

THE FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

Vol. LXIV.—No. 43

Sunday, October 22, 1944

Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

War and God

AFTER the tragedy the burlesque. Or ought one to say a pause in the tragedy for the burlesque? The parties in the burlesque were the Established, Nonconformist and Roman Catholic Churches and numerous small bodies, but yet the equals of the larger bodies in their foolish beliefs and ridiculous philosophies. All of them believed in advertising their God whenever opportunity offered. That done, they rested with a sense of the old adage that there is a fresh fool born every minute. Certainly none of them can show that God did anything to avert the war, or to stop the war, or to help one side against the other. It is true some of our prominent Members of Parliament took a hand in these holy shows, but one may conclude that a report in a local paper was of more moment than any notice God might take of their religious zeal. The Government laid stress on the need for guns, planes, ships and men. It left people to worship as much as they pleased, but not during hours of labour. Men worked with enthusiasm, men and women worked hard and faced sternly the bombing of their homes, all of which required a courage as great as that displayed on the battlefield. In both his sufferings and in his pleasures the gregarious quality of man will out.

In the stretch of coast we have in mind, the town of Dover has bulked in the mind of the public. The Mayor of Dover said, with a certain grim pride, that there was not left a single undamaged house in the town. Fortunately, there was a shelter in the famous caves that faced the sea. Those caves sheltered many thousands of men, women and children with complete safety. Then the siege ceased; the victories of our troops in France ended this exhibition of modern warfare. But all was not ended. Hitherto the siege of Dover and the adjacent coast towns has revealed the determination of the people to stand firm against the Nazi attacks, no matter how long the end was delayed. It is too early to say they will now spend their time in peace, but I think that hold-out by the people of Dover, men, women and children, is a story that will be told, and ought to be told, when the war is over. I have no doubt there will be many monuments erected to the memory of the men who fought and helped to win the Great—no, the Large—World War of 1939-194—? But there should be another to those women who behaved as did the women of the South Coast. Many of these women, we are afraid, will for long bear the marks, physical and mental, of the ordeal to which they have been subjected.

From Tragedy to Burlesque

But the horror of the siege of the South Coast was not without its, unconsciously, humorous side. Material for a good, stirring drama was turned into a harlequinade. The combined clergy of the coast towns, Dover, Deal and Folke-

stone, united in a call to their followers to combine in a thanksgiving service. That is yet to come, but they could have an individual rehearsal; God would be informed that the big show was yet to come. Thanksgiving for what? Not, be it noted, a combination in the same church—that would get things, and the preachers would get things, mixed. Thus, Father Measures, of Deal, says that he had "special prayers to Our Lady of Sorrows to ask for her protection, and the prayers were answered; only three schoolchildren were killed." Evidently Father Measures does not take into account children belonging to other denominations. He was looking after his own, and he could not induce "Our Lady of Sorrows" to go about saving the children belonging to Baptists and Methodists, nor does he mention what proportion of children were killed and how many were injured, or how many adults were wounded or killed. As to non-Catholics, well, they can go to hell in their own time and fashion. At any rate, no reasonable person can expect one of the numerous band of heavenly "Ladies" to waste attention on Protestants. As to the sects of the Christian world, from Rome to the Salvation Army, each one must pray to whom he pleases, and tell as many foolish lies as they please. In this praying case, three were recorded as saved. Perhaps the other saints were busy elsewhere, or were annoyed because they were not advertised, or they would have saved all the people in Deal, Dover and Folkestone on a large scale, and so have done the trick properly.

In Folkestone the saints don't seem to have been so obliging, for tremendous damage has been done. Perhaps the reason for this is that there was in the Catholic church neither a choir nor an organ. Naturally, the saints are not going to listen-in to a tin whistle. Nor do we think a harp would have pleased them. The saints must be sick and tired of that instrument, especially if the performing angels get their wings tangled up with the wires. Dover seems to have given the Catholic Church nothing to report as concerning the killing or wounding of their members. The priests appear to have forgotten about the vast caves in Dover. Still, some people were killed even in Dover. But probably that news was never wafted to heaven.

After having prayed in separate sections and duly thanked God and the saints, it is intended to have a full united thanksgiving. That may or may not be successful. A great many people have noted that mostly something unpleasant follows days of prayers. Ever since the Allies invaded the Continent the weather has, on the whole, been on the side of Germany. On that matter I have a theory of my own which, if adopted, might prove useful. In any case, I think it is far more sensible.

Who is it who has the greatest interest in people praying? Hitherto it has been taken for granted it is they who pray; but that is clearly not the case. The human race had existed for nearly three-quarters of a million years before

it was ever thought there was a god to pray to. But as soon as gods appeared, and ever since, their most persistent cry—through their mouthpieces, the medicine man or the priest—is for prayers. Why are they so anxious for prayers? If the gods wish to help man to better his life and expand his intelligence, why do they wait for people to pray to them? And not merely wait, but beg them to do so, and offer them all sorts of attractive things to get them to pray. I think there is some catch in this, and the catch is that it is not man who profits so much as it is God—or gods. There have been myriads of gods in the world, and in every case they have died for want of worshippers. It is quite plain that it is to the vital interest of God that we should worship him. It is a matter of grave doubt whether worshipping God is of great value to us. Any rate, I think it is worth while to put the matter to the test.

And the test I suggest is a very simple one. We might issue a manifesto which ran something like the following:

DEAR GOD,—It is the right of every English citizen to present to the King, so long as he exists, a Bill of Rights. That gives to the English people, among other things, the right to change the order of succession to the Throne, to appoint another King, or even to abolish the monarchy altogether. This means that not only is a King removable, but the existence of the kingship itself lies in the hands of the people. The Bill of Rights also places power in the hands of the people to remove God from the Constitution by the disestablishment of the Church, and not adopt our usual method of progress, which so often removes one absurdity to make room for another of the same kind. This, dear God, would not prevent people worshipping any god they pleased, but it would weaken considerably your status, and the reaction of the whole of the British people would be great and deadly.

You must be aware that your people—and others—have since 1939 been engaged in one of the most deadly wars that the world has ever known. Quite naturally, and in accordance with the practice of people from the most primitive times, your people have looked to you for help—decisive help—in a struggle that really threatened *your* existence as well as ours. Sometimes the King has ordered a “Day of prayer”; sometimes he has merely suggested it—or his guardians have suggested it in his name. There have been days of prayer, weeks of prayer, perpetual prayers, all of which were intended to keep your existence in the minds of the people. But the war has gone on; it has even increased in its ferocity, and time after time you have permitted, or directed, the weather so as to help the Germans instead of your faithful followers.

Dear God, we have been patient beyond reason. Like the camel, we have taken our burdens kneeling. We have continued to praise you when we felt that we were not getting the help we deserve. You have favoured the enemy when you should have helped in his destruction. Even though you may have helped us kill millions of Germans, you have at least been unconcerned when the enemy has killed and maimed your followers, and have stood unconcerned while hundreds of thousands of aged people, babies and young people have been tortured and killed. God, we have reached the limit of our patience. We have tried

to save *your* buildings from destruction, while you have stood by inactive while your sacred buildings have been shattered by “enemy action.”

So, dear God, we have reached a conclusion. As our ancestors in the 17th century forced a “Bill of Rights on the King of England,” so we are establishing a Bill of Rights on the King of Heaven. For many centuries the House of Commons has exercised—at least in form—control over the income of the King. In your case we intend, if there is not greater regard shown to the needs of your people, that there shall be rigidly curtailed those prayers on which gods of all times have depended. Unless there is a marked improvement in the care taken of your people, and until there is a plain and unmistakable movement on your part to reward your followers at the expense of the Germans in the field, serious steps will be taken to withdraw the support that has hitherto been given you.

We therefore present to you our “Bill of Rights.” We demand that you act as fathers should act towards their children; that you give them help in a way that leaves no doubt whatever that it comes from *you*. If we are probably dependent upon you, it is an absolute certainty that you are dependent upon us, and that a complete cessation of prayers to you would mean your joining the multitude of gods that are now mere names, and even the mere names have passed out of the mind of mankind. At present it would seem that, whether one prays or does not pray, makes no difference in fact. The issue is therefore plain. Either you can help this war or you cannot. If you can help, it should be prompt and unmistakable, and a single unmistakable interference on your part would paralyse the superstitious German mind. Either you do help or you do not. At present all the evidence points to the fact that you *do not*.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

MR. SHAW'S POLITICAL STOCK-POT

(“Everybody's Political What's What?” By Bernard Shaw.
Constable & Co., Ltd.)

II. ITS VIRTUES

THE chief virtue of all Bernard Shaw's writing is its stimulating and provocative quality. He is essentially serious, too; and those who take him for a self-advertiser doing a spot of political clowning—standing on his head, as in Max Beerbohm's cartoon—misunderstand him as much as Voltaire's contemporaries misunderstand that human phenomenon. This artist and philosopher and populariser fights for the truth as he sees it.

Believing the contemporary intellectual disease to be ignorance rather than wickedness, he plunges into educating his audience upon war, cruelty, the Party system, income equality, class abolition, finance, medicine, insurance, anthropometry, religion and other random phases of collective human life.

Upon the war, he speaks of “our generation of Yahoos now busy slaughtering and murdering one another in a war which is fundamentally not merely maniacal but nonsensical.” Condemnation of the war could hardly be stronger or more infuriating to those who see the war in terms of a righteous crusade. War must be supra-nationally controlled into police work; its romantic superstition must be abolished, with its popular

pugnacity, idolatry and glory worship. But to "resist not evil" with Christ, Tolstoi and Gandhi is to invite aggression and conquest in Shaw's view. Until war abolishes itself by its own cost and cruelty its remedy is supra-national control.

The part of Shaw's book most interesting to Freethinkers will be his two chapters on religion, called "The Theocratic Man" and "Religious Summary." The summary, like all Shaw's summaries, is no summary at all: it is a fresh discursive essay. Shaw is, of course, a believer in the necessity of religion, but it is his own religion; "believing as I do that society cannot be held together without religion." The Mills family used to say, "There is no god—but that is a family secret"; and Voltaire declared that if there were no god it would be necessary to invent him. Even with a god-terror it is impossible to make collective humanity behave decently, as the radio and newspapers daily show us. It may be that godlessness is only possible for the very good.

Shaw has an amusing illustration of the hatred and horror which pursues the critic of any popular creed such as Christianity or national patriotism. He criticised the Flat-Earthians, and was assailed by a barrage of cursing letters. "The writers would have seen me, if not burnt at the stake, at least imprisoned for a year. . . . I might have written the leading article in 'The Freethinker' for 20 years without provoking a single abusive postcard." Obviously, Mr. Shaw has not read his "Freethinker" recently, nor realised that there are modern Freethinkers who do not believe in freedom of speech.

In a trenchant attack on Fundamentalism, Shaw has a striking and just analysis of the English Bible. After praise of parts as literary masterpieces, he calls it "a jumble of savage superstition, obsolete cosmology, and a theology which, beginning with Calibanesque idolatry and propitiatory blood-sacrifice (Genesis to Kings), recoils into sceptical disillusioned atheistical pessimism (Ecclesiastes); revives in a transport of revolutionary ardour as the herald of divine justice and mercy and the repudiation of all sacrifices (Micah and the Prophets); relapses into sentimentality by conceiving God as an affectionate Father (Jesus); reverts to blood-sacrifice and takes refuge from politics in Other-Worldliness and Second Adventism (the Apostles); and finally explodes in a mystical opium dream of an impossible Apocalypse (Revelation)." He would have the Bible rediscovered for what it really is; and the Prayer Book should be burned or rewritten, the 39 Articles discarded. He is all for a credible modern religion; a religious science and a scientific religion in a single synthesis.

Multiplicity of gods (he says) need not trouble the Freethinker, for they are all mere personifications by which the manifold nature of the Life-Force are represented. But evil gods, such as the Jehovah of the Old Testament, must be abolished; and so must his attributes of Jehovan omnipotence, omniscience and the like. For "the Creator, the Holy Ghost, the Word, the Cosmic Energy, the Elan Vital, the Life Force, the Power that makes for Righteousness (call it what you will)" is not in Shaw's view infallible; it proceeds by trial and error, and hence the Problem of Evil. This god works only by, and through, its creations such as man; and if its creations do not fulfil its will (the laws of their own nature and their environment) it scraps them. For mankind is not necessarily creation's last word. To readers of Shaw's earlier work all this is a twice-told (or two-hundred-and-twice-told) tale. So is, of course, his horror of and contempt for Jesus as the Anglican blood-and-sin scapegoat.

But over prayer, Shaw's views have changed—for the deeper. He now finds that prayer "consoles, heals, builds the soul in us, and to enact a prohibition of prayer, as some Secularists would if they had the power, would be as futile as it would be cruel. But there are all sorts of prayers, from mere beggars' petitions and magic incantations to contemplative soul-building

and all sorts of divinities to pray to." Elsewhere he says it is the praying, not the person prayed to, that matters (which will horrify the conventional Christian with his "jealous God"). No doubt a Marcus Aurelius was more exalted by his recognition of heathen Roman gods than Pope Alexander Borgia by his worship in St. Peter's; but the type of god affects the type of prayer. It is a shrewd thrust at modern political superstitions when Shaw finds the new "Heil Hitler" no improvement on the old "Hail Mary!"

And he has no more use for the superstitions of science (which he recognises as such) than he has for the superstitions of religion.

A too little appreciated novelist recently dead, L. H. Myers, has a passage upon truth that may be fitly applied to Shaw's work: "The article called Truth, and commonly exchanged as such in the commerce of human life; the article that most persons consider good enough to offer to themselves and others: that article, compared to the stuff that Cosmo dealt in, was shoddy." No doubt Shaw's truth is far from absolute; indeed, like that of all honourable and righteous men, it falls short of the full glory only too often. Again, the tender mercies of the righteous are cruel; and Shaw's euthanasia for social misfits, due to his besotted worship of the over-glorified community, is shocking. It might mean good-night to a Socrates; but at its worst and most sophistical, Shaw's truth, based on goodwill towards men, is far above what is commonly accepted as truth. When you enter the sphere of Shaw's thought you breathe a different atmosphere from that exhaled by "such as for their bellies' sake creep and intrude and climb into the fold." His is the clear spirit after the order of Lycidas, intent on the faithful shepherd's task, and Freethinkers should honour in him a great Freethinker, even if he does not belong to the strictest of their sect.

C. G. L. DU CANN.

ACID DROPS

LORD BENNETT told a world Evangelistic gathering that God had led the British people in a wonderful way. It may be that Lord Bennett is on easy terms with God—sounds like it. But if he is, we beg him to suggest to God that he should make up his mind about things quicker than he does. A little quicker action on his part might have saved us some very heavy losses in this war. And after all, it would not be bad to give God a hint that in these days he cannot afford to play fast and loose with his followers. Many of them are wavering and others are just deserting.

Archdeacon McGowan, Vicar of Aston, is wroth at the tendency of certain military men taking their youth for a march on Sundays instead of bringing them to church. Other clergymen have joined in the protest; they also object to boys being marched anywhere during church hours than to church. We are not surprised, for how can the poor clergy expect youth to come to church unless they are marched there, and there is no chance of making people religious unless they are caught before they reach maturity. McGowan explains that the girls' organisations are all right because they do not usually parade on Sundays. Sea Cadets are better, as they always say prayers before parade. All of this agitation helps to show to all concerned what our Christian leaders understand by a free, democratic people. Everyone can do as he pleases—provided he does as he's told. The scandal of men and women being marched off to compulsory church worship should be stopped.

The Archbishop of Canterbury says that if you go to church for what you can get out of it you will get very little. Well, some of the bishops and archbishops seem to have done very well. It is certainly not in the commercial or literary world that they would get nearly as much as they get in the service of "Our Lord."

The Bishop of Rochester has appealed to all Kent Mayors to ensure that children under 16 are not admitted to cinemas on Sundays. It seems that the clergy got their way at Beckenham some time ago, but there has been no increase in church attendance. We are not surprised; boys and girls are not likely to be forced to church by that method. On the other hand, the clergy don't care the proverbial button what happens to the boys and girls if they don't come to church. In fact, the worse they are as a consequence of the Sabbatarian Sunday the better. The clergy positively love bad characters if they refuse to go to church. It is the growth of decency *without religion* that is troubling them.

The Vicar of St. Andrews, Wimbledon, writes to the "Daily Telegraph" that the clergyman who quietly does his business has no newspaper value. We should like to know what clergymen, as such, are of any value to the world anywhere.

We rather like the way in which the "Church Times" sets out a point. It says that "Christians are bound to share the good gifts of God with their less fortunate brethren." This is a very delicate way of admitting that while God means well, he often does things in such a way that others are left to put things in a better way, and that his favours are distributed in a rather unsatisfactory manner. So man lends a hand and attempts to put things straight. It seems, and experience endorses the supposition, that he chucks the good things to certain favoured people and leaves it to them to do what they may to distribute his favours on a better and wider measure. But why does he not see to it that each of his children gets his, or her, share? We are often told how bad the situation would be if man did not take a hand, and the "C.T." gives a proper reply to the question: "Where would man be without God?" It looks as though the retort is: "What would God do without man?" Man has to spend a great deal of time rectifying God's blunders.

The Rev. Leslie Belton, in the course of a letter to the "Sheffield Telegraph," says that he is not prepared to argue whether prayer is merely magical and superstitious "or how far it concords with rational philosophy he is not prepared to say." But the only prayer that religious people are concerned with is the miraculous one where someone does something that he would not have done had the prayer not been offered. That is a religious prayer, and it cannot avoid being a religious one. It looks as though Mr. Belton is losing confidence in his religion, but lacks the courage to face the consequences of his own mental development.

The old saying that "when thieves fall out honest men get their dues" has its parallel in the fact that when professional religionists fall out laymen get glimpses of their real character. Quite recently the Pope addressed a message to Londoners asking that Londoners should show "Christian sentiments of charity, forgiveness and mercy towards Germans. On this, the Bishop of Chelmsford, Dr. Henry Wilson, in the Chelmsford "Diocesan Chronicle," retorted:—

"It is difficult to remember one single word from the Pope in condemnation of the Nazis when they swept London with destruction.

"The plain fact is that Vatican politics are anti-democratic. . . .

"Right or wrong, there is a widespread uneasiness lest the Vatican authorities should succeed in having a say in the peace settlement.

"One of the surest ways to lose the peace would be to permit the dubious counsels of the Vatican diplomatists to have any hand in the business."

If we are permitted to play the part of umpire, we would decide that honours are equal. Jesus Christ did say that when a man strikes you on one side of the face you should turn the other to him for another wallop. On the other hand, Christians have always taken care that the "other cheek" should belong to the other fellow. Further, as an impartial umpire, we should have to point out that the Bishop of Chelmsford receives his power from another official, whereas the Pope is

in daily intercourse with thousands of Saints and claims to be the only priest who was picked out for his post by God Almighty. We think the Pope wins.

Here is another item which should rouse the Pope to action—he may have mentioned it to Mr. Churchill. Three Irish labourers were fined for obtaining money under false pretences. They said they were engaged on repairing bomb damage when they were really at church attending Mass. Two of the men were fined £10 or two months and the other fined £6 or six months. That seems putting Mass in a secondary place. If a man cannot leave his job to attend Mass without losing his wages, it looks as though attending Mass is of less consequence than hauling bricks.

A Mr. Hoyland is delivering a series of lectures for the B.B.C. on how parents are to teach religion in the home. The curious thing is that he is addressing himself to Agnostics. It really serves them right, and Mr. Hoyland is to be excused so far as the parents are concerned when he says that Agnosticism is a "barren creed." Mr. Hoyland says that Agnosticism is barren, and so far as the "I do not know" form of Agnosticism is used, the epithet is deserved. The real fact is that those who wish to know may know how the gods came into existence, and also the way in which they pass out of being. But it is impudence on the part of Mr. Hoyland to adopt the superior attitude involved in his readiness to teach Agnostics how to bring up their children. It is not the children of Atheists or Agnostics that need special religious teaching. It is the children of Christian parents who need carefully watching as they approach adult life.

It is a thousand pities that our politicians do not leave religion alone, or if they cannot, that they do not deal with it with some degree of understanding. Mr. Ernest Brown, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Chairman of the European Committee, told a body of "Free Churchmen" that the paramount need of the Continent was a revival of religion. And this in face of the fact that religion has always been one of the strongest single force operations all over Europe. Those who are in the habit of looking at facts, instead of dreaming dreams of a disturbing order, must realise that religion in some form or other has always been in operation all over Europe. The great lesson here should be that the sooner religion is treated as a matter that concerns the individual only, the better. It has never checked the evil in man, and has generally found an excuse for its operation.

We count the Bishop of Southwell (Dr. Russell Barry) to be kind and sarcastic. We base that suspicion on the fact that he advised his congregation that the Church of England should have the courage to say where it stands. How can any Church say to-day where it will stand to-morrow? Once upon a time it held that the Bible told nothing but the exact truth. Later it began to think that it had to be read "spiritually," which came to mean anything that paid. The Church also stood by the opinion that every type of animal was specially created in the Bible style. That gave way to evolution. Once it believed in a good red-hot hell. Then the majority of Christians began to discover that hell means only that the wicked were shut out of God's presence. Once it denied the right of Nonconformists to be counted equal to the Church Established; now it joins hands with them on the ground that if the Churches don't hang together they will all be hung separately. We think that Dr. Barry is a bit of a humorist; but we daresay he has heard of the famous Vicar of Bray. There are crowds of them about.

We see that the Churches are getting ready for another day of prayer to bring the war to an end—with victory for the Allied Forces. Well, if they will keep it up they are certain to hit the mark, and so there will be established a proof of the power of prayer. We wonder whether any of our readers have kept account of the number of massed prayers we have had, and the kind of answer that has been given. God, at any rate, has taken five years up to the present to make up his mind, but he seems to be watching which side the wind blows.

"THE FREETHINKER"

2 and 3, Furnival Street, Holborn,
London, E.C.4.
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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 think the following from that great Freethinker and one of France's great writers, Anatole France, will be of interest to readers. It was to be read to the International Freethought Congress held in Paris on September 4, 1905:—

MY DEAR PRESIDENT,—I greatly regret my inability to take my place in the Congress, to whose deliberations you yourself bring the authority of conspicuous endowments of mind and character.

I adhere wholeheartedly to the principles which unite the Freethinkers of France.

Revealed religions all have one drawback. The revelations on which they are founded represent a stage in the progress of science and civilisation which has long been superseded. Doubtless the ideas of the gods are no more unchangeable than those of the human beings who interpret them. They fade away in time. But they are always in the rear of human intelligence. Take the God of the Christians. He cannot be taxed with not changing. He was a Jew, and now he is an anti-Semite. But we must do him justice. He is not so fierce as he used to be. Nevertheless, he is the sworn enemy of science and reason. The Churches, founded in his Son's name, especially the Catholic Church, offer, as we can see for ourselves to-day, a desperate resistance to the moral and intellectual development of the societies they claim to direct.

You, gentlemen, exhibit that spirit of doubt and inquiry which is essential to scientific progress, and without which neither pity nor tolerance nor broad human sympathy could have a place in this world. I associate myself with your generous endeavours and remain,

Mr. President,
ANATOLE FRANCE.

All Leeds Freethinkers will, we hope, make a point of being present at the Trades Hall, Upper Fountain Street, to-day (October 22), at 7 p.m., when Mr. F. J. Corina, under the auspices of the Leeds Freethought Society, will give an address on "The Need for Secularism." Mr. Corina's trenchant style is well known to readers, and we are sure his exposition of Secularism, and the need for it these days, will form an absorbing subject. We trust there will be an excellent audience.

Keighley Freethinkers will have an opportunity of hearing Mr. J. Clayton lecture in the Co-operative Assembly Rooms to-day (October 22) on behalf of the local N.S.S. branch. Having

just concluded a busy open-air season around Lancashire, Mr. Clayton's subject, "What Are We Fighting For?" will come from one with a long and varied experience of active work for our movement. The lecture begins at 3 p.m., and both speaker and the branch deserve all possible local support.

The following, which we take from the pages of the "Ripley Gazette," is worth noting as one indication what hosts of people will endorse, even when so many lack the courage to say it openly:—

"We understand that the Alfreton Urban Council have followed the lead of the County Council in deciding by a majority of ten to four to open their meetings with prayer. We are not aware that it is any part of the duties of a local authority to indulge in religious exercises. We had formed the opinion that they were there for sterner and more realistic purposes. Next, perhaps, we shall hear that this issue is to become an election cry—"To pray or not to pray." We hope, at the expiry of six months, the public will be told the result of the experiment. It can hardly be worse than the attempts to induce the deity to provide better weather for our fighting men at the front."

Put the New Testament into a completely modern dress, and the result would be complete disbelief. Take away the gradually developed specialised language in which the Bible is written, a language that was never a language of the people in the sense of its being either a written or a spoken one for any other purpose than that of religion, and the real nature of the narrative would be plain to everyone. Let anyone sit down and imagine what the scenes pictured in the New Testament would appear like to a modern coming into contact with them for the first time in their actual happening, and he will get a far better idea of the nature of genuine Christianity, and of the character of the primitive believers, than he could possibly acquire from any course of theological study.

Hundreds of thousands of temples, synagogues, mosques, conventicles and places of worship scattered through the ages; hundreds of thousands of men and women devoted to religious services and saddled upon human society for support; an incalculable amount of human energy spent in the service of religion, and for all this not a single verifiable truth contributed to the stock of human knowledge, not a single idea that could not have been produced without its aid, and has not been realised without its existence. Is there a more monumental instance of human folly than this?

It is to the credit of the Christian Church that the one thing it has never forgotten to preach is the gospel of truth, love and brotherhood. It may have commenced its career with forging numbers of documents, and continued by tampering with the writings of such classical works as suited its purposes; it may have made itself notorious among the pagans for the hatred with which its followers assailed each other, and for the lies they told about each other; it may have made torture a settled and customary feature of legal procedure; it may have substituted miracles for medicine and relic worship for sanitation; it may have blazed its way across the world over the bodies of tortured and murdered Jews and heretics; it may have done its utmost to suppress liberty of thought and speech wherever it has planted itself; it may have threatened the security of the family with its obscene doctrine of celibacy; it may have made whole districts desolate in its attempts to weed out heresy; it may have given to war a religious sanction, and to intolerance a religious justification; it may have slandered unbelievers, living and dead; all these things it may have done, and done consistently and persistently, but let us be just. It has never ceased to preach the gospel of truth, love and brotherhood.

A publisher who deals largely in Bibles and religious publications proclaims that the stocks of Bibles are being depleted. Naturally we are not upset by this, although the Bible is both an interesting and instructive volume—if read with a few good modern books on anthropology handy for consultation. But what this publisher is complaining about is that his particular trade being religious productions, any falling-off in the supply seriously affects his business. Bibles in homes do not usually show signs of wear.

A CATHOLIC IN CONTROVERSY

II

ONE part of the case against the Catholic Church in Wells' "Crux Ansata" is that it "passed over at last almost completely to the side of persecution and the pleasures of cruelty." That puts its ghastly story of murder, assassination, torture and imprisonment over a period at least of fifteen centuries in a sentence far too kind for such a record. But as it is history, and history that no amount of Jesuit shuffling can upset, one can quite well understand that Mr. de la Bedoyere, in his reply, "Was it Worth it, Wells?" to "Crux Ansata," would take good care that his own dupes should know as little as possible of the truth.

He therefore takes up some attacks on the Roman Church from the Hitler organ, "Schwarze Korps," from "Angriff," and from "Crux Ansata" to show that the "tone and object" of Wells and the "madder Nazis" are "practically identical." Or in other words, Wells is all right when he gives us "Mr. Kipps" and "Love and Mr. Lewisham," but when he is so silly as to attack the Roman Church "he must write as vulgarly and brutally as the close-cropped, bespectacled fanatics who serve Mr. Hitler, and even in the same words." But supposing the "Schwarze Korps" is right in its attack on the Church which the "bespectacled" Editor of the "Catholic Herald" swears by? It may well serve Mr. Hitler's purpose, although Hitler himself believes in a Divine Providence just as does Mr. de la Bedoyere. A man may be close-cropped, he may wear spectacles, and he may even call himself a Nazi, but at the same time his attack on the Roman Church may be true. It was for Jesuits like Heenan or D'Arcy—or even Mr. de la Bedoyere—to show that Wells was wrong. But it was far easier to show that his dislike of Popery is shared by some Nazis—and thus stir up an irrelevant prejudice—than to deal with a serious charge against the Church.

But Mr. de la Bedoyere knew that he had to come to grips in the end, and so his next attack was on Wells' authorities, Dr. Coulton and Mr. Joseph McCabe. He attacks Dr. Coulton in a delightfully disingenuous way which for most of his pious readers will put that redoubtable Catholic adversary completely out of court. Coulton declared that Fr. Thurston could not find ten blunders in ten pages in Lea's "History of Auricular Confession." Fr. Thurston found fifteen, so that settles Coulton as an historian! And to clinch the matter we are informed that Coulton has never been a Catholic! And this kind of nonsense—and insolence—is swallowed by Roman Catholics as argument.

What Mr. de la Bedoyere did not do, because he could not, was to take the statements quoted by Wells from Dr. Coulton and prove them to be false. And that also neither Fr. Heenan nor Fr. D'Arcy attempted to do. Anyone who has read the numerous pamphlets and books written by Dr. Coulton against the Catholic Church will know that his indictment leaves that of Mr. Wells miles behind. Catholics do not like Dr. Coulton—and if I were a Catholic I should not only hate him but fear him.

But when it comes to Mr. McCabe "we get our first real guffaw." And Mr. de la Bedoyere forgets what a real honest-to-goodness decent fellow he is and, like all Catholics, begins to see red. That a man brought up as a Catholic priest eventually saw through the damnable imposture of Popery, and was honest enough and brave enough to give it up, might have passed with other Catholics if he had only shut up. But that he should publish books against a system which he knew to be false and cowardly, which in essence was a persecuting one more akin to Nazism than anything else, was a crime so horrible that

Catholics can hardly find words beastly enough in their fury to denounce him. And so, utterly unable to reply to Coulton, and certainly quite unable to deal with McCabe, Mr. de la Bedoyere came to the conclusion that, "after all, authorities are a secondary matter"! Why, then, all this pother about Coulton and McCabe? Why not say outright that facts are too stubborn to be worth answering? That is the kind of reply beloved by the Roman Church.

By this time, however, Mr. de la Bedoyere began to see that Wells wanted not a lot of futile talk, but definite proof that his "indictment" was packed with mistakes; and so we get particulars of fifteen or so set duly out. I wish I had the space to set them out in these pages; for, indeed, if ever bankruptcy in argument could be shown it is here. It is no excuse to say that the answers are "rapid sniping," or that they are "the easiest ones." None of the "answers" matter the proverbial brass farthing. Wells says the "sins of the flesh are venial." It should have been "venial"—and, in any case, they are not venial. Wells says that Gibbon blushed so much at the manners and morals of Pope John XII "that he had to take refuge beneath a veil of Latin footnotes." And the marvellous Catholic reply to this is that "there is nothing in the Latin notes not to be found in the English text." Yes, but do we get a defence of John XII? Not on your life. Wells understands that the "burning of his body will cause a Catholic trouble at the Resurrection." And the answer is, "He's only a big baby after all." Wells says that the people had a thin time in the Middle Ages, and the reply is lots of people actually lived to 60 or 70 years of age. He says their clothing was stale and dirty—and the Quennells, in "A History of Everyday Things in England," say "they were not." Wells says the Pope is "profoundly ignorant and mentally inferior," and the reply is that he knows several languages. And this kind of thing is claimed by Mr. de la Bedoyere to be answers to "specific misstatements," though, when he came soberly to reflect on what he had written, he had to admit that he does "not set any great store on this exposure." Exposure, indeed! C'est pour rire.

The history of the Roman Church is open for any layman to study. He does not require the expert assistance of a priest or a Jesuit to lead him gently through the devious path of understanding. Murder and torture, humbug and credulity can be understood by all except lunatics. Through the past 1,900 years this Church has been the blight of the human race; it has stood in the way of progress and enlightenment, and is an anachronism in a war-weary world. For that matter, it always was an anachronism.

The Roman Church insisted, and still insists, on blind obedience. It wants grown men and women to kneel and pray and encourages a sickening servility to "priests." Its relics, its beads, its apparitions of Mary, its holy water and crucifixes, blessed or unblessed by an archbishop, are revolting examples of humbug and credulity. Ingersoll, in his celebrated reply to Manning, "Rome or Reason," took Catholic Spain as an example, and showed that when cholera visited Madrid and other cities "physicians were mobbed. Processions of saints carried the host through the streets for the purpose of staying the plague. The streets were not cleaned, the sewers were filled. Filth and faith, old partners, reigned supreme. . . . The Church allowed its children to perish through ignorance."

Wells could have made his "Crux Ansata," had he wished, a far more formidable indictment; but what he did was to call the attention of many people, deceived by Rome's clever publicity, to a little of what might be urged against the claims of the Church. No squeal that "we Catholics are such good chaps" can hide its bloodstained and terrible story.

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"It was the enemy of intelligence," cried Ingersoll, "the assassin of liberty, and the destroyer of progress. It loaded the noble with chains and the infamous with honours. It argued with the sword, persuaded with poison, and convinced with the faggot."

There is nothing in Hitler's Nazism which the Roman Church had not equalled and surpassed in brutality and horror. "It was the greatest and most powerful enemy of human rights." And it is this indictment that not all the de la Bedoyeres, the Heenans and the D'Arcys in the world can answer.

H. CUTNER.

A SONG ABOUT BISHOPS

God made the Modern Bishop
His Myst'ries to perform,
And makes him preach such sophistries
(To raise a Fleet Street storm)
As "Bacon may be Shakespeare,
And Wine *perhaps* is blood,
And though this world's a fake sphere
It's *Relatively* good!"

This vacillating Bishop
Would call the Virgin "Mrs."
And censure Roman Catholics,
Who cover her with kisses.
He dubs it horrid and he calls
The whole thing "oversexed,"
Though *Honi soit qui mal y pense*
Should be a Bishop's text.

His "props" are not episcopal,
But pseudo scientific,
And his "Fearless Modern Outlook"
The Press hails as "Terrific!"
He keeps Darwin's Evolution
Quite handy on his rostrum,
And with Einstein's Relativity
Dilutes the Christian nostrum.

He sells machine-made wafers
As the Living Flesh of God,
And grocer's watered claret
As blood—it's very odd!
He damns all wicked Freethinkers
And sneers at what they've missed,
Yet when they grow by thousands
Becomes a Modernist!

This Modern type of Bishop
At Magic draws the line.
Not frankly—like the Freethinker,
Who says that Wine is—wine—
But packed with reservations
And Metaphysic sham.
Yet if he draws his salary,
He doesn't give a damn!

This Hell-rejecting Bishop
Thinks that Blasphemy's a sin,
But that Science and Religion
Are really Kith and Kin.
But people aren't so stupid,
Nor will they long be caught,
And buy the Modern type of pup
The bloomin' Bishop's bought!

GWYN.

CORRESPONDENCE

MOLIERE OR CYRANO?

SIR,—Sorry, but it is Molière. "Mais que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?"—spoken by Geronte in "Les Fourberies de Scapin," as every schoolboy knows!—Yours, etc.,

MICHAEL DE LA BEDOYERE.

[Mr. de la Bedoyere is still in error. Molière borrowed the quotation from Cyrano de Bergerac.—EDITOR.]

OBITUARY

WILLIAM ROWE

I have just heard that William Rowe has died in Durban, South Africa. He was 79 years of age, and had been a fervid supporter of Freethought and an admirer of "The Freethinker" for many years. William Rowe, while first and foremost an avid student of our movement, was likewise extensively interested in revolutionary movements and took a consistent anti-war attitude, not because he could have condoned the atrocities committed by the Nazis or Fascists, but because he believed that these, like other reactionary creeds, were branches of Capitalism itself, and as such had to be fought in the same way. He never allowed himself to become intolerant toward the beliefs of others, but was always able to marshal a solid agglomeration of facts to support his philosophy. Moreover, he was kind almost to a fault, if such a characteristic may be so applied. He had an excellent collection of books on Freethought, but one of his complaints about living in Africa was that he found it so difficult to obtain "The Freethinker."

I know that William Rowe would have wanted no better tribute to his memory than that all his friends should know of his death through the intermediary of our paper.

ROBERT S. BLUM.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park).—Sunday, 3 p.m. Messrs. WOOD, PAGE, and other speakers.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m., ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A.: "The Ethics of Democracy."

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 6.45 p.m., Mr. J. V. SHORTT will lecture.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m., Mr. JOE WALKER, C.C.: "Means of Life."

Glasgow Secular Society (25, Hillfoot Street, Dennistoun).—Sunday, 3 p.m.: Open Discussion.

Keighley Branch N.S.S. (Co-operative Assembly Rooms).—Sunday, 3 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON: "What Are We Fighting For?"

Leeds Freethought Society (Trades Hall, Upper Fountain Street, Leeds).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. F. J. CORNA: "The Need for Secularism."

Leicester Secular Society (75, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m., Mr. T. F. PALMER: "Is Evolution Still Sound?"

WANTED to purchase (or loan of).—"The Ego and His Own," by Max Sterner; "The Pathetic Fallacy," by Llewellyn Powys; and Works of Stuart Glennie.—Box 45, c/o "The Freethinker," 2-3, Furnival Street, London, E.C.4.

TO SWEAR OR NOT TO SWEAR?

THE bleatings of Mr. H. Irving, in his article "To Baa or Not to Baa," are so utterly remote from the realities of the position raised in my articles on oaths and affirmations that it would be a pity to follow him around in his glib gambolling from point to point, where he touches ever so lightly on each one without staying long enough for any of them to penetrate.

Mr. Irving seems to overlook the essential difference between being brought before the law for an offensive act as distinct from a spoken or written statement. He says, "Action against a perjurer need not depend upon a pledge any more than action against a thief." It need not, I agreed; but it must if justice is to remain even a shadow.

Prosecution for an illegal action, such as theft or assault, does not need to rest upon a pledge or declaration, but upon the evidence that the action took place. The illegality of the action is an easy matter to decide, for actions are codified as offences by statute or recognised by common law. In other words, actions for which one may be prosecuted or sued are specified in some form or other, and their specification establishes our measure of freedom of action by indicating that we may do all other things without fear of interference. Generally, socially right or wrong actions are understood in advance as a result of codification, common law and official regulations; and even if we do not know all the law (we are supposed to know them) we have a means of reference by which we can ascertain what actions are legally right or wrong. We know, or we can get to know, where we stand.

But, while actions are legally identifiable in advance, who would dare suggest that similar clarity of position could be produced in regard to speech or writing? To make it possible to know what may be said or written, or vice versa, would need a legal library of words, phrases, names, etc., more comprehensive than the British Museum Library. It would mean ten thousand ridiculous Acts, like the Blasphemy Act, laying down offences, without even then being able to prescribe their nature, and a great battalion of lawyers specialising in Statutes of Words. The very idea is nonsensical.

Offences of speech or writing could never be pre-specified, and the attempts to do so in limited respects—blasphemy, sedition, slander and libel—have already shown how dangerous such laws may be. So, with the single exception of speech or writing which can be proved to do actual harm to the individual subject, I must for my part insist upon complete freedom of expression. But such freedom is not to be obtained by abolishing declarations and pledges which provide the ground for actions for perjury, breach of contract and so on. To provide the widest field of expression there must be strictly limited grounds of action in such matters, not a declarationless or pledgeless state of affairs, in which any remark or piece of writing could, in the hands of the unscrupulous or spiteful, become a ground for legal complaint.

If we are to know where we stand, there must be no crime of perjury without a broken declaration to speak or write the truth; no "breach" action without a recognisable pledge and so on. The law is not always an ass, and in most respects it already recognises this principle, as anything from an official form ("I declare this information to be true to the best of my knowledge and belief") to an affirmation or oath will show. If it were not so few of us would dare to write or speak, fearing the uncertainty of our legal position.

If actions against speech or writing could be taken without specific and limited cause, "The Freethinker" would have been rendered hopelessly insolvent years ago by legal costs and

Freethought speakers would be continually banished by bankruptcy to the workhouse.

I want to see the oath disappear because it is a mark of degradation for a man to invoke a god to help him speak; but I want the affirmation, or something like it, retained because that clearly limits the circumstances in which a man may be proceeded against for opening his mouth. The right to prosecute for perjury within a clearly limited scope is a reasonable thing; the right to prosecute without such limitation would be highly dangerous.

Mr. Irving is badly out when he says perjury need not depend on a pledge. Perjury *does* depend on a pledge, for it is the making of a false declaration, not merely a false statement. That is a very important distinction—and a wise one. But there is no need to labour the point. Perjury does, and must, depend on a pledge.

And the wise sheep will understand the value to the flock of a little useful baa-ing now and then.

Mr. Irving, more altruistic or more gullible than myself, seems to think there is something in the idea of "truth for truth's sake"; but this seems to me to be very faulty Determinism, giving truth a capital T and a place among the metaphysical "absolutes." I can imagine a man telling the truth much more easily when bound by an affirmation, which (1) makes him conscious of a duty to his fellow men or (2) makes him afraid of the consequences of lying, than in any philosophic fatuity about truth for truth's sake.

When Mr. Irving says Christian bigotry is not very conspicuous in legal circles to-day he is again wide of the mark. If the term "legal circles" includes the bench of lay magistrates who still dominate the petty courts of this country, we shall find Christian bigotry as well entrenched as ever, but with this difference: that while the old bigotry was actuated by honest belief, the present bigotry is largely a product of spineless lip-serice hypocrisy, which is worse.

Moreover, to say "As religion becomes weaker the affirmation is bound to supersede the oath" is to dazzle oneself with that "torch in the black-out." We have smashed Christian theology, but not Christian hypocrisy. That is a much tougher nut; and sitting back with hope glistening in one's eyes, saying that something is "bound" to happen, is about the best way to prevent it from happening.

Some people have been saying for years that secular education was "bound" to come, so why worry. How do they feel about it now in view of recent happenings? F. J. CORINA.

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