

THE FREETHINKER

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Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Advance of the Godless

A FEW weeks ago I called attention to the fact that Atheism as a description of a mental attitude had become acclimatised in this country. There has been a greater development of a regard for accuracy of language and for intellectual freedom. Even the "man in the street" shows less inclination to shiver when someone is pointed out as an Atheist. The logic of fact is overcoming the power of Christian bigotry, although the nationalisation of fearless speech where religion is concerned is not yet complete. Truth is not always as mighty in action as it is in logic. Yet the discussion with regard to the existence of God is becoming more definite in form, and the use of such twilight terms as "Agnosticism" is not nearly as common as it was, and for once the defenders of the faith were correct in saying that it was a respectable cover for Atheism. In practice it may have softened the malignancy of the Christian attack, but that was done at the cost of a strict regard for scientific and logical exactitude.

In sober truth, the plea "I am not sure whether God exists or not" is not merely illogical, it verges on the absurd. One may be an "Agnostic" with regard to the existence of a fowl with six legs, that the creature is twenty feet in height, that it has a tail growing out of its side, and so on. But the animal is at least thinkable, and that gives a base for discussion, and even gives admission for possibilities hitherto unknown. But we cannot treat "God" in this way without sacrificing our intellectual sincerity. A thing—any thing—must be thinkable if it is to become a fruitful subject for discussion. Conceivability is essential to all sane discussions. Whether we are dealing with man in his infancy or man as he is to-day, we can think only of the thinkable. We can no more think in a vacuum than we can live in one. To think we must have something that is thinkable, we can no more form ideas in the absence of suitable material than we can live without suitable food. The brain of man is not something that is separate from an organism, it is a part of it.

That will do for a groundwork, and on that we can picture man's earliest attempts at understanding and interpreting the world in which he found himself. That groundwork exists to-day, not with a substantial difference in substance but vastly different in form and expression. The gods of primitive man might be wise or foolish, kind or brutal, good or bad, but at least they stood for something operating in a world made up of "things." "God" or gods stood for something. But for the modern man God stands for the inconceivable, and with the advance of science, for the impossible. To the modern educated man to-day "God" stands for nothing that is realisable. "He" or "It" rises

from nothing, lives in a vacuum and ends in nothing. The modern God is well described as being without body, parts or passions. That is an excellent description of nothing at all.

I think, therefore, we may safely say that the era of "I do not know whether God exists or not" has almost run its course. One cannot be "Agnostical" with regard to something of which one cannot form the shadow of a shade of what it is. Neither can we close our eyes to the fact that to-day we know how gods came into existence and how they fade away into nothingness. As an Atheist I can understand the gods. I can watch them growing and dying. What the modern apologetic Christian worships is not a god, he is prostrating himself before the perpetuation of a great illusion.

Atheism

It must have been noted by many that during the past ten years there has been a marked increase in the number of open avowals of Atheism. Two factors have here been at work. One is the normal development of the human intellect, the other the reaction of the Russian Revolution. The lesson of the transformation of Russia—for the better, in a single generation—has not been lost. Indeed, the World War has also helped to drive home the lesson that the moulding of the human state rests in human hands alone. Our alliance with Russia came as a shock to the whole body of the Roman Church, to a very considerable section of the English Church, and to a large number of Christians of other denominations. The tremendous improvement of the new Russia had to be stressed to overcome the opposition against counting Atheist Russia as our Ally, and it is worth noting that it was not the improvement in the life of Russia that led to our association, but solely because of their capacity as military Allies. There is a certain bitter recognition of the situation when one recalls that it was not the prospect of a better social Russia that brought it into closer contact with us, but the fact that when put to the test they could fight and kill and die as well as any Christian nation in the world.

Still, it must have been a bitter pill for our Christian people to swallow. Perhaps we may be permitted to note that this religious animosity towards Russia is not even now dead. It is merely not openly active. It was a bitter pill to the Churches, and even though swallowed, we doubt if it has been completely digested. But while it would be foolish to assume that the Churches will forget their earlier opposition to Atheist Russia, it is certain they will have to move more cautiously.

That, I believe, will explain the admission now made by leading clergymen that Atheism is plainly on the advance in this country. That confession has taken the place of the old falsity that people were not losing their religion, they were simply dissatisfied with the preachers. A more

ridiculous, a more clumsy tale was never told by a priesthood that has lied and lied again in the interest of the Church; it would seem to indicate that even in this the clergy are losing ground.

Our New Archbishop

The new Archbishop of Canterbury gave an address the other day to the Central Church for Religious Education. In the course of his address he said that "Atheism has been creeping among the people for more than two generations." Bless the man, he cannot even tell this lie in a plausible manner. We call it a lie because we cannot conceive an Archbishop so ignorant of the facts of the case that Atheism has been steadily growing among the *people* for about five generations, and that among the upper intellectual classes Atheism has been well represented since the Renaissance.

Of course, it must be noted that Dr. Fisher said Atheism had been "creeping" among the *people*, and that word here is of some significance. It means not the people in *high* places, but those in low ones; and if the Church breaks down in keeping the people "in order" supporters in high places will naturally ask of what use are the Churches. Those who will turn to the series of books written by Mr. and Mrs. Hammond on the state of the people from 1760 to 1840 will realise how valuable religion is as a means of keeping the people content in the position in life where God has been pleased to place them. The priest and the squire saw to it that when the people suffered they recognised that their suffering came from God, and humility was the first of the Christian graces.

Probably, feeling that it was rather risky to say that Atheism was growing to an alarming extent, Dr. Fisher qualifies it by saying that Atheism is "creeping" in (that gives an impression of something slimy and generally disreputable), and follows it up by saying that there is to-day "an absence" of "Christian content." I haven't the slightest notion in what way Christian content differs from other causes of content, being under the impression that content is content, no matter what we are dealing with, so must let that pass, unless Dr. Fisher is giving us a dose of the old Christian teaching that Christians—particularly poor ones—must be content wherever they are, satisfied with whatever they may get, and thank God that things are not worse than they are.

It is rather difficult to decide whether the Archbishop is merely artful or is just a little intoxicated with his elevation to the highest post in the English Church. For example, he says that "the only defence against implicit Atheism is a well-founded theology." We agree, or perhaps it would be better to say that we agree if the words cited mean what they suggest. But a closer reading of his speech gives quite a different meaning. Instead of the defence against Atheism taking the form—the only form that can be effective—of meeting the Atheistic position fairly and squarely in an open discussion, the Archbishop's plan is to induce parents to accept "the responsibility for the Christian education of their children," to see that "Sunday remains a day of Christian teaching," and he insists that the religious Sunday "must be recovered from the secular uses to which it has been exposed."

Now, if that means anything at all, it means that the children of Christians must be brought up knowing no religion but the Christian one, and generally the children

must be so trained that they will be completely ignorant of all that science has to tell them on that head. Of course, we can all agree that if parents and preachers join hands on this matter, and if they succeed in preventing children knowing anything concerning the real origins of religion, children will grow up with their minds sufficiently warped to secure their loyalty to the Church. There is nothing new in the plan, but it is not quite so easy to work as it once was.

Of course, this moulding of human nature can be accomplished, and it can operate for evil as well as for good. Dr. Fisher's plan is essentially that of Hitler. It is that of preventing youth finding out what is true, and to tying the developing mind down to accepting a cut-and-dried series of ideas and to shun all others. Hitler and Dr. Fisher are of the same brand. That one works for a religious system and the other for a social one is a mere matter of detail. Hitler and Fisher merely have different ideas, but the method, the aim, the desire to rob youth of its freedom to become the blind servant of a method is common to both. It is both cowardly and contemptible to force a set of doctrines on children as though they were impregnable and important truths. There are many ways of getting a living, but surely the very worst is that of forcing upon a defenceless child as unimpeachable truth ideas which we know are questioned in all directions.

We hear a great deal to-day of freedom. From the Spanish Franco to the British Lord Halifax, from Japan to Ireland the air is laden with declarations of the beauty of freedom of thought. And now our chief Archbishop proclaims in the name of God that children must be brought up to see life only through the magnifying-glasses provided by the Church. But I think that Dr. Fisher is not very astute in the way he states his case. A lie should be so dressed that it looks like the truth. A slander should be served with rose trimmings. What Heine called "the great lying Church" appears to be losing its skill.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

MARTIN LUTHER

II.

EVERYBODY, of course, knows how Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses against Roman Catholicism to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. It was certainly an act of great courage, though it would not be unfair to say that he would not have found it quite so easy to do in Rome or Paris or London. When we think of the foul murder by the Catholic hierarchy in France over 200 years later of a poor youth, not twenty years old, the Chevalier de la Barre, for not taking his hat off to the "Host" in a religious procession, a murder which roused Voltaire to his famous "Ecrasons l'infâme," we can see what would have happened to Luther in 1517 outside Germany. Moreover, it is a mistake to imagine that Luther was against the Church of Rome as a Church—all he wanted (at first) was the righting of certain abuses which seemed to him not wholly in accord with a Divine institution.

This nailing of his theses on the church door has captured the imagination of the world, and it will, I think, be a long time before the true Martin Luther is allowed to emerge and appear in the light shed by Mr. Peter Wiener's pamphlet against the German Reformer.

Although Luther's many admirers and biographers try to hide the fact as much as possible, still they are forced to admit his almost complete instability of character. The story of his throwing an ink bottle at the Devil gives a key to the many fits of depression, of melancholia, and of paroxysms, which accompanied him all his life. His hysterical weeping and sobbing, indeed, caused his companions to think he *really* was possessed by the Devil.

Under the influence of the enlightening forces of the Renaissance, superstitions, belief in miracles, and the like, were slowly but surely dissolving; but, says Mr. Wiener, "It certainly is true that Luther forced back upon Germany a belief in miracles, superstitions, mysticism, a fanatical belief in evil powers," while in his "Table Talk," Luther admits that "Rage acts as stimulant to my whole being. It sharpens my wits, puts a stop to the assaults of the Devil and drives out care. Never do I write or speak better than when I am in a rage. If I wish to compose, write, pray, and preach well, I have to be in a rage." But this rage resulted in his using language which simply cannot be translated—"He writes things one cannot quote in decent English" is how one writer puts it. Language was in his day pretty free, but Luther appears to have gone far beyond even "the custom of educated men of his time."

Luther hated "reason" or, as he himself puts it, "Usury, drunkenness, adultery; these crimes are self-evident, and the world knows that they are sinful; but that bride of the Devil, 'Reason,' stalks abroad, the fair courtesan, and wishes to be considered wise, and thinks that whatever she says comes from the Holy Ghost. She is the most dangerous harlot the Devil has." Luther, in fact, was the great protagonist of "Justification by Faith alone," in fact, he deliberately added the word "alone" to the text in Rom. iii, 28, in his German translation; it is not in our A.V. Of course, for this and other "mistranslations" he has always been bitterly attacked by the Roman Church. Neither did he always see eye to eye with Jesus Christ, or God Almighty himself. He actually said *once*, "When I beheld Christ I seemed to see the Devil" and on another occasion, "I look upon God no better than a scoundrel."

"Faith," he would declare, "cancels all sin," and "sometimes it is necessary to commit some sin out of hatred and contempt for the Devil." Luther, it will be seen, was certainly obsessed by the Devil. He even blamed a bad headache brought on by drinking too much to the Devil.

It is well known that he married an ex-nun—which added to the enormity of his crimes in the eyes of the Roman Church. But it was all because he "burned," as Paul would say, a "burning" he again put down to the Devil; and so one is not surprised to find him coming to the conclusion that "the matrimonial act is never performed without sin . . . differing in nothing from adultery and fornication." For Luther, "The word and work of God is quite clear, viz., that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes." And that appears to have been his unchanging attitude. That he was not against polygamy is shown by his advice to Philip of Hesse who was a great supporter of Luther. Philip was already married and had a family but wanted another lady, and asked for Luther's authorisation to marry her. This was given—so long as the marriage would be kept secret—and the Reformer was given as a present a large barrel of wine.

In 1525 broke out what historians call the "Peasants' War," though they published their grievances in a very moderate document, "a model of courageous moderation," as Michelet calls it. The peasants looked upon Luther as their leader but he certainly did not deserve their trust. "To kill a peasant," he declared, "is not murder . . . let there be no half measures! Crush them! Cut their throats! Transfix them! Leave no stone unturned! To kill a peasant is to destroy a mad dog . . . A prince who failed to do so would be sinning against God

very badly . . . It is no longer a question of tolerance, patience, pity. It is the hour of wrath and for the sword." And of course it was "the peasants who serve the Devil."

When Luther's followers reproached him, he said, "If they say I am very hard and merciless, mercy be damned. Let whoever can stab, strangle and kill them like mad dogs." This has, I believe, been often quoted even in England, but it is well to remember it when we are dealing with Luther, the Reformation, and Christianity. In any case, even his warmest admirers have never been able to find out exactly how to exonerate their hero from this brutal attack on peasants.

When the poor people were finally defeated, Luther said, "It was I, Martin Luther, who slew all the peasants in the insurrection for I commanded them to be slaughtered. All their blood is on my shoulders. But I cast it on our Lord God who commanded me to speak this way." This is not quite as well known as the other advice I have quoted.

If, as Mr. Wiener contends, Luther was the spiritual ancestor of Hitler, it is worth while to see what he has to say of the Jewish race. When Luther, then, was fighting the Pope, he wanted all the allies he could get, and he welcomed Jews and attacked Catholics for their treatment of the race. But this did not last long. Here are some of his typical announcements:—

"Never forget, beloved Christians, that apart from Satan himself, you possess no more deadly, poisonous, and dreadful enemy than a real Jew. They poison wells, kidnap and maltreat children.

The breath of the Jew reeks.

Their rabbis teach them that theft and robbery is no sin. A more bloodthirsty and vindictive race has never seen the light of day.

The Jews are malignant snakes and imps.

Were I able, I would knock one down and stab him in my anger.

If I had to baptise a Jew, I would take him to the bridge of the Elbe, hang a stone round his neck and push him over with the words, 'I baptise thee in the name of Abraham.'

We ought to take revenge on the Jews and kill them. We ought to set fire to their synagogues and schools. Confiscate their property and drive them out of the country."

That ought to do for the present, but there is quite a lot more in a similar strain. And one must not forget that no other German had such a powerful influence on the political, social, and religious life in Germany as Martin Luther. Indeed, for Mr. Wiener, "the line from Luther to Hitler runs straight; and one of the main causes, if not the main cause, which turned Germany into a country of barbarians, which produced a Germany attempting repeatedly to destroy the values of western civilisation, was Martin Luther and his German Reformation."

The Germans in Luther's opinion were the *Herrenvolk*, and the German language was the most perfect in the world. All this led to the need of a great leader, a Fuehrer, for "if Germany only had a real leader, then no enemy could ever be victorious."

But my space has run out. I hope the reader will turn to Mr. Wiener's pamphlet for long extracts from Luther's works which I suspect have never before been given in English so fully. Already pious reviewers find that they cannot recommend the little work, for if Luther is the great example of Christian Reformation at its highest, what an indictment of their "Divine" creed!

Unfortunately, Mr. Wiener argues—once again—for a "true" Christianity as against the "sham-Christianity" of Luther and others. Some hope!

H. CUTNER.

ACID DROPS

"You pays your money and you takes your choice." That is a well-known sentence, and it is well illustrated by the present condition of the Christian Churches. One day we get vivid accounts of the religious quality of our fighting men which would lead one to believe that the real Christian army is now in being. Another day we open our papers to find that the situation of the Christian Churches goes steadily from bad to worse. Here is an example furnished by the Rev. Dr. Colville, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in England.

"When the war is over we may expect, if history is any guide, a period of demoralisation," he said. "Indeed, this demoralisation has already begun among certain sections of our people. It is evident in loose views of sexual morality, in juvenile delinquency, in gambling and intemperance and in the extraordinary increase in the habit of stealing."

That is a mere statement of fact, for whatever may be the justice of a prolonged war the inevitable process of decivilisation takes place. He is both a fool and a liar who says that war uplifts. It does not. If it brings the members of one group closer together, it also snaps the links that united others. And in the long run religion is more destructive than is war. Rival soldiers will fraternise from sheer human feeling. Rival religionists will, other things equal, hate each other in the name of their respective deities.

The following protest against the fixed dishonesty of the B.B.C. seems to us worth noting. One day the lusty lying and unlimited impudence in the interest of our decaying churches will be noted by historians, and the "great lying Church" will be fully exposed. Meanwhile we give the following excerpt from "The Inquirer"—the organ of "Unitarian Christianity." The date is June 9:—

"The writer of these notes recently listened to a religious broadcast to children. It was upon the Resurrection. The broadcaster spoke with simplicity and effectiveness. He used the permissible and 'classical' argument that something must have happened soon after the death of Jesus to turn a band of cowards (the Apostles) into a band of heroes. This is permissible, but what followed is hardly so. The broadcaster informed the children that these Apostles were eventually persecuted and done to death in a manner much worse than in the persecutions of our own day. This was used as a statement of fact and not of argument, and the broadcaster ought to have known that there is not the slightest evidence for that statement. No one knows what happened to the twelve Apostles. There are legitimate doubts (entertained by many instructed members of the traditional church) as to whether there were twelve Apostles at all. But most certainly it is not permissible to state that they were all persecuted to death. We are not concerned with the ethics of making this kind of statement to children, but we are concerned with the kind of situation created by it in modern society. 'You,' said the great historian Ranke to a Christian scholar, 'are in the first place a Christian; I am in the first place a historian. There is a gulf between us.' Some day some of those children will discover that gulf; they will help to make it; and in it, in its various depths and ramifications throughout all the various forms of the life of the modern age, much that is necessary to save our world will be buried."

The Bishop of Ely says he has been disturbed "for many years" "by the indifference of his fellow countrymen to religion." We do not doubt it. But we do not see any way out for the bishop short of adopting the Hitlerite method. Of course, so long as the churches can do that, they may boast of good results, and in the new Education Act the Government has deliberately opened the way for some measure of success. But more than that is needed for the churches to succeed in their aims. And again Hitler showed the way—the only way—and came a cropper.

There are many people who are not exactly Christians, but are under the impression that Christianity no longer threatens anyone. For these people, as well as those who do not care to attack the Churches, we call their attention to the following. At Ealing three Parliamentary Candidates have been invited to attend a

religious conference and express their views on the work of the Church. They will also be asked to discuss the secularisation of modern life and the appointment of Bishops by the State. That is the most daring threat of direct religious interference with freedom of thought that we have heard of for some time.

Of course, the religious vote has always been in existence, and as we have said over and over again Members of Parliament, or candidates for election, are often forced to play the humbug in order to win an election. And the hypocrisy that wins an election is of necessity succeeded by more hypocrisy in the House of Commons. Of all the candidates we doubt if there are a score of them who would speak truthfully to the questions of a religious tribunal.

Professor C. H. Dodd has made a remarkable discovery. With that keen perception for which our modern theologians are famous, he told the Ely Diocesan Conference the other week "it is the Church's business to make the great words of the Bible and the liturgy come alive. . . ." The world must be taught that "human history is the material in which God works, and that he has brought it to fulfilment in an historical incarnation and historical Redemption." And, of course, Prof. Dodd followed up his stirring and original words with the usual reference to the "stark history" of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. We do not doubt for a moment that the old ladies of both sexes at Ely were suitably impressed, but we do like to call the attention of those people who tell us that "Bible-banging" and the aggressive policy of the N.S.S. are out of date, and ask them how to explain such a modern phenomenon as Prof. Dodd whose like, no doubt, can be multiplied very extensively.

Professor Koszul, the professor of English at Strasbourg University and a thorough-going Catholic himself, says in the "Church Times" that

"The plain, if unpleasant, truth is that the Vichy Government . . . was supported by many Catholics, not because it was pro-German, but because it looked upon itself as by God appointed to abolish once for all the hated democratic traditions inherited from the men of 1789 and their Anglo-Saxon teachers."

Or, to put it another way, these French Catholics were glad of an opportunity to show once again who was "boss," the Church or the people, and, if it had been possible, to have established a regime differing from pure Nazism only in name. Professor Koszul is a valuable witness for the fact, often claimed in these columns, that Nazism and Catholicism are blood brothers.

Now that Mussolini is dead and cannot answer for himself, the Papacy is turning out all sorts of yarns in its favour as the Great Champion of Peace, with Mussolini as the villain always wanting war. A Vatican document has appeared to prove how hard and how earnestly the Pope fought him for peace in Italy, and how furious "Musso" was at the Papal peace efforts. But one thing was omitted, and that was the precise words used by the Pope, supported, of course, by the necessary documents, that the Vatican was entirely opposed to Mussolini's "conquest" of Abyssinia and the way in which Italy's laughing airmen bombed the poor natives and used poison gas against them. Nothing is more amusing than to see how the Pope is now trying to pose as a great humanitarian always opposed to war—now that war in Europe is over.

Prebendary Welch is the gentleman who looks after God, and is paid for his labour by the B.B.C. with money collected from the general public. Judging by results his services are not very successful, for the number of men and women who will not be bothered with gods of any sort increases steadily. Dr. Welch consoles himself with the reflection that bad as the situation is for the Churches, believers may be created in greater numbers through the medium of Broadcasting. Well, all that has been produced is the word of the heads of the B.B.C. that the religious part of their broadcasts is much enjoyed by listeners. We do not doubt it, but we should like to see another set of figures—the number of those who switch off when the time for religious services and religious talks takes the field.

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

- J. Y. ANDERONY.—Thanks. Matter received safely.
- W. S. MARTINS.—We agree with you as to the advance that has been made during the past generation. But it would be foolish to believe that the Churches are incapable of effecting some degree of a "come back." We must never forget that our Churches and their supporters are still powerful and active, while the mass of people are inactive and careless.
- F. WISE.—Much obliged for letter. As it is not marked "private" we take it we are at liberty to publish it. It is a fine revelation of the mental quality of these men.
- F. STEAD.—Pleased to receive. Judging from your age, your connection with the Freethought Movement is about as long as ours. The minister who told you there was no such person as an Atheistic poet must be an awful liar or a hard-shell fool.
- BENEVOLENT FUND N.S.S.—The General Secretary N.S.S. gratefully acknowledges a donation of 10s. from Mr. J. Bryan (Manchester) to the Benevolent Fund of the Society.

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SUGAR PLUMS

The English people as a whole are so woefully ignorant concerning the state of affairs in our African Colonies that we gladly commend a very useful pamphlet issued by the Council for Civil Liberties. The title is "Civil Liberty and the Colonies," price 9d. It should prove very handy for all who wish to know how things are managed—or mismanaged.

As we noted, the new Archbishop is rather doleful as to the outlook for the Church. We think that dolefulness is warranted. After all, if people move at all they must either move forward or backward. The Archbishop is asking for an annual sum of £200,000. Well, if that some can be added to other sums we have no doubt that newcomers will be found in the Church. But whether that will compensate for those who move out of the Church is quite another question.

The "Church Times" is rather sad. It says there was a time when "Democracy was democracy." Now there is "no security for a clean social life." Perhaps we may cheer up our Christian Democracy by reminding him that there never was a Democracy in this country, and, of course, there is not one to-day. Long ago Thomas Paine laid down the main lines of democracy, and he paid dearly for his endeavour. How can we have democracy with an hereditary monarchy, with no right for the people to select a monarch, if a monarch is desired? Or while we have an hereditary aristocracy? Or while man has not the right of entry to the earth itself—save when the "free" citizen forms the central figure of a funeral procession? A real democracy is far more a social fact than a political one. When the people realise that much we shall be able to say "that a Democracy is at hand." Until that develops the political game

will be that of fooling the people to believe that we are a Democracy.

We should be delighted to learn whether the "Church Times" really considers that to have an established Church—selected centuries ago—with special privileges for which the public pay by force, and the forcing religious instruction in elementary schools, and that teaching to be a long, long way from what science knows to be the truth, is evidence of our being a democracy? Democracy really depends upon individual independence and freedom. How much of that have we to-day? How much are people striving to get it?

One of our readers, Mr. A. Hanson, wrote to each of the candidates in his Division:—

"In your opinion, does the return of the Labour Party (or whichever Party the candidate represents) mean increased power to the Church?"

We do not think the question is likely to draw many replies. Still, it will serve to note the intellectual quality of the candidates who receive the letter.

There is always a public for a new Life of Jesus, or stories about him, so we are not surprised to find one now on the bookstalls entitled "Stories of the Boy Jesus." Miss Entwistle has made her book both "daring and inevitable," says the Foreword—the daring part being the way in which the authoress, baffled by the "reticence" of the Gospels on the childhood of "our Lord," invented the "ideal" Child herself. All the same, we would have thought there was just as true material in the so-called Apocryphal Gospels as anything made up elsewhere. What about the beautiful story of the boy Jesus making mud birds with other children, but causing his to fly? And that other lovely thing, a door made by his "father" too small to fit the doorway made miraculously to stretch so that it did fit? There are plenty more, so we fail to see how Miss Entwistle was "inevitable."

All religious argument begins in folly and ends in confusion. Its folly was less apparent and its confusion less marked in an earlier age than our own. But to-day, the world has become too vast and too complex for the Deity it once honoured. A God who impresses one generation with his power, earns the indifference or the contempt of another by his impotence. And amid all the cant and folly of speech to which the war has given rise, there does emerge the single truth that it has caused many to check their religious beliefs by the grim facts of a world war. It is these who are realising how paltry and inadequate religious theories are when brought to the touchstone of reality. A God who does nothing is bad enough; still, one can treat him with the indifference he deserves. But a God with whom all the barbarity and cruelty of the world is part of a "plan" is horrible and demoralising. To realise that one were in the grip of such a being would unnerve the strongest. Fortunately, even religious people do not realise all that such a theory involves. They say that these things form part of the divine scheme of human betterment; they act as though no such scheme existed. And as to the Atheist, he is beset by no such nightmare. He sees the evil in the world, as also the good, and he sees both without misunderstanding. If he works without hope of help from the gods, he also works without fear of their displeasure. Human development is from the brute upward, and if there is enough of the brute still working in man to remind us of his origin, there is enough of the human active to inspire us to fresh efforts for its complete emancipation.

Here is a lament from the pulpit. It is from the Rev. H. Bett of Redford. He also has discovered that there was "a decreasing number of members in the churches," and, in fact, "the religious background had faded out." God had, in the past, "raised up such men as Wesley and Whitefield," but none of these were showing now. So the preacher goes on lamenting the low state of current religion. After all, the Christian superstition is running the course that has beset other religious systems, the only difference is that Christianity has to-day almost touched bottom.

A PAINFUL FICTION

"IT'S poor eating when the flavour lays i' the cruet," said George Eliot's delightful Mrs. Poyser at a supper party. It is a poor prospect for the reader when an author, faced with a subject fat with fascinating facts, needs the salad oil of fiction. This was the astonishing disposition of Howard Fast in writing "Citizen Tom Paine," published by John Lane at half a guinea.

One would have thought that Paine's life provided a narrative as good as "Robinson Crusoe," who had not attained his majority as a creation of fiction when Paine was born. Paine was a traveller; in a sense a castaway; he was resourceful; he was often in danger. The narrow escape from the guillotine which curiously enough, although Moncreu Conway gives it credence, this author ignores, was as much of a thrill as the sight of the footprint on the sand in Defoe's story. All this is not enough; invention is called for, in the view of Mr. Fast, and (to say at once what little good can be said of his book) his brain is fertile enough in this department.

Like the biographers of Shakespeare, following Nature, he abhors vacuums. Like those same biographers (my friend Cutner will agree) he fills in the gaps at any cost—to truth. Thus, whilst the evidence is in favour of Paine's father being a lovable parent, the Fast fiction is as follows:—

"Get thee to America, if thee will not work,' Paine's father told him when the boy was thirteen years old, and had had more than enough of schooling and dreaming and wandering in the lush fields of old Thetford and climbing in the ruins of the old castle and building castles of his own and thinking that childhood goes on for ever.

'Not stays,' he said stubbornly.

'And thee are one to say stays or not stays.'

'Not stays.'

'And thee know another trade, thee stubborn, ill-mannered ill-weaned whelp.'

There follows a somewhat salacious passage wherein we read of the thirteen-year-old boy trying on the stays of a Mrs. Hardy who "weighed two hundred pounds . . . most of it in midriff and above . . . a bosom like the heathered hills of Scotland and a belly that had a given passage to more ale than the Dog's Head Inn."

Giving passage to drink is unconscious humour of the author. He has given passage to it to such an extent that in the course of his two hundred and fifty pages Paine appears forty times in an inebriated condition! "Once, for ten days, he had only enough control of himself to crawl down to the tavern for more brandy." Really, on his showing, the title of the book might have been "The Seditious Sot," "A Fuddler for Freedom," or "The Democratic Drunkard." What a pity Mr. Fast did not flourish a hundred years ago! Then he might have got George Cruikshank—whose "Worship of Bacchus" was perhaps the first notable picture to confront my infant eyes—to design the dust cover. As it is, it represents a figure somewhat suggestive of Daniel Quilp or the gentleman who once used Pear's soap and since then had used no other.

This leads me to the dirt. Nineteen times it is suggested that Paine was badly in need of a bath! There is no thought of making any allowance for the habits of the time. One of the most quoted remarks of Dr. Johnson was that he had no passion for clean linen. When he found a bathroom in a house he inquired of his host if he was well. "Yes," was the reply. "Well," said Johnson, "let well alone; I hate immersion." No doubt when John Wesley said that cleanliness was next to godliness he wanted to give the bath a boost. Furthermore, when William Blake meets Paine—the brief encounter is well embroidered by Mr. Fast's imagination—he is not only fuddled but foul in his songs. J. M. Robertson reminded us that:—

"This was a time when Pitt was more or less drunk after dinner on perhaps most days of his life; and though hard

drinking was then, in England at least, extremely common, and Pitt had been a heavy drinker from his youth, the coincidence suggests that to some extent, in Pitt's case as in Paine's, gnawing care may have been at the bottom of the habit."

Our author seeks no such extenuation, though indeed he does make Paine when "perched on a chair" say "I am drunk—drunk but inspired."

Yet I am loath to believe that this is deliberate debunking. There are passages that put Paine in a favourable light. For instance, at a Congress dinner, Hemming says: "What he has seen and suffered should be an inspiration for all of us." When Monroe questions the wisdom of publishing "The Age of Reason"—how axiomatic it is that all such publications to these people are untimely!—its author is made to exclaim:—

"When have I been wise? Was it wise to throw my fortune with a pack of farmers the world knew defeated before ever they began to fight? Was it wise for me to cry out for independence before any of your great men at home had dared to conceive the notion? Was it wise for me to give a revolutionary credo to England and then have to flee for my life? Was it wise for me to spend ten months under the shadow of the guillotine? I have been many things but never prudent, never wise. That's for heroes and great men, not for a staymaker."

What then is the explanation of "Citizen Tom Paine"? It should be noted that it first appeared in New York in 1943. No doubt the author thought a dramatic vivid presentation—these qualities cannot be denied—of a well known Anglo-American was a good hit with a war on. Perhaps he knew very little about him—it is remarkable that there is not a line of Preface retailing the sources that were tapped. It was a hurriedly painted portrait, with an amusing indifference to facts. Napoleon converses with Paine; through confused chronology Burke hobnobs with him *after* the publication of "The Rights of Man"; the latter's associates are twice said to have included agnostics, although the word was coined by Huxley a hundred years later; we are told that in England the penalty for poaching was to be drawn asunder by horses. If Paine could be summoned from the vasty-deep—following Ingersoll according to "Psychic News"!—he might reasonably say of Mr. Fast perhaps it was right to dissemble his love, but why must he be so unfair? The answer if candidly given, might well be that drunkenness is more piquant than sobriety. Also here was perhaps a way of escape against the slings and arrows of outraged orthodoxy. Why turn a spot-light on the author of "The Age of Reason" it might be asked. What does it matter if the light is made to reveal a drunken and disorderly Paine? could be the answer of the writer.

Fusing fact with fiction in attempts at biographical depiction is a modern fashion that appeals to those unfortunate people who find no flavour in genuine history. There was Bechoffer Roberts's "This Side Idolatry" (Dickens); Maurois's "Ariel" (Shelley); Robert Graves's "Wife to Mr. Milton"; and Neil Bell's "So Perish the Roses" (Lamb). The last, for most of his life, had the weakness ascribed to Paine. There is a delicious letter in which Elia describes his being brought home from a party pick-a-back, "on the bat's back I did fly merrily," he said. Supposing Neil Bell had made the latter drunk once in every six pages of his book? Then the respectable organs of literary opinion would have fallen upon the author as a damned denigrator. But what does it matter about Paine? Very little, except to left-wing organs like "Tribune" where Mr. Fast was properly dealt with. The Editor of this journal has given the explanation in his admirable little book on Paine just published: Paine wrote "The Age of Reason."

Although it does not appear on the title-page, the British Museum cataloguer has described the book under review as a

novel. I am glad of it. Future investigators may here find warning to avoid Fast, and to consult Moncure Conway, Robertson, Leslie Stephen, Cohen, Hesketh Pearson. I recall what Samuel Pepys once said of a sermon on original sin to which he listened at the Church of St. Olave, Hart Street, alas, now but a shell; it was understood neither by the preacher nor the public—"I could wish he had let it alone." This exactly represents my feeling about this book on Thomas Paine.

W. KENT.

ONCE I WAS BLIND

I AM a business man. I use my reason in every transaction. I have signed and sealed documents regarding all my properties. I carefully check in all my stocks. I carefully check up on my bank pass book every month. I have Accountants to see that all is correct, I leave nothing to faith or chance.

Yet, for over forty years I had faith. I believed I would be alive when dead. I thought a mansion in the skies was mine for just the asking. I thought three times one was one (the trinity). I believed a God made the world in six days. I believed a loving God drowned a world, covered a man with boils, and placed a man in the stinking belly of a fish for three days and nights. I believed in miracles, in the feeding of five thousand with a few loaves and fishes. I believed that the Creator of the universe found pleasure in having His only son born in a cattle shed. I believed in a Holy Ghost. I believed that the Great I Am was jealous of all the other little gods of stone and gold. I thought the Creator of the wide and open spaces would only meet me inside brick buildings called churches. I believed a hundred other illogical things. Why? Because I was blind.

To-day, thanks to "The Freethinker," etc., I have eyesight. I use my reason. I believe nothing that I cannot prove. My faith has vanished, as I now see that faith is bunk. I am a happy man. I am an honest man with myself and my neighbour. I do not fear death. I am not worried about anything, knowing man is himself to blame for being so stupid, and thus wrecking his own life.

J. A. FREEMAN.

CORRESPONDENCE

EVOLUTION PAST AND PROCEEDING.

Str.—Animals communicate with each other, or with mankind, by sounds, which often show much intelligence. But it is speech, with its concomitant of writing, which has made man the "lord of creation." And who can foretell what fresh ground may be broken up, and what discoveries made by human evolution? Meanwhile in this stage of scientific revelation, religion is still being taught as divine revelation, and the minds of the young in their most susceptible age, are being impregnated by ignorant and very varied forms of superstition, including belief in miracles, etc. The one step in advanced thought taken by the Christian Churches, State or Free, is that they now consign miracles to the past. They apparently all agree in ruling out modern miracles!—Yours, etc.,

MAUD SIMON.

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OBITUARY

JOSEPH JOHN DARBY.

With sorrow we have to announce the death of Joseph John Darby, which took place on June 12 after a long and painful illness. Joseph John Darby will be well known to London Freethinkers as a speaker from N.S.S. platforms in and around London for many years. He was sound to the core in his Free-thought principles, ever ready for duty and made many friends by his warm-hearted and genial disposition. The remains were interred in Islington Cemetery on June 18, when a tribute to his character and work for the movement was read by the General Secretary of the N.S.S.

R. H. R.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Report of Executive Meeting held June 20, 1945

The President, Mr. Chapman Cohen, in the Chair.

Also present: Messrs. Clifton, Griffiths, Ebury, Lupton, Horowitz, Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Quinton, and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. Monthly Financial Statement presented. Report of the Annual Conference proceedings submitted. Messrs. Clifton, A. C. Rosetti, and Mrs. Quinton were re-elected as the Benevolent Fund Committee. Lecture reports and arrangements for provincial lectures were dealt with and correspondence from Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff, Chester-le-Street and London, given the necessary attention. The Secretary gave a brief report of proceedings at the International Freethought Federation Committee Meeting. A number of minor items were dealt with and the meeting closed.

R. H. ROSETTI, General Secretary.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Sunday, 12 noon, Mr. L. EBURY. Parliament Hill Fields, 3.30 p.m., Mr. L. EBURY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m., various speakers.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, 11 a.m., Dr. J. C. FLUGEL, D.Sc.: "War Mind and Peace Mind."

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Car Park, Broadway).—Sunday, 6.30 p.m., Mr. HAROLD DAY, and various speakers.

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (Mound).—Sunday, 7.30 p.m., Mrs. M. WHITEFIELD will lecture.

Kingston-on-Thames Branch N.S.S. (Kingston Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. W. BARKER will lecture.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platt Fields).—Sunday, 3 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture.

WANTED.—House, urgently required (to let or buy) in Birmingham or near, preferably South district, but not essential. Write: Mr. Norman Fowler, 19, Falconhurst Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham. Can any Freethinker assist a fellow Freethinker?

THAT'S THE HUMOUR OF IT

I.

THE capacity of Scotsmen to make or see a joke is often a subject of humorous argument. Outbreak of war in 1939 provided a test of Scots' capacity for risibility. The Scottish Church appointed a Commission to Interpret *God's Will* in the Present Crisis.

If that mouthful and the implications thereof did not set all Scots grinning then they have no sense of humour. It is enough to make a cat laugh.

On similar lines the names of religious bodies all sound comic. The Roman Catholic Church is a ticklish contradiction in terms which becomes more involved the more its protagonists try to explain it, as does the Trinity, supposed to be monotheism.

Among the Protestant sects queer and absurd titles pop up like Jacks-in-the-Box. Lutherans, Wesleyans, Brownists, Swedenborgians, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Independents, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Fundamentalists: they roll off the tongue as unctuously as their ministers talk.

Older sects, Antinomians, Anabaptists, Pelagians, Arians; they leave us wondering, gasping a little.

No less mirth-provoking are Salvation Army—why not Salvation Navy or Salvation Air Force?—and the newer offshoots of Christianity, as International Bible Students Association, now Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Plymouth Brethren, Exclusive Brethren, Particular Baptists, Peculiar People, Reorganised Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventists, Elim Four Square Gospel, Christadelphians; while Quakers bring to mind Shakers and Holy Rollers.

God! What a list! It is nowhere near complete. Omar Khayyam was modest when he wrote of "The two-and-seventy jarring sects."

All of them are supposed to be worshipping the true god. One can only quote the quatrain famous in the 1914-18 European War, made funnier by the "Daily News" primly and piously refusing to print it on the grounds it was blasphemous:—

"God heard the embattled nations sing and shout,
God strafe England and God save the King:
God this, God that, and God the other thing.
Good God! said God, I've got my work out out!"

II.

Bibliolatry is the most humourous form of idolatry. A statue or an image represents a single concept, although those of Indian deities attain considerable complexity of form and detail, but that is characteristic of Indian art. More often idols are simple, like the worshippers.

Whereas the Bible can be interpreted in as many ways as there are readers of it, and a few more beside.

Nevertheless the whole book exudes unconscious humour. Sensibly children have sized upon one of its legends as a jolly game, the Noah's Ark.

The tortured rimes and twisted rhythms and platitudinous aspirations of hymns are delight to anyone with a taste for verbal felicities.

Prayer books are scarcely less amusing. No Christian is able to define the difference in principle between reciting from a printed prayer book and the Tibetan method of inserting written prayers in a cylinder to be revolved by hand, or coupled to a windmill or waterwheel for perpetual turning and so utterance of the prayers. Simplest would be to hold the printed volume of prayers up to Heaven and say: "Here, God, are the prayers. Take them and read the appropriate ones yourself."

That should be an easy matter for an Almighty God to do.

As an entertainment the Anglican Book of Common Prayer repays study. The quaint medieval language as well as thoughts, and the relics of dead controversies buried like fossils in its pages are charming. One delicious sample must suffice, from the Athanasian Creed:—

"The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible . . . as also there are not three incomprehensibles . . . but one incomprehensible."

That is why we know so much about him, or them, is the only comment to make.

Those in pursuit of similar diversions should read the lives of the saints, devotional literature, and the periodicals issued by the innumerable religious organisations.

III.

Yet most of the above lack the human interest which the majority of people demand in their humour. For that one has to look upon the orders of bishops, priests and deacons; with attention to the thousandfold subdivisions, ranging from popes and cardinals and archbishops down to acolytes.

"Here's an acre sown indeed,
With the richest royalest seed."

Particularly the seed of merriment.

Sometimes it is vainly asked whether or not the priests can keep straight faces when they meet in private, or are there broad smiles at the innocence of the lambs they fleece so often?

Contrarily one marvels how the laity keep straight faces at the performances of priests, parsons and pastors.

It is recorded of the great and terrible Earl of Chatham that when he met a bishop he bowed till his nose was between his knees. Additionally to the magnificent satire this must have been to hide the breadth of the smile provoked by the billowy lawn sleeves and coloured robes, leaving a witch-doctor of Central Africa surpassed.

Actors, variety artistes and clowns know the mirth-inducing power of grotesque attire. Likewise we laity are entitled to the minimum of a smile at the tonsure—not to mention genuflexions and affected voices—biretta, cassock, surplice, bands, chasuble, cowl and the gallimaufry of other strangely named vestments sported by monks, nuns, bishops, priests, ministers and pastors of the army of parasites imposing themselves upon us.

A. R. WILLIAMS.

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