

# THE FREETHINKER

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## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

### Man and Miracles

GODS have always depended much on miracles—at least, they did until the advance of science reduced miracles to things of doubtful value. Then they were used to strengthen religious faith rather than to create it. But at any time miracles manifested themselves only to those who believed in them. From that point of view miracles may be classed as the most modest things known to man. They will never intrude where they are not invited. Even Jesus Christ refused to perform miracles where there was no faith. Given the right audience, he could raise a man from the dead, cure the blind with a touch, and feed a multitude with a handful of food—and then be left with more food than he had when he commenced operations. Given a suitable audience and miracles are plentiful; but they are largely a loss of time and labour. The believer does not need and the unbeliever does not believe them. The characteristic features of miracles are loss of time and a fruitless expenditure of energy. Obtrusively, miracles flourish in ignorance and wither with the growth of science.

Perhaps the chief feature of miracles to-day is their impudence. For example, about eight years ago some Catholic priests staged a miracle in Portugal. The first recipients of "divine" favour were three little girls aged seven, nine and ten. To these children appeared "Our Lady"—Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary told the children many things, decorated with the customary magical happenings. The news spread and an alleged throng of men and women gathered. In the end some wonderful things happened, of which we present a few samples:—

Before an immense number of witnesses there appeared "Our Lady" dressed in "dazzling robes." Joseph, the father of his wife's son, appeared "carrying the Infant Jesus." Then (at the same gathering) "Our Lord," grown up, lovingly blessed the crowd.

There is a sense of humour in the story of the showman who exhibited two skeletons of George Washington: one when he was a child and one when he was an adult. But the Catholic Church beats the showman hands down.

But a still greater miracle was staged:—

Moving away from the children, "Our Lady" pointed to the sky, and then "all at once the Sun began to spin round just like a wheel of fire, casting in every direction, like a gigantic magic lantern, enormous beams of light—green, red, blue, violet—of every colour. Then the Sun stood still, only to begin again; and a third time it gave the same whirling dance."

There is more of this kind of stuff, but for sheer impudent lying it outdoes all other religious lies that have ever been told. This miracle began with three unknown children plus

"Our Lady," and it ended with the full endorsement of the Papacy. It appeared originally in Portugal, but surely this shifting of the sun in its orbit would have been noticed all over the world. It may be rated as a miracle that it did not put an end to the life of man. Of course, there is Bible authority for this in the story of the sun standing still to enable the Jews to kill their enemies. But in any case it was very badly staged. The miracle should have occurred in England, or France, or Russia. As usual, God sent his miracles to the wrong place, the wrong people, and at the wrong time.

### God and Mr. Nichols

I have before dealt with this "miracle," and I return to it again because a well-known journalist, Mr. Beverley Nichols, has avowed his full belief in miracles. Mr. Nichols is a weekly contributor (I refrain from the obvious pun) to the "Sunday Chronicle." Mr. Nichols gives no cases for what he says, but it should be placed to his credit that he does say quite plainly that he has full belief in miracles. And he makes it quite plain that when he says a "miracle" he means all the term properly implies. He says that by a miracle he means "a manifestation of the supernatural."

That sounds courageous. In sober truth, it is a mere rattle of sounds. He finds his readers in the dark and he leaves them in a fog.

Mr. Nichols means by supernatural something that cannot be explained by "natural law." In that case, and to make his case strong, he should be acquainted with all natural possibilities and be assured that nothing new is to be discovered. He must, in short, know the quality of the known and also of the unknown. If he can reach that point he will then be able to say proudly that he is able to explain the inconceivable. In that case I hope that he will be better able to appreciate my position than he is to understand his own.

A wise fool, in claiming to be an authority on the non-understandable, would have been cautious enough to give a naked statement of what he believes, or what he believes he believes, by plainly stating his position and so have done with it. But, rashly, Mr. Nichols proceeds to justify his statements. That is really more than God himself has done. For when God said "I am the Lord thy God" he did not say how, or why, or when he became that; he simply said "I am" and let the matter rest there. Mr. Nichols rashly tries to explain an unexplainable position, and that was bound to create trouble. He says that he believes in miracles "partly, or perhaps principally, because I accept the validity of the Gospels." Now, I admit that there is something dazzling about this. He believes in the Bible because of the miracles recorded, and he believes in miracles because they are in the Bible. So long as Mr. Nichols holds that position he is almost unbentable. If it will either cheer or help him, he has my assurance that no disbeliever in miracles can disturb his equanimity.

It is the only basis on which a religiously-minded man can hold his own.

But not by way of completely disproving Mr. Nichols' position, I would remind him that all the Bible miracles that are of any use to him were accepted by religious primitives long before the Bible appeared. Moreover, it is plain truth that miracles are accepted not because of a particular instance, but because people believe in miracles beforehand. On the other hand, I would point out to Mr. Nichols that it is now an agreed canon that we may accept accounts of what occurred two or three thousand years ago only when they fall into line with what we know to be true to-day. In the case of witchcraft, for example, the evidence of contemporaries in favour of witchcraft is very strong indeed, and if we were guided by the judgment of, say, the 13th century we should believe in the practice of burning witches. Instead of that, we collect data on which thousands of people—and even children—were burned and witchcraft is set aside. Materialistic conclusions take the place of religious teaching. The fact here is that we judge the validity of old theories in the light of contemporary knowledge. If the teaching of the past is accepted, it must fall into line with the knowledge and understanding of to-day. And in the light of that knowledge gods, ghosts and kindred superstitions are forced to give way to scientific conclusions. Gods belong to the past—and their past is their condemnation.

But we must be fair to Mr. Nichols. He puts forward some evidence which he quite wrongly considers of value. He says:—

"I have been to Lourdes, and only a man of the most hide-bound prejudice can be sceptical at Lourdes, with its crowded volumes of evidence, tested and re-tested by relentless critics using methods of modern scientific procedure."

But this will not do. It is plain, undiluted Sunday newspaper slush, and Mr. Nichols is carried away to express a very strong opinion on a matter on which he is obviously uninformed. Moreover, his language is far more likely to deceive than to enlighten because it does not state facts that should be stated. For instance, Mr. Nichols writes of some people who have testified to the "miracles" at Lourdes. I could do the same without going to Lourdes. I know men who have claimed to cure rheumatism by carrying a potato in their trousers pocket; others who have been helped by the potency of a medicine bottle filled with coloured water. I recall a man who helped thousands to better health by electric belts which in a court of law were proved to be quite destitute of any electricity. It is quite a well-known fact that people may die showing symptoms of a disease they never had. I would not even deny the poor dupes who say they saw the Virgin careering about the sky in Portugal. The list of this kind of thing is immense. There was plenty of evidence that witches turned milk sour. Strangest of all—to laymen, but not to skilled doctors—a woman may unconsciously imitate pregnancy, showing all the outward symptoms. There are a great many complaints in which doctors are compelled to work along the lines of their patients' fancies.

I take it the guardians of Lourdes do not do this. They work for their own ends, and damn everything else. Some of these writers in the Press and elsewhere should drop the easy but often misleading game of "mugging up" a subject and leave some matters to qualified persons. Even

a course of psycho-analysis on this point would help the newspaper man, but not the head of a religious business. His motto is "Get results"—honestly if you can, but get them.

There is one other point—rather a serious one—which has application to Mr. Nichols. He talks of the Lourdes cures. As an Atheist, with a mere A B C understanding of the working of the human mind, I may add that I should be greatly surprised not to find that some people found benefits from Lourdes or from the carrying of a potato in their trousers pocket. But Mr. Nichols has written as though, year after year, the poor people who went to Lourdes sick came back cured. Of course, this is not the fact. It is but a small proportion of the people who reap anything from their visit. The majority come back as they went. Some—probably most—who are not cured are good enough to count their failure as due to their not having acted as God wished. There is a vital truth in the old saying that camels and Christians take their burdens kneeling.

In Continental churches—Roman Catholic churches—it is common to see clusters of sticks placed therein as a token of thanks for God having cured people's ailments. The priests point to them as evidence of the goodness of God. It is an old trick. The Greeks had it; and there is a story of a man who was shown by the priest of a temple the things that had been given to the temple in thanks to the God for their safety in returning from a sea voyage. "Good!" said the visitor. "But where are the tablets recording those who never returned?"

CHAPMAN COHEN.

## AN ENIGMATICAL VICTORIAN

CLARA G. STILLMAN'S study of the life and labours of "Samuel Butler; A Mid-Victorian Modern" (Secker, 1932), is a welcome addition to the various volumes which deal with a perplexing personality whose activities were remarkably versatile. This highly interesting biography supplements the standard memoir of Butler's intimate friend, H. Festing Jones, as well as Mrs. Garnett's "Samuel Butler and his Family Relations." A very pleasing feature of Clara Stillman's work is the uncompromising manner in which she appraises his religious opinions, while his personal relationships are quite unconventionally surveyed.

Of clerical descent, his grandfather being the famous headmaster of Shrewsbury School, and his father a rector and later an Anglican Canon, Samuel Butler as a child was the unpitied victim of parental cruelty and tyranny. His early experiences embittered his later life and he never forgave his sadistic father for the corporal punishment he endured as a boy. These terrible trials he mordantly recorded in his remarkable novel "The Way of All Flesh," a work published after his death which won him widespread recognition.

That to spare the rod was to spoil the child, was treated as axiomatic in early Victorian religious circles. As our authoress observes:—

"In England in the first half of the nineteenth century the screams of all the babies having learning and religion thrashed into them swelled to a mighty chorus. Some of the most gifted Englishmen of the time carried through life in the deflections and insufficiencies of their emotional natures—the marks of a too intensive or too long drawn out parental rigour."

There can be no doubt that Butler was brutally treated and naturally he became an apprehensive and constantly ailing child. It was therefore an immense relief to escape parental flogging when he was sent to school and later, in 1847, entered Shrewsbury School at the age of twelve. Still he was not happy in his new surroundings "although he came from a far worse place, his home, and thus escaped the 'daily savage beatings' that the word 'home' implied."

From Shrewsbury, Butler departed to Cambridge, and, while there, made a minute study of the Greek text of the New Testament. Strive how he would to reconcile the glaring contradictions of the Gospels, this proved an impossible task. This and other cogent considerations caused Butler to abandon all thoughts of a clerical career. This decision infuriated his father, who was already scandalised by his son's heretical inclinations. Moreover, Butler desired to become an artist, but his parents vetoed this proposal as too Bohemian. Ultimately, Butler decided to emigrate and voyaged to New Zealand in 1859. There he became a sheep farmer and for the first and last time in his life made money.

His progress towards Freethought was completed in 1862. He continued his theological inquiries and became a devout disciple of Darwin. He was deeply impressed by the "Origin of Species" and corresponded in enthusiastic terms with its author, although in later years he virulently assailed him, having espoused an evolutionary system of a neo-Lamarckian character.

While in New Zealand, Butler met, and was infatuated by, a prepossessing impostor named Pauli who sponged upon him for over thirty years after they had returned to England together. Pauli was always ready to take Butler's money and easily evoked sympathy and pity from his guileless benefactor. Clara Stillman observes that:—

"Butler's attitude throughout was one of long-suffering patience and tender devotion. It was not until Pauli's death that he discovered that Pauli had for years been making between £800 and £900. He left an estate of £9,000, none of it to Butler."

Again, at Pauli's funeral Butler learnt that for a long period Pauli had been living in luxury and that one, and perhaps two, other of his dupes had been furnishing the funds. From first to last, Butler himself had given Pauli £6,000 not a penny of which was recoverable for there was no document to prove that he had ever presented him with sixpence. This, and other episodes in Butler's career, illustrate the complexity of human nature and indicate how even men of pronounced ability in certain directions may be infantine in others.

Apart from his "Way of All Flesh," Butler's most-known book is his curious satire "Erewhon." It is a clever performance but far inferior to "Gulliver's Travels." This work was published anonymously but Butler avowed his authorship in its second edition. The satire attracted the more thoughtful reading public but its sceptical audacities scandalised Butler's pious relatives.

Butler penned a pamphlet dealing with the evidences of Christ's resurrection but this passed almost unnoticed. A more ambitious undertaking was his "Fair Haven." Professing to be a defence of Christianity "it was in reality," remarks Clara Stillman, "an ironical analysis of all the arguments advanced by theologians to justify belief in the supernatural, and a pretended refutation of all unbelievers. With such two-edged satire Butler was in his element and let himself go with infinite relish."

The ironical "Fair Haven" was so solemnly sustained that it deceived the very elect. Among these deluded readers was a prominent clergyman who sent it to a friend whom he wished to convert and several reviewers of religious publications. "The Rock" thought the work so extraordinary that it departed

from its custom of brief reviews and discussed it in two consecutive numbers. "His exhibition of the certain proofs furnished of the Resurrection of our Lord is certainly masterly and convincing." Thus the pious "Rock," but the more astute detected its real character and to them the "Fair Haven" appeared a fine example of exquisite humour.

Towards the close of his career, Butler returned to his early work "Erewhon" with its sequel "Erewhon Revisited." Thomas Higgs who had escaped from the Erewhonians in a balloon in the earlier satire now, a score of years later, revisited the scenes of his former exploits only to discover that his flight in a balloon had been regarded as miraculous and that he himself had been deified as the Sunchild. In consequence of his astounding disappearance in the air, a State Church, furnished with all the adornments of a sacred cult had been established, with Higgs himself as the outstanding divinity. In fact, an impressive mythology had been elaborated so great had been the amazement of the Erewhonians at Higgs' ascent to the air god in what they considered a supernatural manner. Higgs was an orthodox Christian, and was deeply disconcerted to discover that a complete system of theology had been created with its relics, testimonies, emendations and sects which expounded in their diverse ways the sayings and doings of the Sunchild when he dwelt among them. Higgs also learns that certain interested parties who smile in secret at these pitiful exhibitions of popular credulity nevertheless encourage the crowd in its absurd beliefs. And the fiction has grown so sacred that to query it openly was to court disaster. "Even though Higgs himself were to return and tell it from the housetops that he was mortal . . . he would be killed and not believed."

It is true that Butler disclaimed any desire to lampoon the creed of Christendom as his only intention, he protested, was to reveal the manner in which religions arise. This, however, seems a sop to Cerberus, and his biographer shrewdly observes that one is entitled to accept or reject Butler's avowal as one pleases. "Certainly," our authoress avers, "Higgs bears no resemblance to Christ, and it is not necessary that he should. But the parallelism between Sunchildism and Christianity, between the Erewhonian and the Anglican Church, between the institutions and types with which Higgs came into contact and those with which Butler had struggled all his life is sufficiently obvious, especially when we have all Butler's earlier writings to guide us."

With Butler's domestic arrangements with all their romantic characteristics, there is no space to deal. Nor with his important contributions to the doctrine of evolution along neo-Lamarckian lines. It is a pity that his early affection and admiration for Darwin was turned to antagonism, despite the conciliatory attitude of the famous naturalist, until Butler's insensate hatred made all personal relationship impossible.

A greatly gifted and many-sided man, Butler was strangely emotional and was easily wounded and estranged. Still, although he invited trouble with eminent men of science and was subjected to a conspiracy of silence in his lifetime, his writings have become far better known and appreciated since his death. To-day, his autobiographical novel "The Way of All Flesh," ranks with Gosse's "Father and Son," as a study of Victorianism at its worst, by an author who in many respects represented the choicer spirits of that much maligned and misrepresented generation.

T. F. PALMER.

## Speaking for Myself

By Lady (ROBERT) SIMON

Price, post free, 2s. 8d.

## ACID DROPS

An item of war news. The Bishop of Cologne has made it public that he prayed to God for the Allied bombers to reduce the Cathedral to dust rather than permit the Nazis to enter. Would it not have been better to have prayed God to paralyse every German who raised his hand against the Church? Moreover, what kind of a God is the Christian deity when he has to be told what to do and how to do it? A god worth his salt would have prevented the war occurring. Some men did at least try to save the Church—and the people, which the Bishop naturally forgot. But what did God do? He is waiting for what so many are doing—just nothing.

The Bishop adds to his very foolish prayer the advice that when the war is over Christians must do what they can to bring peace to the world. But if Christians, wherever they existed, had said, "There shall be no war, neither shall there be preparations for war," who would have been strong enough to create a world war? One should always bear in mind that Christians have never objected to supplying arms of war to whoever wanted them; and implements of war are made for use, not for mere decorations. War is a terrible thing, but it is not quite so sickening as the cant of brotherhood and kindness that dribbles from the lips of professional preachers.

For well over 60 years we have been stressing the truth that wars will never cease until the peoples of the world have sufficient judgment to create an international court to which all differences are submitted, and also that there is an international power to see that the legal decisions are obeyed. Christians have mobilised for war. When and where have they ever mobilised for peace?

The "Church of England Newspaper" is very anxious that to administer control in Germany there should be selected men not only of integrity and intellectual quality but also of Christian character. But Germany has never been short of men of pronounced Christian character. The last Emperor always kept a Bible by his bedside and read passages every night. Hitler is a profoundly religious man who honestly believes that he is carrying out God's will. And the fanaticism of the young generation of Nazis, who do not hesitate to die fighting, is so religious that in feeling and brutality it carries one's mind back to the Christian Crusades. And for the rest there is enough humbug behind the cant of religion that the less it is heard of in connection with public life the better. But if humbugs and double dealers are needed, then we admit we should advertise "Only Christians need apply."

As we are stating facts, we beg Christian readers of "The Freethinker" not to take what we have said as an equivalent for saying that all Christians are humbugs. We do not. We mean only that Christianity has a very liberal supply of humbugs, and it is they who are likely to be selected if religion is to decide appointment.

"The Morning Advertiser," which of late has been rather eager to puff up the Christian religion, appears to be wavering a bit. In its issue for April 5 it says editorially:—

"We must not forget that Nazism is not a mere political creed. It is . . . a religion which, as the war has abundantly shown, is capable of producing its martyrs as well as its intolerant zealots."

We said this directly Nazism showed itself above the horizon, and when so many of our leading professional Christians and so many of our leading politicians were doing what they could to "appease" Hitlerism in order to use Germany as a bulwark against a European growth of Soviet Russia. Of course Nazism is a religion. It has all the marks that carry us back to the earlier centuries of Christianity when the Church ruled the roost.

As some sort of apology, probably, the "Advertiser" refers to the "surprising renaissance of the Russian Orthodox Church" when it was persecuted "by the very Government which is now allowing it to function again." But that is not true. From the first move the new Government declared for freedom of religion—all religion—so long as its leaders refrained from political plotting against a movement that was fighting for its very life. But the

Russian Church, largely manned by time-serving leaders to Czarism, did what it could to destroy the new movement. In self-defence the Bolsheviks had to act. It was fighting for existence and our highly placed preachers and politicians were doing their best to restore the old régime. But step by step, as the priests kept clear of political planning and plotting, the Church has been able to get church after church returned. The Soviet has followed its declared policy, and well it is for us and for the world that it has done so.

In Clones (Southern Ireland), after a struggle, men and women were permitted to sit together in cinemas. Now it seems that the priests visit the cinemas to make sure that there, women sit on one side and men on the other side. What a fine example of the ethical influence of the Church on men and women! Their male and female followers cannot be trusted to sit within touching distance. We wonder whether, in the Roman Catholic Heaven, male and female angels are separated every evening in different pews?

One more indication of the peace that is to follow the second world war to end war. The French Government demands the return of the possessions France had before the war. Churchill has declared that what we have we hold. Russia will frame its territory to be on its guard against war. Other States will be looking out for pickings. A war to end war looks like being a permanent feature for the future.

The Scottish Churches are grumbling at the way in which landowners are behaving towards them in building new places of worship. The landowners are demanding current prices. The Churches want lower rates because the sites selected will be for the worship of God. Up to the present, God seems to be getting the worst of it—or he is not interested in the matter. At any rate, there is a block to many churches, but we imagine the difficulty of the Scottish Churches will not be getting buildings, but of filling them.

Bearing in mind the great demand for dwelling houses, and that God has permitted so many of his houses to be knocked about, it would seem common sense to see that dwelling houses should be put before the churches. There are enough churches to accommodate worshippers as it is. In any case, God can wait. That is perhaps not the usual way of putting it, for God cannot wait. If once his children forsake him they seldom come back. All the Churches know that; but perhaps the news has not reached the recording angels, or they may not have informed the Boss.

The Vicar of St. Richards, Haywards Heath, Sussex, is in a very doleful mood. He finds nowhere any indication of growing church attendances, and he says he can detect "no signs of a religious revival." He asks: "How can one be a good Christian and ignore completely the example and express commands of the 'Master'?" We really do not know. We do not recollect Jesus advising people to go to church. He himself went in for open-air meetings, and the chief mention of his visit to the Jewish Church—of which he was a member—led to a hell of a riot. All we can suggest to the Vicar is to turn his church into a cinema.

Good news from Germany! The Holy Coat—the coat that Jesus wore—has been retrieved at Trier. It is the seamless coat said to be worn by Jesus. Germans value that relic for they are essentially a very religious people, and there are none more fervid in their religious feeling than the blind followers of Hitler. No historian of the future can, if he wishes to write real history, avoid this significant fact. But Christian historians will probably succeed.

By the way, clothing seems to have played a great part in Christian miracles. A very favourite one was to use sunbeams for a clothes rack. An Irish saint, Delcola, found the weather very hot, and the record runs that the Saint "threw his mantle on a sunbeam and it remained there until the Saint took it down." St. Goar (German) likewise hung his mantle in 575; and so the tales run. Roman Catholic writings will provide scores of similar historic facts—religiously historic facts.

# "THE FREETHINKER"

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## TO CORRESPONDENTS

Answers to letters held over till next week.

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

When the services of the National Secular Society in connexion with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, R. H. Rosetti, giving as long notice as possible.

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

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

## SUGAR PLUMS

Arrangements for the Annual Conference of the N.S.S. are proceeding smoothly. The Conference will be held at the Holborn Hall, Grays Inn Road, London. As usual, the Conference will be followed by a Public Meeting, the chair to be taken by the President, at 6.30 p.m. There will be a number of reserved seats, tickets free on application to the Secretary at 2 & 3, Furnival Street, London, E.C.4. We advise all who wish to take advantage of this to write without delay, stating the number required. Applications are coming in briskly.

We have received from the "New York Law Journal" a complete account of the summing-up by the United States Court of the case brought by the "Truth Seeker" against a collector of Customs who refused to admit Freethought literature sent from this country. Our limited space will prevent our being able to publish the whole of the judgment, as we feel our readers would wish, but the essential part will appear in our issue for May 6. The case was won by the "Truth Seeker," and for that they have our congratulations.

The following appeared in the "Manchester Guardian" in reply to an article dealing with a recent book on Thomas Paine:—

"Sir,—The inaccuracies of Mr. Howard Fast's biographical novel 'Citizen Tom Paine' have misled your reviewer into writing that Paine 'was not in his private life a man who claims our sympathies.' All those who lived with Paine and knew him intimately found him sympathetic; in one of Lord Edward FitzGerald's letters to his mother from Paris he wrote:

"I lodge with my friend Paine; we breakfast, dine, and sup together. The more I see of his interior the more I like and respect him. I cannot express how kind he has been to me. There is a simplicity of manner, a goodness of heart, and a strength of mind in him that I never knew a man before to possess."

Paine was the intimate friend, host, or guest of Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Monroe, Edmund Burke, Blako, Horne Tooke, C. J. Fox, Thomas Rickman, Lord Lansdowne, the Duke of Portland, and a number of other distinguished and respectable persons; they mostly wrote of Paine with affection and respect, and none but his political enemies ever suggested that he drank to excess or was in any way objectionable.—Yours, etc.,

ADRIAN BRUNEL.

Gerrards Cross, Bucks., April 11."

Mr. Brunel is by way of being an authority on Paine, and we congratulate him on what he has to say concerning one of the most absurd accounts of Paine we have read for some time. We hope to deal with Mr. Fast's book later. We are rather surprised at such a book appearing at this time of day.

We doubt whether ever before within the past century and a-half has Church and Government worked so hard to prop up each other as they have during the past ten years. And when one speaks of Church and Government one must include the B.B.C., which has openly declared its determination to prevent anything being said "on the air" that is calculated to let out the truth concerning religion, while busy circulating news about the progress of religion that none but a fool could believe.

Here is an example to the point. When a very large percentage of our population was drafted into the Fighting Forces, and huge battalions of people sent to the workshop to aid the war, every attempt was made by Church and Government to see that as much religion as possible was given both. It is quite plain that if the Forces and the workers had been able to say what they wanted a vast majority would have left the parson and the services outside. But they were inside so far as the workshops were concerned, and by orders in the case of the Forces. And from each came reports from the clergy of the warm welcome given to the religious services.

Here is a little light cast on the scene from a letter by a Christian so far as the workshops are concerned. The letter is published in the "Woman's Own" for March 30:—

"I work in a factory on essential war work, which is tedious, and so we are privileged to have a radio. Each time a religious service comes on it is immediately turned off. I'm sure each one of us would feel much better in spirits if we listened quietly instead of hearing continual swing music. But for some reason or other the majority of girls won't listen to anything religious."—Mrs. K. O. HYDE.

Among the collections of stupidity and humbug manifested by our sending missionaries to all parts of the world that to China is the most conspicuous. We send out half-mentally baked priests and preachers who approach the Chinese people, with their rich record of philosophy running back to a time when Christianity was not yet born, as though we were dealing with savages. With wisdom the Chinese kept the religious invaders at arm's length, and only a few here and there succumbed to the Western religious gospel that is offered to them. Just about a century ago we forced upon China the use of Indian opium in the interests of Christian opium growers in India. If we had swapped the wisdom of China for the Christian religion of England, the superiority of the wisdom of China over the religion of this country would have been obvious. As it is, the more thoughtful of our people are just beginning to value the Chinese wisdom. Perhaps the best way to describe the two peoples is to say that, like the better English people, they are above their creed, and the better Chinese are still digging the gold from the mine of their inherited wisdom.

We do not know a better way for most people to get into close touch with the Chinese outlook on life than by reading that most delightful of books, "My Country and My People," by Lin Yutang. If missionaries were sensitive people they would shiver at the thought of "converting" Chinamen who are worth the capture. From his 400 pages we select the following:—

"The idea that we live in order to die, as taught by Christianity, is incomprehensible. . . . The true end, the Chinese have decided in a singularly clear manner, lies in the enjoyment of a simple life, especially the family life. . . . The end of all knowledge is to serve human happiness. . . . There is no doubt that the Chinese are in love with life, in love with this earth and will not forsake it for an invisible heaven. They are in love with life, which is so sad and yet so beautiful. . . . They are in love with life, with its kings and beggars, robbers and monks, funerals and weddings and childbirths and sickness, and glowing sunsets and rainy nights, and feasting days and wine-shop fracas. . . . So true was Confucianism to the humane instinct that neither Confucius nor his disciples ever made a God."

Consider the impertinence of men who can approach this state of culture with the attitude and the childish preaching of the average missionary? It is almost an insult to a whole people.

## THE SEA AND LITERATURE

(Concluded from page 150)

KEATS thought of the great waters rather as a treasure of magic, a world which he could people with the creatures of his gorgeous fancy. He makes splendid use of this, as in his ever-memorable lines:—

“ Like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.”

In other words he speaks of the ocean's “ pure ablution round earth's human shores,” and of “ perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.” In Matthew Arnold, we find the low Virgilian cry, the sense of tears in mortal things, that sobs in undertone through his tranquil verse:—

“ Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles while the waves draw back and fling,  
At their return up the high strand,  
Begin and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.”

Among Rossetti's shorter poems the musical, melancholy “ Sea Limits ”:—

“ Consider the sea's listless chime ”

occupies a prominent place, but one of his sonnets contains the memorable lines:—

“ From this wave-washed mound  
Unto the farthest flood-brim look with me;  
Then reach on with thy thought till it be drown'd.  
Miles and miles distant though the last line be,  
And though thy soul sails leagues and leagues beyond—  
Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.”

There is a choice of dainty pictures in the verse of William Morris, such as:—

“ And underneath his feet the moonlit sea  
Went shepherding his waves disorderly.”

Walt Whitman confessed that all his attempts to portray a ship in full sail had failed, but in his “ Sea and the Hills ” who shall say that Kipling has not succeeded:—

“ Who hath desired the Sea—the immense and contemptuous  
surges?  
The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, ere the star-stabbing  
bowsprit emerges—  
The orderly clouds of the trades and the ridg'd roaring  
sapphire thereunder—  
Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws and the head-sail's low-  
volleying thunder?”

To Robert Bridges, ships and the sea are one and indivisible, and he has expressed the wonder and the witchery of the wanderers in great waters:—

“ Whither O splendid ship thy white sails crowding,  
Leaning across the bosom of the urgent west,  
That fearest not sea-rising nor sky-clouding,  
Whither away, fair rover, and what thy quest?  
Ah! soon when Winter has all our vales opprest,  
When skies are cold and misty, and hail is hurling,  
Wilt thou glide on the blue Pacific, or rest  
In a summer haven asleep, thy white sails furling?”

Yet the magic of the sea and shipping has been superbly expressed by a prose-writer. John Ruskin has written nobly of ships in his “ Harbours of England,” a book conceived in praise and illustration of Turner's magnificent drawings. Ruskin had the true sea-passion. He knew London and its good, grey river,

and he had seen the splendour of the Adriatic at dawn. He was not a sea-rover like Herman Melville, and he was not born to stand at the wheel. But he saw as few men see, and wrote as few men can hope to write. There is in English literature no more stirring language concerning the magic of the sea and the rapture of the seaman. Boats had for him an endless fascination, particularly the undecked sea-boat. That represented a miracle of human achievement, the perfect adaptation of means to ends. The boat's bow, he says, is “ naively perfect ”:—

“ The man who made it knew not he was making anything beautiful as he bent the planks into those mysterious, ever-changing curves. It grows, under his hand, into the image of a sea-shell, the seal, as it were, of the flowing of the great tides and streams of ocean stamped on its delicate rounding. He leaves it, when all is done, without a boast. It is a simple work, but it will keep out water. And every plank thenceforward is a Fate, and has men's lives wreathed in the knots of it, as the cloth yard shaft had their deaths in the plumes. The nails that fasten together the planks of the boat's prow are the rivets of the fellowship of the world. Their iron does more than draw lightning out heaven; it leads love round the earth.”

There is more real beauty in the ordinary fishing-boat than in the decorated galleys. Says Ruskin again:—

“ Nothing that ever swung at the quay sides of Carthage, or glowed with Crusaders' shields above the bays of Syria, could give to any contemporary human creature such an idea of the meaning of the word ‘ boat ’ as may be now gained by any mortal happy enough to behold as much as a Newcastle collier beating against the wind.”

The fascination of the sea lies in the magic of the ships. They carry the imagination to enchanted islands and upon desperate voyages. They are the symbols of unconquerable endeavour, and, at the last, of rest.

“ MIMNERMUS.”

(Reprinted)

## “ PROVING ” RELIGION

IT is only rarely that clerical writers venture to touch on those controversial points which for years past have been the acknowledged ground for Freethought propaganda. In a recent article in the “ Daily Telegraph,” however, the Rev. L. B. Ashby, who writes a weekly sermon for that journal, wandered on to what is exceedingly dangerous ground for a clergyman. His article is entitled “ Can Faith be ‘ Proved ’ ? ” It deals with one of the perpetual complaints of the orthodox—namely, the fact that the heretic cannot be put in his place by logical argument. After all, in most areas of opinion where opposing views are held by different people, it is usual for both sides to present arguments which appeal to the reason, and, according to the weight which is accorded to each side, the neutral thinker can make up his mind. In such classical differences of opinion as those between Socialism and Individualism, or between Free Trade and Protection, or between Nationalism and Internationalism, it will eventually be true that the person who can marshal the most convincingly logical arguments on his side will be the winner of the argument.

In the sphere of religion it is very different. Hear Mr. Ashby:—

“ When people ask to have the truth of the Christian faith proved to them, one is compelled to answer that this is something which cannot be done. All that one can do is to state clearly what the Christian faith is and then invite people to try it for themselves.”

As has been done in other discussions, let us substitute something else for the words "the Christian faith," and see how the argument sounds:—

"When people ask to have the truth of the Einstein theory of Relativity proved to them, one is compelled to answer that this is something which cannot be done. All that one can do is to state clearly what the Einstein theory of Relativity is and then invite people to try it for themselves."

That at once shows the falsity of the whole attitude inculcated by Mr. Ashby. If we can only be convinced of the truth of a particular attitude towards life by first of all believing it, and subsequently finding that it works, how can we be sure of the truth of any religious or irreligious view? After all, a member of the National Secular Society finds that Atheism works; a member of the Rationalist Press Association finds that Agnosticism works; a member of any one of the conflicting sects of Christianity, from the Roman Catholic Church to the Salvation Army or from the Church of England to the Society of Friends, finds that his special version of the eternal verities of the Christian Faith works to his own satisfaction. In fact, the brilliant idea of Mr. Ashby really boils down to substituting a subjective for an objective idea of truth.

This is, at first sight, highly convincing; but anyone who ponders the matter for awhile and tries to get a little beneath the surface must surely be convinced that it is the completest bankruptcy of the intellect. It is not merely unconvincing, it is impossible. Mr. Ashby is voluntarily throwing overboard the whole logical basis on which European thought has been founded for centuries past—and all to defend a religious attitude which most intelligent people have long ago recognised as being indefensible.

S. H.

CORRESPONDENCE

A PRIVATE BROADCASTING STATION.

Sir,—We must face the fact that the B.B.C. is controlled by a Christian Group, and if we are to hear representatives of the Atheist Movement we will have to do something for ourselves.

It is not possible, as yet, to run a private broadcasting station in this country, but we can use another medium which is free from censorship, viz., 16mm. sound film.

If Freethinkers are prepared to finance the establishment of an independent recording outfit, we can produce our own films and at the same time establish sound-track records which could be broadcast from abroad on the lines of the pre-war advertising programmes.

Freethinkers are invited to write to me for further details, as I hope to establish a group of fellow enthusiasts who will assist in the showing of suitable films. Owners of 16mm. silent and sound projectors will be placed on a register, and as soon as suitable films are ready shows can be arranged.

A silent film called "Mind Your Own Business" is in course of preparation, and as soon as more equipment becomes available an extensive programme of films will be prepared for the use of Secular Societies and others.—Yours, etc.,

L. SANDERSON.

VICTORY PEAL.

Sir,—Church bells, and not guns and sirens, will signal the Allies' victory over the Nazis. The sirens would have spoken for the whole of the heroic populace who, with their sons and brothers in the Forces, have won their war. The church bells will speak for about a quarter of the people. Of late, Church and "religion" have been frantically working overtime on radio and cinema to put the fear of God into credulous souls who thought they would get a brave new world automatically after defeating the Huns. Hasn't it been made clear that one of the main ideas is to keep the post-war world safe for "free enterprise," which is capitalism, which is private profit from human exploitation? Look at Italy, Belgium, Holland, Greece. The

myths, superstitions and "beliefs" of organised religionism persist for economic and political ends that are opposed to the ideal of the Brotherhood of Man. The only live internationalism is the brotherhood of "Business." Blots on the design at home are the inadequate housing plans, the doctors' turn-down of the proposed State Health Services (preferring private enterprise), and the near-bear of National Insurance that was to have been "Social Security." There are others; but, withal, we'll have the church bells pealing the Victory and pointing the happy land beyond the sky. The man in the street has to find the money that the Churches don't pay in the way of rates or entertainment tax. Let him, then, enjoy the clangour and the clashing.

"What say the Bells as they clang overhead?"

'Cheer up! Cheer up! You'll soon be dead.'

—Yours, etc.,

NUNC DIMITTIS."

THE B.B.C. AND CHRISTIANITY.

Sir,—Recently the Bishop of Bradford criticised the B.B.C. Brains Trust for taking no definite Christian standpoint.

When Dr. Joad heard of this he said (I quote the "Bradford Telegraph and Argus" for March 22):—

"Why should they? This is not a Christian country; only one person in ten goes to church. The trouble is that people don't realise it.

On the Brains Trust we are not allowed to discuss religion because the B.B.C. don't think religion can stand investigation, inquiry and discussion by Agnostics."

The B.B.C. had "no comment" to make on the Bishop of Bradford's criticism of the Brains Trust and the "To Start You Talking" programme.

They maintain a discreet silence. But when will their intolerant, bigoted attitude be overcome? What are the various Freethought M.P.s doing?—Yours, etc.,

"ALERT."

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., ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A.: "The Moral Mischief of Christianity."

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. V. SHORTT, a lecture.

Burnley (Market).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON, a lecture.

Cornholme (Lanes.).—Wednesday, May 2, 7.30 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture. Barnes Square.

Enfield (Lanes.).—Friday, April 27, 7.30 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture.

Nottingham (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. T. M. MOSLEY will lecture.

Padiham.—Sunday, 3 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture.

Worsthorne (Lanes.).—Monday, April 30, 7.30 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Belfast Secular Society (Old Museum Building, College Square).—Sunday, May 6; lecture and debate at 7.30 p.m.

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Room 13, 38, John Bright Street).—Sunday, 3.30 p.m., Mr. T. MILLINGTON: "And Now for the Brave New World."

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanic's Institute).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m.: Special Night.

Cardiff Branch N.S.S. (Severn Road Council School).—Friday, May 4, 7.30 p.m., Mr. W. A. ANDREW: "Fetishism from a Secularist's Standpoint."

MATERIALISM RESTATED, by Chapman Cohen. Price 4s. 6d.; postage 2½d.

ROME OR REASON? A Question for To-day. By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 4d.; by post 5d.

## PRAISE OR DISPRAISE

## I.

REMOTE in time some unknown author of that collection of Eastern literature we curiously call Apocrypha writes enthusiastically "Let us now praise famous men."

Why should we? Before we proceed to obey that ecstatic behest let us examine famous men, to see on what grounds they are entitled to praise.

Naturally the first to be considered are those who ruled countries, usually by hereditary right, or result of conquest. They frequently claimed divine ancestry or assent as princes, kings, emperors, with a few queens and empresses, known by corresponding titles in their own languages.

What an extraordinary collection they are! Hardly one appears normal. The poet Shirley dismisses them aptly in the line "As gods they lived, like men they died."

An epigrammatist tersely sums up their rule in "The right divine of kings to govern wrong."

Most of them did the latter successfully. Amazing how for thousands of years mankind has borne royal tyranny. Wars engaged in for personal reasons; spite, pique, ambition, aggrandisement; torture, confiscation, taxes, reckless squandering and prodigal extravagance indulged while subjects starved, or toiled with minimum reward, slavery: that is their record.

Enough of them. In spite of Thomas Carlyle the Hero as King is now discredited, as are nearly all Carlyle's Heroes. Heartily we agree with Mark Antony to bury Cæsar rather than praise him.

## II.

Unfortunately, reduction or dispersal of regal power led to the politician, ranging from royal favourite to democratic choice. One has suspicion in the latter case the leader is more self-chosen than elected, however much he court the suffrages of the populace or the people delude themselves they voted him into power. Allied with the last illusion is the greater one that the politician can or will do good. He will—for himself and his junta.

As Hamlet says: "A politician; one that would circumvent God."

So little wonder he thinks he can circumvent the people, often doing so while playing his chesslike game against other politicians.

Carlyle remarks on ministerial conjurers who outwitted other ministerial conjurers, or boasted of holding the reins of government, but which was more often the spigot of taxation. Not without diverting some stream of profit to themselves.

Variants of the statesman are many, from diplomat to Dictator. The latter is perhaps more honest in that he seizes power openly, and if ruthless uses it without pretence.

The ancients had a salutary practice of assassinating tyrants and oppressors, wherein they showed wisdom which seems to have vanished from the modern world.

## III.

As we are not going to accord a pæan of praise to politicians we must look for idols more worthy. Among such rank sailors and soldiers. We have our Wellington and Nelson, France its Napoleon Bonaparte, while every civilised country pays tribute to past and present military and naval commanders. They are supposed to have saved their countries from grave dangers, though one wonders how that can be when they fight on opposite sides. The loser cannot have done so, and one is doubtful about the victor.

With naval and military figures the difficulty is they were ostensibly acting under orders, although armies and navies and their personnel often have great influence upon policy, frequently too much. Either in that capacity, or as instruments of govern-

ment policy there is little to admire in winners of battles and conquerors of countries, still less to praise.

Looking back through history we realise that most wars need not have been fought, and the wholesale killer is not a helpful or constructive or productive character any more than an admirable one to be copied, much less praised.

## IV.

In the arts the problems and position are different. At their worst practitioners of creative art are harmless, and may be criticised with impunity, which is or has not always been true of the famous men considered earlier. Singularly individuals engaged in government and politics resent criticism, try to stifle it, and if able to do so, penalise it.

To artists of whatever form criticism is necessary. For them the deadliest treatment is indifference, to be ignored. As criticism does not of necessity mean merely fault-finding, but includes calling attention to the good points as well as bad praise may be classified as part of criticism.

H. G. Wells remarks that if a crazy millionaire bought up works of art and destroyed them there would soon be no artistic productions. Publicity is the breath of life to art. Actors and actresses, musicians and other public performers must have the applause immediately, or they cease to be employable.

Contrarily artists creating objects of permanent nature will continue regardless of blame or praise. The artistic impulse, the constructive or creative spirit is so urgent that poets, painters, architects, sculptors, writers, composers and similar will go on for years before achieving recognition, counting on getting it in later decades, even dying unknown consoled by the prospect of future generations elevating their works to the ranks of classics.

Perhaps we laud past and dead artists too much. Some praise mingled with our analysis of modern art, or to break the silence of our indifference or dislike would encourage coming artists. However much we admire the work of bygone ages we must have new, as necessarily as we have to eat fresh food each day. Not try to live sustained by last week's nourishment.

## V.

Scientists, engineers, inventors and other workers in material progress seem to trouble least about their rewards, praise or aught else. Yet there are many men and women who have laboured for the good of humanity to whom praise is due. We ought to accord it in their lifetimes, with other testimonies before they pass from us chilled and disappointed, for us to feel guilty of short-sighted dullness in not acknowledging their fame.

Presumably the writer of "Let us now praise famous men" meant those who do good, not to include careerists and self-seekers. Or men of ill fame might demand a meed of praise; criminals and destroyers, those who have done harm and are widely remembered for it, have bad reputations if not fame.

Really the injunction needs reversing: let famous men now praise us. Lacking the millions of earth's inhabitants, the masses of ordinary populace, there could be no famous men. These latter should praise and thank the countless common people as being the raw material from which they built up their fame, the foundation, the audience, the inspiration, without whose myriad presence famous persons would remain unknown, unfertilised, sterile and blank.

A. R. WILLIAMS.

**CHALLENGE TO RELIGION** (a re-issue of four lectures delivered in the Secular Hall, Leicester), by Chapman Cohen. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.

**THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE MYTHICAL CHRIST**, by Gerald Massey. With Preface by Chapman Cohen. Price 6d.; postage 1d.