

# THE FREETHINKER

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## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### The Witch Mania

APART from the books describing the belief in witches and demons, the two most interesting works in recent times on the subject are "Witch Cult in Western Europe," by Miss Margaret Murray (1921) and "The God of the Witches," by the same author. (There is no date on the title page, but it is later than the other book named.) Miss Murray's main thesis is that the witchcraft which flourished during the medieval period, and later, was a survival, growing in strength, of the pre-Christian fertility cults. Whether this theory fills the bill or not, it is an attractive contribution, and comes to us in the nature of an explanation instead of providing readers with a contemptuous description of semi-insane behaviour. It must be borne in mind that the charges brought against men and women very often centred around births, cattle, storms, ruination of crops, etc., and it would be only following a line with which all anthropologists are familiar, that the gods of one generation become the demons of another. The best description of the difference between religion and superstition was: "Religion, superstition allowed; superstition, religion not allowed"—and a scientific description of gods and devils might truly run: "God, devils given first place; devils, gods in a subordinate position." In the witchcraft of the medieval and later ages, Miss Murray sees the continuation of the dethroned pagan deities; and to some extent we agree with her. Certainly the elaborate services of the Roman Catholic religion, with its miracle workings, and its pleas for help from one or more of a cloud of "saints," supports the definition. There is another consideration worth noting. The Renaissance, essentially a revival of pre-Christian

culture, had opened to Europe much of the forgotten learning of the ancient world. The Mohammedan civilisation also had its influence, with Jews acting largely as the instruments of transmission. It was the Jewish influence in dealing with disease, which merely on professional grounds threatened the power and profits of the Church, that had to do with the risings against the Jews. The Church, with its miracle cures, could not tamely submit to this inroad on both its income and status. (We shall have more to say on this head when we come to deal with the demonology of Jesus and the New Testament. We merely note this in passing.) Without the impetus to an acquisition of scientific knowledge coming from the schools of Mohammedan Spain, it is not easy to see how the revival of European life could have occurred. We owe more to the intercourse with the Mohammedans and the Jews of Islamic Spain than has yet been admitted by our historians. Most of our students leave school without knowing anything about it. We may say that the majority really know less than something because they have yet to unlearn what has been given them.

Demonology was also strengthened by the rise of Protestantism. Catholic and Protestant, each saw the agency of Satan in the power of the other. The Roman Church saw nothing in the rise of Protestantism but the endeavour of Satan to destroy the power of the Church; and Protestants openly declared that the Papacy was working for the interests of the Devil. One is reminded of Boccaccio's story of the Jew who, after visiting Rome, joined the Church because he felt that nothing so wicked could exist for so long if God had not been behind it. But the historic fact is that, instead of Protestantism weakening the grossest of superstitions, it gave to demonism a new lease of life. At any rate, so far as belief in witches is concerned, there is little to choose between the two Christian bodies.

It is next to impossible to calculate the number of men and women—mostly women—who were burned at the stake, after being tortured to confession, for the religious crime of witchcraft. Most of these victims were women because, in accordance with Christian tradition, women were more wicked than men, and so the easier drawn to the service of Satan. As usual the Bible was quoted in support of the foolish and the brutal. The reason why was given by Macaulay's "wise fool," King James I. He says: "The reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer than man, so it is easier to be entrapped in the gross snares of the devil, as was ever well proved by the serpent deceiving Eve at the beginning." This was the fault that Christian saints found in woman from the beginning of the Church. That fine example of the brilliancy of our monarchy—although we have had many worse kings than James I.—said in justifying the water test of whether a woman was a witch or not:

This series of notes is in reply to a question: "What is Christianity?" There are so many forms of Christianity we declined the task of answering. But Christianity is an historic religion based upon the Bible. The clergy are crying: "Back to the Bible." We take them at their word, and give the essentials of Christianity as presented in the Bible.

"God hath appointed, for a supernatural sign of the monstrous impiety of witches, that the water shall refuse to receive them in her bosom that have shaken off them the sacred water of baptism." There are few stupidities that have not found a religious justification.

The ordinary reader is inclined to think of witchcraft as something that was entertained by the Churches and the more ignorant of the populace. That is quite wrong. It was something that was held—and indeed it was—an integral part of the Christian religion, and to doubt it was almost and in some circumstances actually, an offence that might lead to a charge of being an accessory to Satan. We have already given one quotation from the "Demonologie" of James I., published in Edinburgh in 1597. Here is another taken from the introduction to the book. It was written to counteract the influence of Reginald Scot, who had written a book questioning the evidence on which thousands were being condemned:—

"The fearful abounding at this time of these detestable slaves of the devil, the witches or enchanters, hath moved me to dispatch this treatise of mine . . . against the damnable opinions of one called Scot, an Englishman, who is not ashamed to deny that there can be such a thing as witchcraft. . . . My intention is to prove two things . . . one that such devilish arts have been and are; the other what exact trial and severe punishment they merit. Witches ought to be put to death according to the law of God . . . and the municipal law of all Christian nations. To spare the life and not strike whom God bids strike is treason against God."

Macaulay may have been right when he called James a learned fool, but there is no question that he was a sound Christian, and that he was speaking on the authority of the Christian God.

But eleven years before King James wrote his book, Bishop Jewell, preaching before Queen Elizabeth, warned the Queen and said:—

"It may please your Grace to understand that witches and soecrers within these last few years are mervously increased within your Grace's realm. Your Grace's subjects pine away even to death, their colour fadeth, their flesh rotteth, their speech is benumbed, their senses are bereft. I pray God they never practise further than the subject. . . . These eyes have seen most evident and manifest marks of their wickedness."

The reply to this was an immediate passing of a new Act of Parliament against enchantment and witchcraft. It should also be borne in mind that witchcraft was already condemned by the laws of the Church, as it still is. But the law led to a fresh batch of tortures and executions. It was not the first, nor the last example where religious belief and Church influences made for the brutalising and worsening of life.

One other example in order that the reader may be helped in understanding what real Christianity is, and as evidence that when the Christian Churches have not been coerced by a strong secular control they have invariably made for retrogression, we may take from one of the greatest of Christian leaders—Martin Luther. In many things Luther

betrayed a rough and ready common sense. In the matter before us he could write that:—

"Witchcraft is the devil's proper work wherewith, when God permits, he not only hurts people but makes away with them; for in this world we are as guests and strangers, body and soul under the devil; idiots, the lame, the blind, the dumb, are men in whom ignorant devils have established themselves, and all the physicians who attempt to heal these infirmities as though they proceeded from natural causes, are ignorant blockheads who know nothing about the power of demons."

In his "Table Talk," Luther says: "I know the devil thoroughly well; he has overpressed me so close that I scarcely knew whether I was alive or dead." Luther, in fact, saw the activity of the devil whichever way he turned. A singing in the ear was proof that the devil was its author attempting to prevent his writing. A violent headache had its origin in the same source. When a storm raged it had its origin in satanic activity, for "the winds are nothing but good or bad spirits." Suicides he believed were often men who had been strangled by evil spirits. "The devil," he said, "can so completely assume the human form that we may very well lie with what seems to be a woman of real flesh and blood, and yet all the while 'tis only a devil in the shape of a woman." The devil might easily become the father of a child, unsuspected by both husband and wife. He says that he knew such a case, and said: "I would have that thrown into the Moldau at the risk of being held its murderer."

These examples might be multiplied indefinitely, but that would be a tiresome repetition of substantially identical statements. Here and there one meets with a Christian of eminence who raises a mild protest against the method of conducting prosecutions of witchcraft, but with very rare exceptions these consisted of doubts as to the legal method adopted rather than a questioning of witchcraft itself. To doubt the reality of demonism invited a charge of being in league with the devil, and few were bold enough to risk that.

When the question of the reality of witchcraft came, it was raised from the Freethinking side. How could it be otherwise? Nothing was clearer than that the Old and New Testaments were saturated with belief in the activity of evil spirits and of man's commerce with them. From Genesis to Revelations there is no break. Church doctrines, Roman Catholic and Protestant, insisted on the existence of evil spirits and their intercourse with human beings.

Wherever Christian influence prevailed, right up to the end of the seventeenth century, this murderous superstition prevailed. Those who have read Cotton Mather's "Wonders of the Invisible World" (there was an edition of that work published in London in 1862) will be well aware of the evil consequences that followed the English settlers in the New World. They took their Christian demonism with them, and the consequences of that were the same as had darkened the lives of millions of human beings in the Old World.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

(To be continued)

## "HAND-IN-HAND TOGETHER"

THAT inimitable pair of music-hall and radio artists, Flanagan and Allen, will be remembered for a long time as the people who made popular that catchy song:—

"Arm-in-arm together,  
Just like we used to be."

The new Vicar of Leeds (the Rev. A. S. Reeve) will be remembered as the war-time cleric who tried to make popular another catchy phrase, which might be versified thus:—

"Hand-in-hand together,  
The Church and State must be."

Whether the vicar's effort will be as successful as that of Flanagan and Allen is a matter of doubt, for the vicar has not the advantage of being able to set his phrase to a catchy tune. Had the Salvation Army been the established Christian movement in this country, instead of the dour Anglicans, they would have had a better chance, because their faculty for blending religion with lively music is an undoubted advantage in putting over slogans and catch-phrases.

Nevertheless, despite his disadvantages in comparison with the Salvationists and the music-hall pair, the new Vicar of Leeds has made a good start by getting the Press to quote him liberally—and that is worth a lot. He has shown, also, that he has got the right idea about his job; and he has, no doubt, allayed the fears in the minds of many that the two Archbishops must have set up by their recent flirtations with rather threadbare ideas on social reform questions.

So long as there are vicars like Mr. Reeve, the "best people" have little to fear from an odd reformist Bishop, or a couple of Archbishops who may (or may not) have forgotten what they owe to the influences that got them where they are.

Mr. Reeve was welcomed to his new job, as God's representative among the half-million that form the population of Leeds, by the holding of a civic reception. Just how civic the reception really was I don't know. It certainly seemed to represent some of the citizens—but there was a conspicuous absence of those who might justly be said to be representative of the main population.

Several representatives of associated and subsidiary companies related to the religious industry were present, but I fear that no corduroyed or overalled denizen of the dense working-class areas graced the platform by his (nowadays) honourable presence. Perhaps all the corduroy and overall wearers were too busy winning the war for Mr. Reeve's Christian post-war world.

Or perhaps the post-war world is not intended to include such people—except, of course, in their present capacity, as silent and unrepresented workers for the best people, who are to be found in the Church and in the public life that pays homage—and tribute—to the Church.

Why do I jump to such wicked conclusions about the intentions of the Church? Well, let Mr. Reeve answer that question on my behalf.

During his welcome to Leeds (by the best people) he made the following statement:—

"The Church and State must go hand-in-hand. I believe that is essential if we are to get the right kind of Britain when the peace comes."

Now I am not challenging the truth of Mr. Reeve's statement at all. In fact, my comment when he made the statement was, "Quite so." But I do wish to implement the statement, because Mr. Reeve (like so many parsons do) left something unsaid.

He forgot to mention that the right kind of Britain he had in mind was for the right kind of people—those people for whom it is indeed desirable that the Church and State must go hand-in-hand. I can put no other construction upon his words. The facts allow of no other construction.

All the Churches in the country can claim only one-fifth of the population as supporters; and the Church that Mr. Reeve had in mind can claim only a mere 8 per cent. But what an 8 per cent.! After deducting all the "worker-worshippers," the chaps that feed the heating boilers, sweep up the graveyards, keep the interiors clean and tidy, go round with the collecting plates, and perform other menial but necessary tasks; and after allowing for a small proportion of self-sacrificing spinsters, and other kind-hearted but inhibited people who are "wedded" to Christ through the Church, we find that the remainder of the 8 per cent. largely consists of those who can honestly speak of Britain as "our country" because it is, in fact, their country.

Again let Mr. Reeve speak for himself—and for the best people:—

"The sacrifices they (the soldiers, sailors and airmen) have made must not be in vain, and it is the bounden duty of all to see that the England of to-morrow is really a country which is worth living in in the fullest sense of the word. That country cannot be built unless spiritual values are given their proper place. That is why the Church and State must ever go hand-in-hand."

It all sounds good until we reach the spiritual values, doesn't it? Then we find that there is a *proper* place for these values, and that they cannot have their proper place unless "Church and State . . . go hand-in-hand."

I am going to leave you to work the proposition out for yourselves. It shouldn't be difficult.

All that I wish to add is that, unfortunately for the vicar, and the other best people, there are quite a number of ordinary people in Britain who have other ideas about the "essential" place of the Church in the post-war world, and the "proper" place for spiritual values; and the partner that wears the frocks in this hand-in-hand courtship of Church and State might find herself severely jilted when the post-war world arrives.

It will not be by those who have made the sacrifices of the war, but by those who have managed to survive the war—and the church parades!

F. J. CORINA.

## ACID DROPS

THE "Morning Advertiser," the organ of the Licensed Trade, has become very "Churchy" of late and, like so many ardent recruits, feels impelled to tread on very dangerous, because quite unsound, grounds. It even backs up the B.B.C. in its perfectly partial and unfair method of not permitting any criticism of religion, and accepts as a justification the idiotic plea that we are nominally Christian. But what is the good of a name if the fact is dead against it? And even among those who call themselves Christian there is no agreement as to what Christianity is. The "Advertiser" is guilty of gratuitous stupidity, for there seems no reason why it should drop its Christian advocacy and confine its attention to the less harmful commodity which it represents.

Now here is a fair offer to the "Advertiser." If the "Advertiser" will show us any agreed good law which it believes originated in Christianity, we promise to prove that it did not have its origin in Christianity and, in addition, will supply some bad law which we owe or owed to Christian influences. It would be quite an educational exercise for the editor, but we haven't the slightest expectation of his coming up to scratch. In this country one may talk any kind of nonsense in support of Christianity. He is quite safe.

The "Advertiser" notes that "Secularists" have never been given the use of the microphone, but justifies the B.B.C. by saying that if this were done, "it is obvious that everyone else ought to be invited." Well, why not? We have been shouting to high heaven that we are a free people, and that all opinion is free, so why not act on the alleged fact? The "Advertiser" is

shocked to think that this open policy would involve freedom for Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Agnostics, Atheists, Gandhi, etc. Why not? No existing opinion could be more intellectually stupid than that of the one-sided religious propaganda that is now being forced on the public; and if all opinions were given a chance there would be less need for the faked discussions which the B.B.C. now puts before the public.

There is one very remarkable item of news given us by the "Advertiser." It says that a "certain Dean of an Anglican Cathedral Church is a member of the Secularist Society, and apparently this fact has not caused him to be debarred from the microphone." That is really news, even to us and, if true, this Dean must be well disguised. The "Advertiser" seems to be as reliable in its news as it is in its arguments.

Under the usual talk of the stress of war conditions an attempt was made recently in Cardiff to permit an increase in the number of hours which schoolchildren could legitimately be worked, and also to lower the age limit and to make it permissible for them to be worked before school hours. It is a compliment to the City Fathers that the suggestion was beaten by a 2 to 1 majority at the Council meeting, but the most astounding part of the whole attempt upon reducing the already limited rights of these children was that the prime movers were past presidents of the local Sunday School Union. Alderman G. Fred Evans, the proposer, and Councillor Morgan Davies, the seconder, at the Council meeting, are both prominent Nonconformists. These Christians show their love of children in a curious way, and we wonder what our wonderful "Christian Heritage" would be if left entirely to the Christians.

The Bishop of London preached the other day at St. Anne's, Highgate, that if the world would become Christianised—of course, as the Bishop understands it, which involves support of the State—our troubles will be, to a very considerable degree, ended. There never was a time during the past 60 or 70 years when the public was not treated to this kind of talk. But it is the outside world that has made the Church more human than it was, not the other way round. Meanwhile, the Church stands as one of the greatest vested interests in the country, and its officers are as keen in getting their pound of flesh as any avowedly commercial concern.

In a leading article commenting on the Bishop's sermon, the "Hornsey Journal" offers a mild comment on the Bishop's visit. The editor says that "when the Church is not without stains on her own record," she can accuse others, and adds, "When the time comes to rebuild our slums (presumably he means build houses to replace the slums), let the Ecclesiastical Commissioners think of the property of which they are the landlords . . . and let them revise their leases to give their tenants of the best." Good advice, but is there any likelihood of their carrying out the advice? Not the slightest.

To give better terms to tenants might be done, although a little time ago the Archbishop dodged a similar question by saying that the Church was powerless, as its wealth (the Church of England is, considering its numbers, one of the wealthiest Churches in the world) was in the hands of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners; and if the Commissioners are approached, the reply would be that, as Commissioners, they have to administer an estate in a businesslike manner—which means getting all that can be got. There is only one way of getting round this difficulty, and that is to disestablish the Church and let each religious organisation depend upon the support of those who believe in it.

South Africa is with us in our fight for equal liberty among mankind and the creation of a new heaven on earth. As proof of this we find from the "Johannesburg Star" for January 20 that: "No principal teacher or assistant teacher . . . shall be admitted or retained on the staff of a public school unless either he is prepared conscientiously to give instruction in Bible history . . . or puts before the director any objection he may have to undertake such instruction and receives exemption." If the teacher has the courage to ask for exemption and the good, or

bad, fortune to get it, he will be a marked man or woman, and with very small chance of promotion. Why cannot Christians dilute their intolerance with just enough honesty to say plainly what their aim is? We are pleased to see in this issue of the "Johannesburg Star" a very strong protest from our old friend, F. W. R. Silke, against such a travesty of justice.

Russia is to undergo a bombardment from a new quarter. The Pope has threatened a weekly broadcast of a new weekly prayer with special application to Russia. One would think that God would already know all about Russia, and would hardly need his memory jogging. After all, the cessation of prayer and praise—on which all gods live—from Russia must have been noticed in heaven. We can imagine "He who sits on the throne" saying to his Commander-in-Chief: "Look here, Gabriel, just give this fellow a hint that we know our job, and that while we enjoy and fatten on praise, we dislike these covert hints that we have not done all we might have done. They suggest that we have overlooked something, or that we have not done all we might have done. Besides, these Russian leaders are Atheists, not half-mentally baked doubters; and when one has to deal with a thorough-going Atheist there is no return."

Perhaps it is an indication that our Minister of Education is not finding the pious plot between the Board of Education and the Churches running as smoothly as he had hoped. But recently he told a Free Church meeting that he was not aiming at introducing a new State religion into the schools, but attempting to find a common basis for "inoculating the young mind with an old faith." That is rather too thin. First, so long as religion is taught in the State schools it is bound to take on the colour of a State religion. And as he is aiming at giving more definite religion, with a measure of control of the schools by the clergy, he is really trying to establish a State religion. It was a piece of impudence to aim at a Church-cum-Tory system of education with a Coalition Government in power. But it is an insult to say that he and his confederates, the bishops, are not trying to establish a State religion in the schools.

The B.B.C. has launched what it calls a new series of discussions on "What is Religion?" We have heard only the first and it looks as though the new series will be like the old ones, only a little more artful, and so more deliberately dishonest, than the earlier ones. We shall see how far out we are in our forecast as the series develops.

The two speakers in the first instalment agreed that good conduct without belief in God is not religion, and if belief in God is not accompanied with good conduct, that is not religion. So being what one may call an old hand where the twists and wriggles and squirms of the modern Christian world is concerned, we fancy we can see the way in which the story will develop. Anyone who really thinks about the subject should be able to realise that the essence of religion lies in the belief in God or gods, or to put it quite accurately, in supernatural beings. But morality has a quite distinct origin and significance. It is concerned with the behaviour of human beings to each other, and that begins long before the gods are heard of. Religion comes in at a later stage, and then its influence on morals is mainly bad.

Of course, if the B.B.C. had a spasm of honesty in their manoeuvres there would be an Atheist to put the case for Atheism before the world. But that will certainly not be done, for the B.B.C., while conceding that there exists a multitude of men and women who hold to a reasoned Atheism, yet there are so many poor, ignorant, weak-minded believers in God, that a plain statement of Atheism might shake the faith of a large number of Christians. So, says the B.B.C., let learning and honesty of speech go to the devil. We must keep people Christian at all costs. Did not Jesus say that unless people were like little children they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven? So the B.B.C. does its best to keep people as infantile as possible. If the B.B.C. has any relish for a compliment from an Atheist, we willingly say that in our judgment it is a completely Christian institution.

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## SUGAR PLUMS

TO-DAY (May 2) in the Chorlton Town Hall, Manchester, Mr. Chapman Cohen will deliver an address on "Church and Religion in Post-War Britain." The subject deserves a series of lectures, and should be as interesting to Christians as to Freethinkers. Chair will be taken at 6-30 p.m.

As previously announced, the National Secular Society's Annual Conference will again, owing to war conditions, be held in London on June 13. The procedure of previous years will be followed, and branches of the Society and headquarter members are invited to send in suggestions for discussion by the Conference. Other arrangements will be as usual. Fuller particulars later.

Writing in the "Daily Express" Mr. James Agate says that he can think of only six books that will be read in the year 2943. Among these he places for unexpressed reasons, "The Pilgrim's Progress." One can understand a person such as "Commander" Campbell telling the Brains Trust that this book was the most read in Britain, but on what ground can a critic such as Mr. Agate come to this conclusion? If anyone asks their acquaintances of the present generation whether they have read Bunyan's book he will find that it is one of the least read of what one may call historic books. And, in any case, it represented the religious opinions of a narrow Christian sect which clothed its narrowness and selfishness with a religious cloak.

Of all Christian writings the "Pilgrim's Progress" stands out as the very embodiment of selfishness and thinly disguised brutality. The family is hardly considered, the social sense is quite undeveloped, the fear of hell is very pronounced, and the essential lesson is "Save your own soul and help others only so far as your conduct will prevent your landing in hell." We agree with a very sincere Christian, Benson, that it is the most selfish book in our literature.

That the "Pilgrim's Progress" is a book that will live because of its merits is simply unthinkable. That it may be handy to look up, as one now looks up the early writings on witchcraft and the early forms of the Christian superstition, or as one now studies the culture of savages, may be admitted, but to set it forth as a gem of English literature, one of the six that will be read a thousand years hence, seems to us impossible, if by being read means what one means when he speaks of Shakespeare being read. The "Pilgrim's Progress" stands as one of the most selfish books in the English language.

There was an endorsement in a recent issue of the "People" from the pen of Hannen Swaffer of what we have been saying for many years in these columns. It concerns the B.B.C. Mr. Swaffer says:—

"The only talks on religion are the monopoly of orthodoxy. No Rationalist, Christian Scientist, Jew, Spiritualist, Moslem or Hindu is allowed to put his case. . . . Unless it is made free to all shades of opinion, the B.B.C. will become a menace to social change."

We welcome Mr. Swaffer's plain statement of an obvious truth, with the reservation that the B.B.C. may become a menace to liberty. It is a menace, and a very deadly one.

Years ago when we said what so many are saying now, we said there was only one way of calling public attention to what was going on. This is that all men of ability and character, or with respect for real freedom of thought, should decline to take part in this gigantic sham. "We believe some have so acted, but it is not enough to act; their refusal to join in the plan of keeping the public in ignorance, by mixing substantial falsehoods with apparent contradictions, will only be met when these men stand aloof and let the public know why."

There is, for example, C. E. M. Joad. Away from the B.B.C., he is apt to drop into the expression of very liberal sentiments. But these should be backed up by a refusal to take part in the imposture practised on the country in presenting faked discussions and an alleged open platform which is a very closed one. And there really are other ways of getting a dishonest living.

The church bells are being rung again—even *their* disappearance seems to have affected church attendance. What a pity it is—for the clergy—that they are not now able to have officials with a long wand driving people to church to hear a parson preach about humanity's burning hunger for religion.

After all, the bells have no connection whatever with people going to church. It was concerned with protecting people while they were in church. The aim was to frighten away evil spirits and, probably having some doubts as to whether God would be able to look after one of his own buildings, they tried to scare one of his own heavenly throw-outs. To-day we imagine that neither motive operates. Bell-ringing has become a kind of advertising, much as a town crier goes round some of our small towns advertising goods for sale. It gives all possible attendants notice—"Please come and sit in my parlour." The churches must advertise if they are to keep their shops open.

Our highly placed clergy never miss a chance of advertising. If things go well, we must thank God for what we have received. If they go badly, we must blame ourselves. God appears to have no responsibility whatever. There he sits, or stands, or floats, seeing things go. Like the famous:—

— old lady of Sydney,  
Who had a disease of the kidney,  
She prayed to the Lord  
That she might be restored,  
And he could, if he would,  
But he did na'.

So we are not surprised to find that a manifesto has been issued, signed by a large number of big bugs belonging to a large number of Churches, home and foreign, telling everybody that the only cure for things is to "return to God, the father of all, whose purpose and love secures the welfare of all, humbly beseeching God to forgive our past sins, and to give us the spirit of forgiveness for wrongs done to ourselves." It is a superb example of clotted bosh. For if God had any purpose, it is his job to see that it is carried out, and the gang of highly placed preachers are all assuring the world that it would be a crime to forgive German leaders the beastly brutalities of which they have been guilty.

## SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA AND THE NON-HISTORICITY POSITION

THERE is one aspect of the problem now confronting us in connection with the manhood of Jesus which is apparently often or altogether overlooked. It is that the Non-Historicity position raises a problem of *modern times*. It also involves the question whether our era derived its name, Anno Domini, from a birth or from a myth?

The early Christians were obviously never faced with the contention that the man Jesus had never existed, though they invested him, in conformity with the credulity of their times, with the miraculous attributes of a deity. Nor, to make a leap to the last part of the 18th century, does that contention appear to have troubled or—so far as I know—occurred to Gibbon. He gives a brief and, in many respects, sympathetic account of his own attitude towards the growth and development of the "Christian Faith" which, he says, "obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth," and he was himself a believer in "the ruling providence of its great author." As a historian, however, though writing in pre-scientific times, he would naturally have repudiated a miraculous starting point for Christianity, and he obviously took a human life for granted. He just accepts the position that the name and date of our era were adopted as relating to the birth of the founder of Christianity. He speaks of "the primitive tradition of a Church which was founded only 40 years after the death of Christ" and of "The Jewish converts or, as they were afterwards called, the Nazarenes." The Christian religion, as Gibbon clearly pictures it, commenced as a mere sect. He writes: "The Jews were a nation; the Christians were a sect." And he pictures Christ as "an obscure teacher who in a recent age, and among a barbarous people, had fallen a sacrifice either to the malice of his own countrymen or to the jealousy of the Roman Government."

According to the trend of the Canonical Gospels,\* whatever veracity may or may not be conceded to these varying accounts of a human life—the Jews in power wanted to get rid of the Nazarene (perhaps as a reformer claiming divine inspiration and authority, and putting his finger upon some of their weak spots) by representing him to Pilate, and through him to Herod, as a political revolutionary, "perverting the nation and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Luke, chap. 23). Acting also as orthodox and monotheistic Jews, they brought against the Nazarene the accusation, as recorded in the non-synoptic Gospel of John, "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God."

It so happened that the crucifixion of Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, fitted in with that of two malefactors, and it may have made so little impression upon Pontius Pilate that—as Anatole France viewed it in his little gem, "Le Procureur de Judée" (Etni du Nacre), he had in his later life forgotten all about it.

But "they didn't know everythin' down in Judæe," and who could have foreseen that the man Jesus—"a condemned criminal" so the "pagans" argued, writes Gilbert Murray in his popular book "Stoic, Christian and Humanist"—was subsequently to be raised to the Godhead as the second person of the *Christian Trinity*: Father, Son and Holy Ghost?† In any case, it seems obvious that when the theology of Christianity was in the

\* See article "The Authorship and Date of the Gospels Reconstructed," by H. S. Shelton, in the current number of the "Hibbert Journal," January, 1943.

† Even the "empty tomb" of the resurrection myth, implied recognition of an earthly life.

making the contention that Jesus, as a man, had never existed, was one that never arose; though it is also obvious that (according to the Gospels) in his lifetime he was credited with miraculous powers and mythical attributes.

Jewish orthodoxy was and is strictly monotheistic, so the question arises: Why, when "the primitive tradition of a Church which was founded only 40 years after the death of Christ" (to quote Gibbon's words again, though they were not used in the same relation), did not the orthodox and presumably active Jewish *nation* avail itself of such an easy method of suppressing the Christian *sect*, if they believed, or could have made their world believe, that the Nazarene never walked the earth of Palestine or anywhere else? And if too, as time went on, and Christianity gained converts and an established position, they could have spread the belief that the human life of its Christ was as mythical and non-historical as that of a discarded deity.

No one could take it for granted that the date which has given us our era, has historical significance, in so far as it stands for the actual date of a birth, whether that birth was regarded as human or miraculous, or as a combination of the two. In his "History of the World," 1898, Edgar Sanderson, M.A. (author of many historical works and sometime Scholar of Clare College, Cambridge), wrote of "the year of Christ's birth" that it "was probably the year 4 prior to the Christian Era, as erroneously reckoned."

Again, it seems necessary to emphasise that the Jewish nation might have found it easy to strangle the new religion almost at its birth, if it had been possible to take the stand, which a number of erudite and eminent scholars are taking nearly 2,000 years later, about a life which was apparently accepted by contemporaries as a fact and not as a myth. Also that, according to the Gospels, although orthodox Jews repudiated any claim to divinity on the part of Jesus and his supporters, they apparently never repudiated his human existence. I may add that from the psychological point of view, my belief is that the Canonical Gospels (of the 2nd century) with all their discrepancies and variations, would not have been received by the Church even in a credulous and uncritical age, if the human life of their central figure had been, or could have been, taken merely as a myth.

It is generally accepted that there is much in Christianity which, in its earlier period, it had in common with existing or pre-existing cults, and pre-eminently with Mithraism. As regards Krishna, one of the "Saviour Gods," this similarity, if it is accepted as proven, extends to the human life and manner of death. These cults have, however, faded out or lost significance, while Christianity, retaining its human background, still holds the field in our religious world of to-day.

Beyond current literature I can make no claim at all to any original research on which to base my opinion on the historicity of Jesus. So what is said here would carry no weight in some circles. I do, however, note that, apart from any spiritual significance which is involved, there is probably no subject dealing with the origin and progress of the Christian religion which is now so ardently and sometimes hotly contested by those who are equally qualified to consult and compare the same records as that which concerns the Historicity or Non-Historicity of the personality who has given to Christianity its name, and to our Era its approximate date.

MAUD SIMON.

### DESCARTES

But "learn what is true, in order to do what is right," is the summing up of the whole duty of man, for all who are unable to satisfy their mental hunger with the east wind of authority; and to those of us moderns who are in this position, it is one of Descartes' great claims to our reverence as a spiritual ancestor, that, at three-and-twenty, he saw clearly that this was his duty, and acted up to his conviction.

T. H. HUXLEY.

## RESCUE THE PERISHING

[The following article appeared in the "Observer" for April 11. It is reprinted with the consent of the editor of that journal.]

AMONG the saddest features of our age is the dulling of our reaction to cruelty and persecution. The persecution by the Nazis, first of their political and religious opponents in Germany and then of their patriotic national opponents in all Europe, equalled the worst that Europe saw during the religious conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries. But it produced all too little sympathy in other countries. Now something else and even more abominable has happened. A whole human community has been condemned to death—not for political, religious or national resistance, but for its mere existence. What is our response?

In July, 1942, the systematic extermination of all men, women and children of Jewish race in Europe began. In December, 1942, the full facts became known in this country. On December 17, 1942, the House of Commons rose to its feet in horror at this supreme crime of all times. On March 10, 1943, Mr. Eden stated in the House that available information pointed to the conclusion that the massacre was continuing.

To-day, on April 11, 1943, it must be stated that the British Government has not so far found it within its power to rescue and shelter from cruel death one single Jewish man, woman or child. The doors of this country and its possessions have remained closed to them. An agreement to admit 4,500 children and 500 adults from Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary into Palestine has not been carried out. Against the most earnest pressure of the whole British public, led by Church and Parliament, the Government has set a stone wall of cold, quiet inactivity.

Instead, an agreement has now been reached with the U.S.A. to hold a conference in the Bermudas for the "preliminary exploration of ways and means" to cope with "what may be an unlimited demand for accommodation on the part of refugees threatened by Germany's extermination policy." While the victims of this extermination policy are daily slaughtered by the thousand, to arrange for a conference with these terms of reference is only a cruel mockery.

After the war the United Nations will face a migration problem involving scores of millions of people, caused not by Hitler's murder of the Jews, but by the upheaval of populations and the dislocation of industries and commerce through the war. This giant problem needs indeed preliminary exploration and planning on the grandest scale. But the trifling problem of providing sanctuary to the handful of hunted human beings who now manage to escape the butcher's blade needs no preliminary exploration at all. It needs immediate action, prompted by elementary humanity.

What we can do is pathetically little in any case. The avenues of escape for the persecuted are few and perilous. If the number of those who find their way out along these avenues surmounts 10,000, this will be reason for rejoicing. All we can do is to make sure that they at least are not thrown back to their tormentors and assassins. To do this we must give assurance to Switzerland that she will be relieved of every Jewish refugee she accepts as soon as British arms have restored free communications with her, and to Turkey and Spain that they will be relieved of every Jewish refugee they accept now.

The present murder of Europe's Jews is the greatest horror of all times. History will keep alive its memory for a thousand years to come, and history will record what the nations who witnessed it did or left undone to check it. We must not allow our Government to put such a stain on Britain's record.

## THE ART OF GERALD KERSH

IT is sometimes claimed that the art of the short story has attracted no really first-rate writer in recent years. In the period immediately following the last war there were outstanding figures like Katherine Mansfield, A. E. Coppard and T. F. Powys, but in spite of brilliant interludes by L. A. G. Strong, H. E. Bates and one or two others, and occasional *tours de force* by individual writers in "New Writing," "Modern Reading" and other collections of short tales, it is suggested that short story writers of the front rank have not been conspicuous.

I do not say that the short story has been unduly neglected in recent years. Quite the contrary, in fact. The number of short stories being written to-day is probably greater than at any time in the past. But it is an admitted fact that (possibly owing to the mass-production basis of the civilisation of which—alas!—present-day writers are necessarily a part) the number of people possessing the ability to impress upon the short story the vital energy springing from a new view, a new philosophy of life has been small.

There has recently appeared, in "Selected Stories" (Staples; 2s. 6d.) a collection of short stories which show a writer who has possibly within him the makings of the story-teller of genius. Gerald Kersh is not an imitation Chechov, an imitation Maupassant, or an imitation O. Henry—under which classifications the vast majority of short story writers, commercial or non-commercial, in our time can generally be arranged.

In an age which has been impressed by laws of writing and rules of composition, he remains a magnificent exception to all laws and all rules. He is a personality of power and fury, and he impresses on his writing the unusual force of his personality. And yet (unlike so many of his contemporaries) he does not merely go on repeating himself, *ad infinitum*, with all his tricks and mannerisms reproduced, until the reader ceases to find that breath of life which is the art of the short story writer of genius.

"Selected Stories" contains 23 tales, and every one is an individual work of art. I will not attempt in these necessarily concentrated pages to give in any detail even an outline of what is Kersh's unusual achievement—the creation of character in queer situations. Let me merely recommend for the attention of the student of the short story such tales as "The Musicians," which portrays graphically the way in which artistic genius can be twisted to meet an environment that is ill-suited, or "Strong Greek Wine," which throws a completely new light on the early days of Christianity. The construction of such tales, though to  
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## SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

### LONDON—OUTDOOR

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead): Sunday, 12 noon, Mr. L. ENRY. Parliament Hill Fields: 3-30 p.m., Mr. L. ENRY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park): Sunday, 3-0 p.m., Mr. E. PAGE and supporting speakers.

### LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1): Sunday, 11-0 a.m., Professor G. W. KEETON, M.A., LL.D.—"The United States: I., The Making of the Nation."

### COUNTRY—INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. Meetings every Sunday at Laycock's Cafe, Kirkgate, 6-30 p.m.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Chorlton Town Hall, All Saints, Manchester): Sunday, 6-30 p.m., Mr. Chapman Cohen—"Church and Religion in Post-War Britain."

### COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (Mound): Sunday, 7-0 p.m., a Lecture. Newcastle-on-Tyne Branch N.S.S. (Bigg Market): Sunday, 7-0 p.m., a Lecture.

### THE ART OF GERALD KERSH

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the superficial reader it may appear unimportant, is nevertheless of immense value.

Starting with a situation that seems calm and normal, Kersh portrays the way in which a man or a woman reacts to a new influence on life. Read this, torn from its context, but nevertheless to my mind, showing the power of Kersh's pen:—

"The trumpeter sat still. Only his feet moved, tapping the floor. His eyes were empty. His forefinger fascinated me. It was pure yellow, and this yellow finger rose and fell on a yellow key, letting out clear, cold blasts of sound—yellow sound!—while his lips were shut tight. I swear to you that you could not have pushed a knife-blade between those lips. It seemed to me that his instrument was soldered to him; that he must eat and drink through the trumpet; that he was an inexhaustible cistern of noise, and the key was a tap. When he played a sustained note, his forefinger grew rigid; music came out in a hard jet."

There is only one thing that I am afraid of, and that is really my reason for writing here. In recent books Gerald Kersh has shown various aspects of life in the Guards. "They Die With Their Boots Clean" and "The Nine Lives of Bill Nelson" have been widely praised, and it has even been suggested that here, in the sphere of the short story, is the equivalent of the verses of Rupert Brooke and other soldier-poets of the last war. It is, we are told, tougher, harsher stuff than anything that was produced by Brooke and his companions—but then this is a tougher, harsher war than the war of 1914-1918. I hope that Gerald Kersh will realise the danger in which he is situated. We do not want to see one of the few writers who has something of extreme value to contribute to the art of the short story to degenerate into a mere propagandist for a national cause, whatever merits that national cause may be able to claim. One can easily imagine the powers that be endeavouring to coerce the short story writer to produce one of those ninepenny or shilling booklets which are so beautifully printed, in complete disregard of paper shortages, by the Ministry of Information; and, while one cannot object to such work being done by hack writers with little of value to contribute in the way of original thought, it is in the last degree to be deprecated that anyone should try to use a writer of something approaching genius for any such limited purposes.

I hope, with all my heart, that Gerald Kersh will resist any such pressure. His "Selected Stories" may be an earnest of what he can do. If he becomes a mere propagandist they may turn out to be a mere flash in the pan. But I (and, I am sure, countless other readers and writers) hope that they will prove to be a first blossoming of a talent which will cast fresh light on life as it comes to complete maturity. S. H.

### CLUTCHING FOR STRAWS

IN his "Grammar of Science" Karl Pearson asserts that, "The goal of science is clear—nothing short of a complete interpretation of the universe." He goes on to point out, however, that "the goal is an ideal one—it marks the direction in which we move and strive, but never a stage we shall actually reach."

To-day we are still hearing the religionist's challenge to science—that there are phenomena which science cannot explain. And when the scientist agrees that there are some things beyond present human knowledge the religionist triumphantly holds forth on the limitations of science, and reinstates his God in the gap formed by ignorance.

It is greatly to be deplored that, in these days of scientific advancement, there should appear a need for again repeating that science is not infinite in its scope. Science is the classification

of facts and the inferences drawn therefrom. It is systematised knowledge; knowledge which is derived from a clear and impartial study of relations and sequences. But it cannot seek beyond the limits of the knowable. It is necessarily limited because there are limits to the scope of the human mind. Yet although there are at present certain phenomena which defy scientific explanation, it is invalid to declare such as non-explainable. Made 100 years ago, the suggestion that men would be able to fly, and at the same time converse with persons many miles away on the ground, would have been considered as heretical as the revolving-earth theory was in Galileo's time. We are only at a transitory stage in the gradual progress of science, and this progress is being achieved in spite of all obstacles.

It is hardly necessary to indicate the directions in which science is assisting in human progress. They are too obvious and well known to need repetition. Yet the Christian "Defender of the Faith" will draw attention, with a long list, to the evils perpetrated by science. He will refer derogatorily to the Nazis as "great scientists" and ask what benefit humanity has derived from their science. That so-called intelligent men should advance such remarks as these is further proof, if more is needed, of the desperate circumstances in which dogmatic religionists now find themselves. It is against this type of mind that science must continually struggle. Whenever a new scientific theory connected with the universe, or man's place in it, is propounded there are Christians who will condemn it as out of accord with God and his word.

Christianity has been in continual conflict with human progress. It has resorted to drastic measures at times, and when scientific truths which challenge religious principles are presented to the world we find them met with counter-propaganda in the form of Christian "truths." A Christian truth is apparently nothing more than the negation of a scientific truth. It is, simply, a lie. And with the same psychological methods as used by belligerents in a modern war, the Christian endeavours to instil the "truth" of "black is white."

The religious hierarchy realise the instability of their position when challenged by science. With much alarm they clutch for straws by hastening to assure their flocks that science cannot explain everything; that there exist phenomena on which science confesses ignorance. An invalid inference is then publicised which, as an example, goes like this: Science has given a new explanation of the universe. There are some things in the universe that science has not explained. Therefore, there are some things which science will never explain. From this they formulate the plain fact that their great God is beyond the reach of science. The majority of their followers then continue in their apathetic attitude towards the unthinkable, whilst a few genuine thinkers, not so easily convinced, become Atheists.

There is no doubt that to-day it is the influence of science which is the chief impediment in the path of a much less potent Christianity. This fact forms the basis for the B.B.C.'s religious "instruction"; it is the starting-point of the padre's pep talks; it is the low roof of reality against which Christianity bangs its head each time it tries to stand.

Religious dogmas and beliefs recede as science advances. The Christian priests and clergymen are forced to oppose this march of science by relying on its inadequate explanation of all phenomena. Yet as Chapman Cohen, in his "Materialism Restated" says, "Where religion is not concerned we do not find the ignorance of science applauded and emphasised, and its conquests greeted with qualifying praise."

A spreading of the scientific outlook among all people must mean the complete rejection of mere beliefs. Science will continue to forge ahead in spite of its present ignorance, for its aim is the ascertainment of truth, and the "truth will out."

S. B. WHITFIELD.