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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

A Plea for Parsons

RIGHT conduct precedes religion. So for the matter of that does bad or defective conduct. This is, however, a basic truth, and it was in operation among animal herds long before the human made its appearance. In terms of the environment animal parents do what they can to educate their offspring. A cat will train its kitten, a bitch its puppy, elephants are known to punish a wayward member of the herd, particularly when it becomes a complete threat to others. Among developed animals there is exhibited a marked preference for some members of the group and dislike to others. To those who wish to study animal behaviour and training in the early periods of life we commend two books by Karl Groose on the play of animals and the play of man. (Both books are out of print but should be reprinted.)

What I have said is a kind of preface to some comments on an essay by a well-known writer, Mr. Arthur Bryant, which appeared in the "Illustrated London News" for February 17. He tells us that the article was suggested by his listening to one of the early morning infantile sermons given by the B.B.C. under the general heading of "Lift Up Your Hearts." The title is not a bad one—bearing in mind the quality of the sermons, it might even be considered a witty one—for the preacher appears to rely more upon his lower organs than upon his brains. Mr. Bryant says that the particular outbreak to which he listened manifested more sense in that five minutes than he had ever before heard. We cannot contradict him, although it does show a rather poor sense of selection. Of course, he may be writing "sarcastic," for he had to catch a train, and when he says that the intelligence displayed in this five minutes was greater than a whole sitting of the Brains Trust, he may be pulling the reader's leg. For example, he says he was struck by the consideration that people will be more likely to swallow what the preacher has to say when their hands are busily engaged. There is something in that, but Mr. Bryant's comments read as though the sermon had been hastily swallowed and badly digested.

For example, here are a few of Mr. Bryant's musings. First of all he believes that "our spiritual leaders" have not made the position of man "sufficiently clear." That is not true. The position of man in this world is quite clear. It only gets muddled when the clergy try to translate the Old and New Testaments in terms of civilised thinking. The essence of foundationary Christianity is as plain as words can make it. All men are born criminals, their criminality dating from the time when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, when God lost his temper and cursed all future generations. Then came, after a long time, the bargain between God and his Son, to the effect that the

son should shoulder the penalty man had incurred, give up his life, and that anyone who believed in him should be counted excused. There was no question of man winning his way by conduct, the story of the thieves on the cross and death-bed repentances knocks that kind of apology on the head.

The moral maxims used impresses Mr. Bryant, but they have nothing to do with the point at issue. They are as old as the human race. In substance they are part and parcel of the ethics of associated life, and were so long before they are met as set theory. They can be traced long before the gods made their appearance. There is nothing that so efficiently shows the low level of our thinking than the assumption that social conduct was first consciously taught. It is just one more instance of the man who discovered, to his surprise, that he had all his life been talking prose without knowing it.

Historic Christianity, says Mr. Bryant, is based "on a high level of unselfishness, forgiveness and love." That is the usual cant of the clergy. To begin with, there is nothing unselfish in historic Christianity. That was based on the complete unworthiness of man, and his only hope was that by the worship of Jesus he would escape damnation. That phase of Christianity is not yet dead, although even the parsonary are growing ashamed of it. But moral teaching, as such, has really nothing to do with religion in either its origin or its development. If an action is good it must be counted as such, because of the nature of its impact on life. God simply has nothing to do with it. Good things, as Socrates long ago insisted, must be good for something. They simply cannot be good for nothing. A good action is good because of its effect on life, a bad one for its evil consequences. Gods simply have nothing to do with it.

There is another aspect of the matter which has apparently never occurred to Mr. Bryant, and was certainly never stressed by the B.B.C. preachers. That is, that once a teaching is recognised as good it remains good, quite independently of any religious belief whatever. Whether there is a god or not simply has no bearing on the matter. Copernicus gave us a certain view of the movements of the earth. Newton gave information concerning celestial gravitation. Darwin gave us a certain conception of evolution. But these truths, once given, become the property of all, and so are quite independent of discoverers. What is true in the cases mentioned is equally true of ethics. The justice of moral teachings does not depend for its value on the one who called our attention to them, they are the common property of all, and their justification must be tested by the intelligence of all. God simply has nothing to do with the question. God is just an irrelevance.

There is another issue raised by Mr. Bryant—that the B.B.C. preacher has many fallacies and absurdities to his

credit. In this case we have to face an assumption by inference. The inference is that Christianity saved the world from what is known as the "Dark Ages," and that there was created a golden Christian age. It is put this way:—

"Never since the last great collapse of civilisation, on the threshold of the Dark Ages, has the world stood in greater need of moral leadership in the conduct of its daily business."

As a matter of fact, the "Dark Ages" were among the earliest Christian achievements. Consider a few facts concerning what we may call the background of the Christian Church. Originally Christianity had at its service the Egyptian schools of science and philosophy. It had also the rich schools of philosophy and the advance made in science by ancient Greece, also the great legal civilisation of Rome. Granted that in each of these centres a decline had set in, no one who is conversant with the facts will deny there was a possibility of a return in full to the Græco-Roman culture. To assume that the Greek and Roman cultures went down before the invasion of the Barbarians belongs to the philosophy which places the *whole* responsibility on Hitler for the present world war. That one of the main causes of the collapse of the ancient civilisations was the rise to power of Christianity is admitted by no less a journal than the "Church Times." In its issue for December 1, in the course of a leading article, we have the following:—

"The Roman Empire itself was an historical attempt to arrest the decline of Hellenic civilisation. . . . The Roman Empire deliberately used religion as an instrument to check the decline of the State, but the (Christian) Church equally deliberately refused to lend itself to that purpose. . . . It is also an historical fact that the existence of the Church did not save Rome from a final process of social decay."

This reminds one of Gibbon: "It was not in this world that Christians aimed at being either happy or useful." But we wish readers to pay special attention to this confession of a truth that is plain to all who read history intelligently. Those who wish to study the way in which the Christian religion sucked the blood of Rome and Greece to the point of death, I commend two of the best books on the subject, published 1898-1905. The titles are "Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire" and "Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius." The author is Samuel Dill, Professor of Greek, Belfast, and of Oxford University. Those who consult these books will find overwhelming evidence that it was mainly the influence of Christianity which completed the ruin of ancient Greece and Roman culture. Professor Dill fully endorses Gibbon's summing-up of the cause of the decline of Rome, and almost in Gibbon's words he says: "The Church and barbarism had triumphed." The association of the two factors was essential to the ruin of the ancient culture. The barbarians lacked culture and the Christian horde hated and sought to destroy all learning that did not fall into line with Christian primitive superstitions. Hitler was not the first to show the possibility of destroying a civilisation. The Christian Church had already taught the world a lesson of early forms of Fascism and Nazism. The Christian Church preceded

Hitler. Mr. Bryant should read history with his mind cleansed from the lusty lying of our Christian guides.

The proof of the truth of what has been said, namely, that it was Christianity that made the fall of Rome and Greece certain, is proved by the fact that when the rebirth of Europe came—round about the twelfth century—the impetus for betterment came not from Christianity or from the Church, but direct from the science and culture of ancient Greece and Rome, with the later science and learning of the Mohammedan world. The centuries of Christian rule that ran from the fourth to the thirteenth century filled the world with crude superstition and intolerance and had denounced learning as an instrument of the devil. The awakening did *not* come from the Christian Church. It came from a revival of Pagan culture which the Church hoped it had buried for ever. So far as the civilised world is concerned, it would have been far better had Christianity never appeared.

Our Spiritual Guides

I am afraid I must confine myself to just one more curious outburst by Mr. Bryant. He advises the Churches what they ought to do. On that matter I can assure him that they have forgotten more than Mr. Bryant ever knew. Piffle and plunder are two features about which the Church cannot be taught anything. They know all there is to know in the art of fooling the people and of retreating when the red light is shown. Mr. Bryant advises the Churches that they must not draw funds "from the profits of slum houses or prostitution, for any part of the revenues which it uses for its work of spiritual teaching." Brave Arthur Bryant! But the Church has always acted as Mr. Bryant suggests—it has given with one hand and taken back with the other. For example, there was the case of the Queen Anne's Bounty. That originally was a tax that fell to the Catholic Churches. Then when Rome was kicked out, the English Church kindly collected the tax. The tax belonged to the Crown. Then Queen Anne was advised to give the income from this tax to poorly paid priests. Then, astounded by such generosity, Parliament increased the Queen's income by the amount she had given away, and that has continued. Most of us could give money away on those terms.

With regard to property, I believe that a great deal of the worst kind of houses—structurally and morally—have now been sold, but the Church takes the money and it is invested—by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners—and the Church has the income. The Church does not give up property or taxes, or anything else. It never voluntarily *gives up* anything; it merely finds other investments. There were also Church rates and tithes to be paid. These also, with the exception of a few remaining relics, have been abolished. But the Church in every case was bought out, and year by year the people are losing the value of the money which was handed over to their spiritual guides. I do not think the English clergy need the counsel that Mr. Bryant offers them. All the tricks of saying one thing and meaning something else, giving up a "ramp" which has served its purpose and straightway inventing another of the same quality. Behind the clergy of to-day there is the long string of cleric tradition. Our clergy may be good enough men, but all of them are bolstering institutions and ideas that can only live nowadays by trickery and misrepresentation. —CHAPMAN COHEN.

A LESSON TO KINGS AND NATIONS

PERHAPS the most far-reaching event of modern times, the French Revolution has exercised an abiding influence over the minds of historians in many climes. Carlyle's and Kropotkin's narratives are familiar to English readers, but apparently the most penetrating studies of this convulsion have been those of French historians who have approached their problem from various points of view.

A most dispassionate and discriminating study of the French upheaval has been written by Mr. J. M. Thompson: "The French Revolution" (Blackwell, Oxford, 1944). Our author was fully qualified for his task, as he was formerly University Lecturer at Oxford in Modern French History.

There are no angels or devils in this inquiry. The virtues and the vices of the successive protagonists in the drama are those of fallible human instruments who remain more or less the creatures of the force of circumstances. Even such supposed monsters as Marat and Robespierre, deplorable as their policy proved, were mainly animated by good intentions. But, that they, and other leading personalities of the period, proved incapable of riding the whirlwind and directing the storm, was not so much due to their lack of ability, but to the constantly increasing complexity of the problems that confronted them.

Our historian stresses the difficulty experienced by the average Englishman in visualising the convulsion. "It is the difficulty," he urges, "of realising that it was French and that it was a Revolution. Historians too often assume, as Burke assumed, that because the French Revolution in 1789 did not proceed like the English Revolution in 1688, there must have been something wrong about it. They seem to expect Paris in 1789, France in 1794 to behave with the calm and propriety of London in 1889, or England in 1894. True, our historical imaginations have been jolted by more recent events. Nineteenth-century complacency could hardly survive the shocks that the twentieth-century had in store for it." Therefore, to gain a reliable estimate of the factors operating at this turbulent time it is essential to visualise the baffling enigmas confronting French statesmen.

Turgot and Necker had unsuccessfully striven to set the finances of France in order and, at the beginning of the troubles, France was bankrupt. The States General was convened in 1789 and the Middle Class—the Third Estate—soon counted for something in its opposition to the nobles and clergy.

In the succeeding National Assembly there were statesmen of outstanding ability and these included Bailly, Siyès and Mirabeau. But nearly all the reforms proposed were more or less anathema to the Church, the aristocracy and the Crown. Yet Louis XVI. and his advisers were uncertain concerning the reliability of the armed forces, if called upon to suppress the insurgent populace and its leaders. "Even the household troops (*garde de corps*) could not be trusted. In practice, then, the king could count only on his mercenaries—a sorry argument against a national Parliament, or a Paris mob."

Still, the sentries guarding the Assembly remained a menace to its freedom, while the regiments sent to surround Paris threatened popular liberty. If the king could master the Capital this would give him complete control of France. While Versailles was the centre of fashion, Paris had become the business centre of the country. Its population was less than that of London, but five times as great as that of any other Gallic city.

Paris preserved its calm until June 27, 1789, when an ominous incident occurred. One unpopular employer was burnt in effigy, while the home of another was sacked. The troops failed to restore order until twenty of the rioters were killed. In the trial that followed the outbreak several were sentenced to death and many sent to the galleys. But marked public sympathy was extended to the delinquents, and it warned the authorities that the Parisian proletariat might rise in rebellion at any moment.

On July 11, the progressive Necker was ignominiously dismissed and replaced by the dictatorial reactionary Baron de Breteuil. It was now obvious that the concessions granted by the Crown were to be withdrawn and full regal authority reimposed.

These proceedings caused consternation. The Banks, the Bourse, the commercial world generally were alarmed. The populace became excited and resentful. The theatres were compelled to close and the cry *Aux armes* resounded through the streets. The crowd conflicted with the German mercenary troops and several people were wounded. "The cry of massacre was raised," writes Thompson, "and maddened the crowd. The foreign troops soon found themselves forced back, not only by citizens armed with the plunder of goldsmiths' shops, but also by the French Guard, who broke from their barracks with their arms and ammunition, and declared for the people. To lose the command of the Guards was to lose the command of Paris." Thus the Capital was surrendered to the people.

During the turmoil, looting occurred, but on the succeeding day a standing committee of staid citizens took over authority. But peace was only momentarily restored; arms and ammunition were collected by the insurgents and a weaponed and frenzied mob assailed the Bastille, the most execrated embodiment of tyranny in Paris.

Attempts to postpone hostilities were frustrated and the attack began. In the words of our historian: "The fighting now grew fierce and fatal. Between two and three in the afternoon (July 14, 1789) the French Guard and the City Militia brought up guns, and an almost professional attack was made on the main defences of the fortress." The assailants displayed undaunted courage and 85 of them were slain; nearly 90 were wounded, 15 fatally.

The Bastille was eventually taken by storm. The dungeons were entered and seven prisoners released, all that remained after Malsherbe's "merciful visitation of 1775." But the rest of Paris was so convulsed that the fall of the Bastille attracted little attention outside the obscure district in which it occurred. But it soon became known when a tumultuous procession passed along bearing the severed heads of the prison Governor and one of his officials impaled on pikes.

These sanguinary events, however, strengthened the hands of the National Assembly and weakened those of the king. One far-reaching result was the decree of August 10, 1789 which "bound the officers of the Guard to employ their troops only under the orders of the civil or municipal authorities." When this rule was extended to the whole army (February 28, '90), observes Thompson, "the king was completely disarmed. Thus the revolution had solved at its outset the problem that had puzzled both Montesquieu and Blackstone. It had created a standing army which could not be used by the king against the people."

The perplexing difficulties that troubled the successive statesmen of subsequent years are all carefully considered in Mr. Thompson's excellent historical study.

The attempted escape; the trial and execution of the king; the rise and fall of the Girondists; the arrest and execution of Danton; the relentless dictatorship of Robespierre and St. Just with their subsequent overthrow; the bloody religious conflicts where the Church still reigned; all these tragic events are dealt with in dispassionate detail in this volume.

The path being prepared for the advent of the Corsican adventurer, Bonaparte, he and his supporters were able to deprive France of much of her dearly bought freedom and to plunge Europe into nearly a quarter of a century's warfare both on land and sea, until Napoleon himself was finally worsted at Waterloo and left France a smaller and less influential State than he found her when he assumed supreme power and overthrew the Republic.

ACID DROPS

We were pleased to see in "The Listener" a strong protest against the recent B.B.C. play on the Trial of Charles the First. It was a glaring falsity, not so much for what was said, but for the way in which it was said. The King was a gentle creature on whose lips the proverbial butter would not melt. That he was false to his promises, and had filled his head with some stupid notion of the Divine Right of Kings was kept back. It was history hardly as good as the ordinary school history, in which only dates and names are usually correct.

Mr. Hayward, the writer of the letter, points out that nothing was said concerning the fact that "all the Puritans had been infinitely patient with the defeated Charles, and up to the last moment they had tried to come to terms with the King. But he was a constant liar, and the greatest equivocator in English if not in world history." We think that in common justice the B.B.C. should put on the air the other side of the case. But that is not the policy of the B.B.C. It will continue framing historie lies as "sacred" truth. It will fool the people so long as it is a monopoly, without giving the other side of the case. The result is that our youth has to unlearn a terrible amount after leaving school, and most fall easy victims to the essential falsehoods on which they are fed.

Christians, says the "Church Times" in a leading article (March 2), now "form only a minority of the population." We have been saying this for many, many years. But that being the case, is it not about time that the "Church Times" and other journals ceased to refer to England as a Christian country? And ought we not to abolish the habit of chaining the King—elected two and a half centuries ago—to the established Church? If we believe, really believe, in freedom and democracy it is time to abolish the relics of a bygone position.

Here is another matter on which it is time we might play for clear thinking and honest speech. "Religious art should be the expression of a faith." But there is no such thing as religious art. Art may be used in the interests of art, so it might, and it has been used in the interests of Atheism. Cabbages may be grown by Christians in a cathedral close and the profits of the sale be given to the upholding of the Church, but does that warrant one calling them religious cabbages? The more closely one probes into religion the more dishonest it proves itself to be.

The Cambridge magistrates have decided that cinemas will be permitted to open on Sunday only on the condition that children are not allowed to enter before five o'clock. These petty pious tyrants are always active in the wrong direction. But as we like to help people in distress, we suggest that a far more successful method would be to admit children to a cinema only on condition that they have gone to a Sunday school at least once on Sunday. They could then get religiously dulled, to be wakened up by the movies.

But a lady writes to the "Cambridge Daily News" stating that her only recreation is the cinema, and she has a child three years old. Five o'clock, she points out, makes it too late to keep the child out. This lady asks too much. She assumes that religion is the equivalent of common sense, which it is not; also that its aim is to be just, which it also is not. To-day, these Sunday laws are enforced by foolish fanatics and by petty authorities who estimate them by the degree with which they make themselves obnoxious. But we remain a "democratic" people—all of us high Tories, hard-shell superstitionists, Roman Catholic priests—"and all."

Recently we called attention to the fact that such a frightening term as Atheism is now being used by a growing number of people without an apology. But, of course, the people are still very numerous who are afraid of the word, and when using it blend it with some deprecatory word or phrase. For example, in a recent issue of the "Sunday Dispatch" a well-known journalist, Mr. Moore Raymond, who calls himself an "Agnostic" (which really

stands for nothing that is intelligible), gives us a good illustration of what we have said. Mr. Raymond says he has no bias against a film in favour of religion, and then follows with the guarding expression: "Nor have I against the cold cynicism of the Atheist," etc., etc.

Now what on earth is the cold cynicism of an Atheist? One definition of a cynic (it had a much better meaning among the Greek philosophers) is: "A captious critic who attributes human conduct to low motives." How does that fit Atheism? Generally in pronouncing himself an Atheist a man gives a guarantee of sincerity. It not only stands in the way of a journalist, a politician, a business man, but, what is more to the point, it shows a mental courage that the average Christian does not possess. Why is Mr. Raymond an Agnostic when he might so easily describe himself as an Atheist? Certainly he would not be permitted to write an article against the belief in a God, or one in praise of Atheism. And why the sneer? We give it up with the conviction that while a man may be wrong in adopting Atheism, he is showing that he is at least completely honest, and we are afraid that that is not quite so evident in Mr. Raymond's comment.

It appears that over 150,000,000 people belong to what is called the "Eastern Churches," including that of orthodox Russia. So the Pope—who feels the schisms between his sect and these very deeply—has arranged for a series of radio talks from the Vatican to see if "reunion" is not possible. What it all means is that the various Churches are beginning to see that they look like hanging separately if they don't hurry up and hang together; and even then they may be only postponing the evil day. In any case, we are curious to learn what new argument the Pope could put up which the other Churches do not know, and which would make them agree to be swallowed up by Popery. For, of course, the reunion would mean a stronger Roman Church—not a stronger Greek Church.

The Glasgow "Evening Citizen" states* that Church attendance on a Sunday, taken haphazard, touched a new low figure. The "Citizen" says that "the same story comes from all around, and every part of the country." We are sure English preachers will sympathise with their Scottish brethren, because they are suffering in exactly the same way. That is why our religious leaders want to see more churches built. After all, a large number of churches will look impressive, and if there are few inside the church, that will serve to some extent to prevent exposure.

One begins to wonder sometimes whether a Roman Catholic dignitary is pledged to tell a certain number of lies per day. For example, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster says there is an attempt to "replace religion and religious education by sex and sex education." That is the kind of lie that will go down among Catholics, but those who are not born as asses or brought up like sheep are only trying to substitute a sex education that shall be clean and free from the filthiness with which Christian teaching has surrounded it.

Canon Peter Green finds no difficulty in believing in the fall of man. We should think not. It is Canon Green's job to make the ridiculous appear sensible. That is probably why God "called him" to his job. Any ordinary person may make a sensible statement pass muster. But to make a ridiculous thing sensible, and an impossible thing real, requires more than that. One must have a man with a capacity to swallow anything—an audience, a listener, who will endorse anything without understanding, and a certainty that what is sheer nonsense to earthly common sense in heaven becomes unbelievable wisdom.

Here is the way the Canon does it in the case of what he calls "the problem of evil"—which exists only for godites. You must believe in the history of the fall, although it is an allegory, and so never happened. Believe that God's chief desire is to save "every single soul," although they are not all saved. God will not work in us against our will. But if we can do it by ourselves, there is nothing left for God to-day. After studying this conundrum we conclude that its real meaning is that we must trust Green—and plenty are green enough to do so.

“THE FREETHINKER”

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

F. MELLOR.—Thanks for letters. They must have had a good effect.

A. DOWSON.—Your letter was much delayed in the post. We are pleased you like the article. We are looking for better things still from the same quarter.

E. MONKSTON.—The reply is one that we have often given. There is no such thing at law as a religious marriage. The authority given to a minister of religion to register a marriage in a church is exactly the same that controls a marriage in a registry. The person must hold a licence, and the marriage must also be in a licensed place. The place may be inside or outside a church, but for the purpose of the marriage the Church becomes a place licensed for the performance of a marriage.

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SUGAR PLUMS

We were pleased to see some very plain language by A. J. Cummings in the “News Chronicle” for March 9 concerning the outburst of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. In the case of a member of the Protestant Churches it might be taken as an individual document, and it would then be weighed up and placed aside as an outburst from a mentally cracked preacher. But discipline is a characteristic feature of the Roman Church, and those who do not obey or say too much are soon brought to book. For that reason we may treat the speech as a “feeler.” We do not know what the reaction will be, but any unprejudiced mind would set it down as one of the most scandalous collections of lies and insinuations that anyone could have.

Although the full report lies before us, we prefer to give the passages selected by Mr. Cummings:—

“In Eastern Poland mass arrests and deportations to Russia, particularly among members of the Home Army, have been going on ever since the expulsion of the Germans. ‘In two months time,’ said an observer, ‘there will not be a single Pole left east of the Curzon Line.’ The arrested Poles are kept in inhuman conditions, in cellars and air raid shelters, with no bedding and without light. Investigations are accompanied by beating with barbed wire, pricking with needles and breaking of ribs. Those arrested are nearly all accused of espionage for the British or for the Polish Government in London and collaboration with the Germans. There have been many cases of abuse and wantonness . . . The tortured people of Poland are awaiting Allied intervention.”

Now, there are several things to bear in mind. The first is that, as we have already said, the Roman Catholic clergy are not men who are allowed to air their personal opinions on

important matters without authority. The second is that the pre-war Poland was essentially a Fascist State and one of the powerful Roman Catholic centres. The third consideration is the very mild rebuke of German Nazism, and then, with the single exception of a mild rebuke as to German treatment of Jews, it bore up against Hitler's rule in Germany with ease, remarkable ease. Next, it is certain that the majority of the common people and the Jewish population will welcome Russian influence. Next, the Vatican finds itself facing a situation that bids fair to lose its power all over those countries that have been liberated by the Allies. There are other considerations, but these are enough to go on with.

But we may add the following from the “Church Times,” which cannot be said to lean heavily on the side of Stalin. In its issue for March 9, the Editor writes: “The overwhelming vote of the House of Commons may be taken as an affirmation of British trust in the political honesty of the Russian Government. In fact, whenever Marshal Stalin has passed his word, history records that he has kept it.” Now, that is a very high tribute, and candidly, we do not know that the same can be said of many of our leading politicians.

A debate has been arranged between the Rev. Father Jarret-Kerr and Mr. F. J. Cerina. The subject of the discussion will be “Secularism or Christianity?” The Reverend Jarret-Kerr is well known, and there should be a good audience. The debate will be held on the afternoon of April 22 (Sunday), in the Mechanics' Institute, Bradford. Debates are not common nowadays, and there should be a good gathering on both sides. There will be a charge for admission and any surplus over expenses will be handed to the Red Cross. Mr. E. V. Tempest will preside.

RIBS AND SKULLS

AFTER hearing a particularly unctuous service of “Evening Prayer” (or a record) thrust on the air by the B.B.C. recently:—

Deaths of heroes all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
If—awake! we throw behind us
“Clotted nonsense” of our time.

—PARAPHRASE.

In Europe:

Gaunt ribs of Death in millions flaunt their bleachings,
And fleshless skulls grin wide their mirthless grin;
All prayer is mute, stunned by its vain beseechings,
To bankrupt Silence “such” is gathered in.
That mirage—Prayer! that spurious, worthless issue
Of money (?) from a counterfeiting fount!
The forging parsons push their flimsy tissue,
Drawn on a “heavenly” BANK OF NO ACCOUNT.

In Britain:

And in exchange, the parsons mulet the people
In sterling Cash of earth's more trusty banks;
Their Ribs of Plenty flaunt in church and steeple,
While Ribs of Death pile up in ghastly ranks.
And fleshless skulls grin on in Death's derision
At organ-song and mumbled chant and prayer;
Grin on at “well-fed” Ribs! and pulpit-mission
To kneeling twerps whose “skulls” of sense are bare.
Grin on at praying twerps with brains moronic,
Whose infant torpor naught can aught dispel . . .
But which grins most—the fleshless, or the cleric?
No man can know, no prophet ever tell.

Tragic Contrast:

And ribs of Death still flaunt their bone-white bleachings,
And fleshless skulls still gape their mirthless grin;
While Ribs of Plenty mouth their “mazy” preachings
For feckless dupes to grope and flounder in.

ARTHUR GODFREY.

A BUNCH OF BISHOPS AND THE "MORAL LANDSLIDE"

TWICE recently, by a non-Freethinker who had heard me speak on the subject of the alleged "moral landslide," and by a non-Freethinker who has read my booklet of the same title, I have been charged with laying on too heavily my criticism that the Christian churches, either jointly or severally, are behind the stunt to convince the country that a moral landslide has taken place. It has even been suggested to me that I would do myself and my case in defence of young people far more good if I left out my attacks on Christianity.

In the latter case I simply intimated that, although my views are on sale in pamphlet form,* they are not for sale to Christians who wish me to whitewash their creed.

Whether the more evolved Christians, who do not necessarily condemn modern youth, like it or not, the facts are plain enough if only they will remove their biblical blinkers. Great impetus to the moral landslide idea has been given by the Anglican and Nonconformist churches, from which the "soft pedal" friends are usually descended, and in case there are others who share their sense of shame—which causes them to deny that Christianity is behind this stunt for its own purpose—I will try to illustrate the fact by using the Roman Catholic Church for the purpose. It is much easier for a Christian to see the villainies of Christianity if one demonstrates them from a denomination to which he does not belong.

I propose to run through the babblings of a bunch of bishops belonging to God's Own Church, and on their testimony we shall see whether the Old Original, at any rate, believes in and supports the landslide idea. If the evidence indicates that She does, I hope well-meaning friends and critics will then extend the argument for themselves by (1) recognising that such a stunt is a good thing for a church which desires to recover its grip on young people, (2) admitting that churches generally are always ready to copy a good idea if it promises to serve their interests, (3) acknowledging that such a stunt, if successful, would tend to serve the interests of all churches, and (4) admitting that the "moral landslide" is a general Christian catch-cry.

So here we go with some extracts from the Lenten Pastorals of the Roman bishops. Says the Bishop of Menevia:—

"We fear many people are to-day losing the consciousness of sin . . . No wonder sober-minded people are alarmed, and tremble for the future of the human family and the peace of Christendom. Men are losing sight of the essential depravity of sin. When that is lost the fear of God vanishes."

In these extracts the Bishop tells a whole lot to the discerning reader. Loss of the consciousness of sin means that the Christian churches, which live upon sin (for sin is part of their trade) are in danger of losing customers. We all know how big industries aim in their advertising to make people "conscious"—bread-conscious, cosmetic-conscious, clothes-conscious, and so on. The same applies to the religion industry. Unless people can be kept sin-conscious trade will be bad.

"When men lost sight of the essential depravity of sin the fear of God vanishes." How truly the Bishop speaks! And when the fear of God vanishes the grip of the priest vanishes, too! It matters little to the Bishop that sin-consciousness is disappearing because human beings are learning to understand themselves; it matters little, evidently, that as Christian sin disappears there develops a higher consciousness of social evil, and a greater tendency to pay attention to it. It is imperative to the Bishop, however, that people shall be conscious of their sinfulness.

* "The Moral Landslide." Pioneer Press. Price 6d. Postage 1d.

The Archbishop of Liverpool was too busy trying to manoeuvre a seat for the Pope at the Peace Conference to pay attention to this question in his Pastoral, but he had a worthy deputy in the Bishop of Leeds.

"We have no hesitation" (says Mgr. Poskitt) "in saying that the exclusion of definite religious teaching from the national system of education has made a shipwreck of both Christianity and the morality of the nation . . . Our people live in the midst of danger both to their faith and to their morals. It is hard to keep clean when you live in a foul and dirty atmosphere . . . immorality is boasted of as something clever and up-to-date."

Note the thumping lie in the first sentence—"exclusion of definite religious teaching from education." No doubt the Bishop, by the qualifying word "definite," implies Catholic religious teaching, but the lie remains. There has been for years, and there still is, at least one-tenth of school time devoted to definite religious teaching, and a great deal more in schools possessing the famous Catholic atmosphere. But let us accept his qualification. Let us assume that Catholic schools alone have definite religious teaching. What then?

Such schools contribute a far greater number, proportionately, to juvenile delinquency than other types of schools, and such schools also contribute more graduates to the adult prison population, proportionately to the rest. So, moral landslide or no moral landslide, the Bishop of Leeds hasn't got the cure, nor has his church.

I admit his point that people live in the midst of danger to their faith. If they didn't we Freethinkers would not be doing our job properly. But faith does not run concurrently with morals, as the history of Mgr. Poskitt's own church amply demonstrates.

The Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle waxes eloquent:—

"Side by side with all the virtue and goodness that we acknowledge we know there is appalling, growing, I would almost say overwhelming, wickedness. Doubt, ignorance, carelessness, and even hatred of God, are all around us. Greed for pleasure, adultery, divorce, impurity, illegitimacy, are all growing common . . . birth control is rife in all its foulness; the shameful disease spread by impurity is crying for remedy."

Birth control seems to be the pet pestilence of this eloquent but factually inaccurate father in the faith, for he goes on to describe it, "as sinful before God as murder and adultery are sinful." I must agree that, if birth control be as sinful as murder, though our lawmakers seem to have missed the similarity, then from the Bishop's point of view there is not merely a landslide in morals, but an avalanche, for a large percentage of the community seems to have decided that family limitation is more intelligently economic than hamstringing home life by producing families which cannot properly be sustained. The other extravagances of the Bishop cannot be justified by the facts, but such points worry religious publicists only very slightly, if at all.

The Bishop of Middlesbrough specialises (in his Pastoral) in matrimonial advice to young people, and, apparently in the hope of keeping them off the slippery slopes of the landslide, suggests that young couples should go to Holy Communion every week for months before the marriage. The implication is hardly complimentary to our engaged young people. The Bishop of Shrewsbury is perturbed about "the quips and sparkling witticisms upon which some people pride themselves." These he describes as "words put on their lips by Satan in order to hurt our Lord." Evidently the Bishop of Shrewsbury still believes in Old Nick, and it seems certain that he still believes in Original Sin, for he says: "We have become used to belittling the foundation principle of the whole of our relationship with God."

This brief survey of some of the things that Rome has to say about the present day moral character ought to indicate clearly that the underlying principle of these allegations is to advertise the saving power of the Christian Church, Roman variety, and to seek more power for its elbow. Morality is simply a question, to them, of securing such control over behaviour as will serve the interests of the church. This fact may be carefully guarded in some of the examples, but it leaks through in others, despite the care of the Bishops.

We may, however, safely turn to Bishop Marshall, of Salford, if we wish to see the cat jump right out of the bag. Bishop Marshall has a happy and useful knack of letting the cat out, probably due to an irrepressible native honesty of purpose, a quality that is out of place in a Bishop. This Salford soul-saver plainly states that he might ban parochial dancing throughout his diocese unless there is greater supervision of the people attending.

Not, mark you, because dancing is in itself wrong (as the Bradford Nonconformists would lead one to think) but because "far too many non-Catholics are being admitted to the dances," and this can "only lead to mixed marriages."

Would it be unkind to suggest that here Bishop Marshall gives a clue to the true situation? In addition to mixed marriages, which constitute a menace particularly to Rome, and perhaps in less degree to all denominations, we have to-day the much larger mixed grill of a community in which denominational distinctions are being blown to the winds as the population is mixed and reshuffled on a scale never known before, in both civil and military life.

Outside of the restrictive sphere of denominationalism religion can never be anything but a shadow of its former self, lacking in that sectarian fervour so essential to any brand of "Final Truth" that bears a trade mark, and claims all others as spurious imitations. Hence, what is called the moral landslide is really a religious landslide, faked and twisted by the churches in an effort to save their own sanctimonious skins.

Rome proves it—and Rome is never wrong!

F. J. CORINA.

CORRESPONDENCE

RELIGION AND THE STATE

Sir,—I read with much interest the article, "The Truth about the Church of England," by Dranoel Sekwah. It was really a study of Dr. Hensley Henson. A very interesting subject! It was a very revealing article, but I think it omitted one of the most revealing passages in the Doctor's Diary—"Retrospect of an Unimportant Life." At the age of 70 Dr. Henson was invited to give a course of Gifford lectures. In his Diary he records that evidently a kind of "Confession of Faith" was expected—a circumstance that invested the invitation with "a solemn significance." Here is the passage:—

"What have I to say at the end of my life on this supreme subject of Religion, of which for so many years I have been a public exponent? What indeed! What do I really believe out of all this mass of traditional and official credenda which for so long I have publicly professed to believe? What indeed? I can see that the preparation of these lectures will be a rather painful discipline, compelling me to confront much in myself that too long I have refrained from facing."

I wonder how many more eminent ecclesiastics could (if they would!) make the same candid confession! As I read it I recalled a saying of Shaw's: "You can't convert a man whose livelihood depends on his not being converted." In view of which, I venture to suggest, Sir, that the Freethought Movement institute a guarantee fund for providing livings for conscientious intelligent clerics. It would then be a case not just of empty pews but of empty pulpits, too!—Yours, etc.,

ARTHUR HANSON.

FREETHOUGHT AND THE B.B.C.

Sir,—What with the attempted saturation of Christian dogmatism in the schools, and the clergy's suggestions that parents should lend a hand to that end, is it not time that Freethinkers should bestir themselves to a counter-offensive towards what could and should be some effort in a voice in the B.B.C., and not acquiesce in their one-sided disquisitions, without protest.

Our increasing numbers, due to the untiring efforts of Mr. Chapman Cohen with his incomparable gift of concise exposition, I suggest, should receive a more active acknowledgment and support; and surely some pressure could be exerted, if only by weight of numbers, upon the policy of the B.B.C.

I am looking forward to the time when his voice shall be heard in a way that can be demonstrated by the most modern methods of dissemination; and why should our growing movement be shut out from such by what is nothing short of tyrannical bigotry. Why not saturate the B.B.C. with a demand to be heard? No doubt Mr. Cohen would prefer to select his own title, but would suggest some such as "Christianity Explained." If a title be agreed upon and the B.B.C. be sufficiently bombed, and our worthy Editor gives his sanction and direction, I feel sure that the inertia—to say the least of it—can be overcome and cause such a demand as to be so overwhelming in its accelerating consistency that it could not be ignored.—Yours, etc.,

P. G. TACCHI.

WE—AND OTHERS.

Sir,—Are we to understand from Archibald Robertson's letter in last week's "Freethinker" that a Fascist or Nazi State can be established by votes? And if the third of the German electorate that did in fact vote for Hitler in the last free election (?) had not done so, would there be no Fascism in Europe to-day?

Let us try to be logical. We cannot blame only Germans for the sorry mess the world is in. We, too, must bear part of the blame for helping to create the conditions which made Hitlerism possible by supporting Baldwin, Chamberlain, etc.

Why the pat on the back for not voting Mosley? There was no need to. Fascism was already in being.

The only conclusion I can draw from Robertson's last sentence—"Be humane—yes, but be just to the victims first"—is continued blasting of Germany. This would, of course, be justice according to the Mosaic Law, but it seems rather strange coming from a Freethinker.—Yours, etc.,

JOHN SEIBERT

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m., Dr. J. C. FLUGEL, D.Sc.: "The Civilisation of Morals."

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Belfast Secular Society (Old Museum Building, College Square).—Sunday, 7.30 p.m., lecture and debate.

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanic's Institute).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m., Mr. L. E. WOODHEAD: "Common Wealth; Principles and Aims."

Leicester Secular Society (75, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m., Miss E. Moore.

Newcastle-on-Tyne Branch N.S.S. (Socialist Cafe, Newcastle).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON: a lecture.

Quarrington (Durham) Church Hall, Quarrington, Tuesday, March 20, 6.45 p.m., debate: "Is there a God?" Aff. Rev. G. CASEY, Neg. Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

THE CHURCH AND THE HOSPITAL

A GREAT many of the things which are so gravely wrong with the present hospital system have their origin in church tradition. There are, for example, the petty disciplines to which nurses are subjected. There is enough discipline in nursing which is essential to the job (disciplines of hygiene, etc.), without countless irrelevant restrictions (rules about wearing cuffs in the corridors, etc.). These petty regulations are a "hang-over" from the days when hospitals were convents and penance was inflicted for its own sake. To-day, psychoanalysis has shown us that we cannot treat adults like children without running risks of dangerous repressions. Sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously, the repressed nurse is bound to "take it out" of the patient (all that business about waking the patient up to smooth out the blankets, etc.). But church tradition is potent stuff and the old disciplines are defended by their supporters with irrational emotion. So the curious position arises that hospitals are often the last institutions to benefit by modern medical research into the psyche.

However, it is the indirect way in which church tradition still shadows the hospital which is most to be deplored. People have transferred the taboos surrounding the convent to the hospital, and the hospital has become a holy thing, not to be attacked. How else can we account for the fact that certain accusations are never made? That people do not dare even to formulate them?

It is, surely, on account of church tradition that people accept the boast of the hospitals that they are free equally to all; yet most people must realise that private patients get a great many things which are denied to public patients. In our hospital, for instance, we had an adenoid and tonsil session every Tuesday, we called it "Bloody Tuesday." Porters would carry the children from the operating theatre back to the wards. But if one of the kids was a private patient, he had to have the dignity of a stretcher. Although the child was unconscious it would not do for him, as a private patient, to rest in the arms of a mere porter.

It is by no means through the grace of asking that a poor person can enter a hospital. Quite often poor people who are in pain have to wait months before a bed can be found for them. Meanwhile their comrades, who have other recommendations than the priority of sickness, pass into beds which are reserved for the privileged. Take the business of "recommendations." Many hospitals have a system by which anyone who subscribes a certain sum to the hospital may make so many recommendations. Any poor person, who is lucky enough to get one of these from a patron, will receive priority. But has a hospital, appealing for funds as a public institution, the right to sell its community service in this way? Isn't it an abuse somewhat in line with the sale of indulgences? And it is worth remarking that it makes no difference that the poor man may, during his life, have contributed more to the hospital through threepenny weekly subscriptions to the Maintenance Fund than the payron who makes the donation which is rewarded with recommendations. For it is the ability to put a lump sum down which wins the favour of the lords spiritual and temporal.

And is it not the hidden power of the convent-hospital tradition which has made it possible to keep alive the other fiction—that honoraries who work for the hospital receive no payment? (Goodness knows, many an out-patient must have wished that the specialist did receive an honest salary which would bind him to his job. For an honorary will often leave his clinic for many hours to attend to the calls of private patients.) But the truth of the matter is that the specialist who "gives" his services to a hospital is allotted so many beds. To these beds he may admit his own patients. So Mr. X, who consults his panel doctor, is told that he is very ill and ought to see a specialist. If Mr. X can rake up the fee for a pukka consultation,

the specialist may admit him immediately to one of his beds at the hospital. Otherwise he will have to wait his turn! Is it, therefore, very ungentlemanly to say that the beds are an indirect payment to the honorary, an inducement to the half-hearted to part with a couple of guineas?

Of course it's very shocking to say this sort of thing. Look at the "Service For Others" publicity put out by the hospitals. See how cleverly it links on to the convent tradition and taboo. Yet the first call on hospital funds is the highly paid executive, including, doubtlessly, the salary of the man who writes the publicity. We who have worked in hospitals are a little tired of hearing the executive say: "No, you cannot have this or this for the patients. Please remember our funds are limited." There is never any talk about the executive forgoing some of its salary so that the patients need not be short of something vital. Yet all this is covered by the aura of sanctity, the holy taboo transferred in an act of "blind thinking" to the hospital.

Yes, there is more work to be done than many readers of "The Freethinker" may realise. In order to clear the way for Progress it is necessary to attack the sanctity of church tradition wherever it may be found; and this is quite often where most people least think to look for it.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

A FORECAST OF FASCISM

TO the modern reader the name of Jack London has a curiously old-fashioned flavour; and, indeed, it must be admitted that many of his books "date" if read with the eyes of 1945. But the republication, as a ninepenny Penguin Book of his "The Iron Heel" provides a very suitable occasion for a reconsideration of his value and import, both in the world of literature and in that of political development.

It is ostensibly a picture of the world and the social revolution, seen through the eyes of a reporter living in the early years of the present century, but the manuscript of which, rediscovered some centuries hence, is interlarded with footnotes provided by the more enlightened reader of that century in the distant future.

The most remarkable feature of the book as a *tour de force* is its frank revelation of the fact that religious reaction is the ground in which political reaction grows—and, indeed, flourishes. The first dialectical victory won by its hero, Ernest Everhard, is over a group of clergymen who are content to let their religious beliefs provide a defence of the *status quo*. Having successfully demolished their feeble defences, he goes on to attack the political reactionaries on their chosen ground.

What is almost equally striking, however, is the way in which Jack London, writing in 1907, foresaw many of the tendencies which only became apparent to the ordinary observer at the time when Fascism arose in Germany and Italy. The burning of liberal-minded books, the torturing of innocent people, the barbarous practice of taking hostages, the deliberate falsification of evidence over such matters as calamitous fires (e.g., the Berlin Reichstag)—things like these which are commonplaces to-day, were almost unthought of in Jack London's time, and yet he could picture them as taking place and make the whole story convincing from start to finish.

I do not, mind you, say that the story is a literary masterpiece. As with almost all works written at a white heat, there are slipshod passages and pages which would amply repay a re-writing. But it is a book which every Freethinker and every democrat would do well to heed, since it shows how those who consider themselves to be our masters and betters would conquer us did they have the chance. It is one of the most onerous of our tasks to ensure that the chance does not arise.

S. H.