphorus) that "glows in the dark like a full moon." He suggested the possibility of reaching the Indies by sailing to the west, a suggestion which reaches Columbus through the medium of a Spanish writer, Tedro de Alliaco. He suggested a reform of the calendar that was not carried out until 1582. If he did not construct a telescope, he at least laid down the lines on which one might be built, 200 years before Galileo. It is after having dealt with the laws of light and corrected many of the erroneous opinions then current, that he concludes by saying: "It is easy to conclude from the rules established alone that the largest things can appear very small and vice versa, that very distant objects can appear very near and vice versa, for we can cut glasses in such sort and dispose them in such a manner in relation to our sight and external objects that the rays are broken and refracted in the direction which we wish. So that we shall see an object near or remote, under whatever angle we wish, and thus at the most incredible distance read the most minute letters or count the grains of sand. In this way we may also make the sun, the moon and the stars descend by bringing their figures nearer the earth."

"QUONDAM."

(To be concluded)

THOUGHTS

I HAVE recently been reading Richard Jefferies "Story of My Heart." It was a complete revelation; I believe if one might strive to attain some of his ideals it may be the beginning of the inward dream one has felt from childhood, an idea of something lovely, of some enduring beauty which shall be the very essence of existence—not a moment felt or dreamed, not a wish of childhood, dismissed in the foolish dead scepticism of adulthood, trampled upon by the lifeless futility of commercialism.

There is one truth I know and will stand to swear upon whatever I make of life, and that is the beauty of life. Jefferies has written on the beauty of the flesh, of human passion, the trees and the sky, the earth and the eternal sea. Another great one of our time, Charles Morgan, has written on the beauty of the mind, the mind which transcends all and gives us our immortality. Many, many of us must have felt these things; must have ached and dreamed and longed for what we knew to be the

truth, for what free youth knows to be its birthright; the good things of life, the worthwhile things, space to think, to live and to rest, the abundant goodnesses that nature produces; only the best of what the hand, eye and mind can give us, the education to appreciate all higher forms of self-expression.

This is a matter which is beyond politics, though obviously Capitalism is among the most retrogressive, and any system which aims at the emancipation of the poor is a step in the right direction, e.g., Socialism, Communism; these political systems will never get to the heart of the problem. As I said before, it is beyond politics.

I have, I suppose, no right to put forward opinions and to criticise the badness of a world in which I exist and for which I have no solution. One human being is so helpless. I find it impossible to love my fellow creatures, and yet there is in the simplest, poorest ones often a wistful longing for what Jefferies called the deepest soul life; I have seen it in their eyes when they were off their guard. It is there where the Church cunningly steps in and promises to supply their need. In reality it crushes the lovely untrammelled mind of a child and chokes the inherent sense of logic most of us possess. Perhaps all people would wish to think as Jefferies, perhaps even the dullest souls have a vague yearning for the lovely things of life, but between the Church and the State and a vicious commercial system they are beaten before they start.

I believe it is a matter of education. When I have a child I hope he can spend the first ten years of life in the country to absorb and live with nature; I hope I may have a library to turn him loose in to find for himself the good from the bad or mediocre, and the loveliest of music for him when he wants it. So many things I want for my child, that he may live as fully and as deeply as he is physically, mentally and emotionally capable; that he shall know all the truths of life as soon as he wishes to, that he may know the essential beauty of physical passion, the power of self-expression, the ability to dream, and to use his imagination creatively, that he may never be crushed and distorted by superstition or religion, that he may love life and always understand the wonder and beauty of it; hating pettiness, sordidness and ugliness, wishing with Jefferies for the-highest possible soul life.

I know the commercialists will tell me my ideal is impossible, that one cannot live with such dreams and not starve. It is not impossible. I have lived in the world for 22 years, I am not very experienced; when old ones told me my ideals were wild and Utopianly impossible I sometimes wondered. But they are not, and any who say that they are, are old—old in mind. But some people are wise, and there were some that knew the truth, that the highest knowledge is of the mind and the deepest beauty is of the senses, that the world is full to abundance for all, that we humanity have made war, poverty and life futilities, and we humanity must strive by being more in ourselves each individual, by evolution of the mind to cure ourselves, or suffer perpetual personal, national and international strife.

PAMELA HUNKA.

VOLTAIRE'S ROMANCES

One popular idea of Voltaire is that of a mere scoffer at sacred things, a ribald reviler of the best human sentiments. Another common notion of him is that of a cold sceptic, who subjected everything to the test of a narrow reasoning process: a man who cared nothing personally either for good or evil; who was all brain and no heart. If these romances fairly reflect the real nature of Voltaire, they exhibit the character of a warm-hearted, sensitive, undiscriminating man, who sickened over suffering and human persecution and who employed, with an almost reckless prodigality against the enemies he hated most, the instinctive weapon of wit which served him best.—"Westminster Review."