

THE FREETHINKER

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VIEWES AND OPINIONS

History and Christianity

It will be remembered that when the war began it was said that England was a Christian country. The King said it, the Prime Minister said it, and, of course, the Churches said it, and they all tried to bring it into practice. The first step was to have a day of prayer. Nothing happened; then came a week of prayer. Again, nothing happened. Then a week's non-stop prayer was tried. Still nothing happened. The clergy continued to pray in public. The people, for the most part, just smiled. Never was there so much praying. But the blow to the religious came when a pact was made with "Atheist Russia," a country which had no official religious head, and had declared that a country would be the better without religion. Things went worse—religiously—when "Atheist Russia" entered on a twenty years' agreement with Christian England, although one of the oaths taken by the King was to protect the Christian religion.

The war ended, but disasters did not cease. There was on foot an obvious movement against the Churches. It was plain in the homeland and it was equally noticeable with our Armed Forces. The number in these—male and female—who declined any religion, grew steadily, even the professional humbugs of the B.B.C. could not deny it. Men wrote themselves down as Atheists, or "No religion."

All this marked a very great advance on the Freethought position in spite of the insistent lie that truth and justice must rest on a religious base. The Churches were being driven to recognise that "the lie in the mouth of the priest" does not run quite so freely as it once did. The old saying that while it is possible to fool some of the people all the time, you cannot hope to fool all the people all the time, was justified. However much truth may be bedraggled in the mire of religion, sooner or later it will find expression.

The note of alarm struck by the authoritative document, "Towards the Conversion of England," appears to have affected the larger part of the preachers of all denominations. The Commission itself led the way with a plain statement that:—

"There can be no doubt that there is a wide and deep gulf between the Church and the people. Reports testify with one voice the fact of a wholesale drift from organised religion . . . Pulpit teaching can no longer be relied on . . . you cannot convert people who are not there."

There are other indications in the booklet mentioned, but the remarkable thing is the degree to which preachers, other than those of the established Church, realise that the mere denunciation of Atheism is useless. Atheism and general unbelief were too common to be affected that way.

That is admitted by the dropping of the old fashioned lie that an Atheism which did not exist has lost its power. The admission is that "a wide and deep gulf" divides the believers in God and the multitudes of unbelievers. Besides, once an Atheist always an Atheist. No man, short of a sheer loss of mental balance, can outgrow Atheism. The religionist who comes forward sufficiently to reach Atheism has entered a one-way road. Atheism is not like wearing a particular kind of clothing which one may discard at any moment, it is a definitely developed attitude of mind which remains as long as mental health persists.

It is for that reason I pay little attention to the shrieks of those professional gentlemen who cry out as though religion was in its death throes. If that were the case we would expect that a certain number of professional Christians would proclaim themselves as Atheists. But if we cannot accept in full their stress on the alleged weakness of religion, we may at least accept the attitude as a confession that with very large numbers of people religion has lost its hold.

Confessions

Here is a quotation from the "Church of England Newspaper," by the Rev. J. H. Ward:—

"During the last seventy years or so it has become possible for entirely respectable people to leave the Christian Church entirely out of opinions, practices and emotions, and to be entirely comfortable about it. . . Aren't we all perfectly well aware that for the vast mass of the people the open Church door means nothing, prayer mere childishness, and the worship of God an obscurantist survival of an outworn superstition. To the vast multitude man no longer comes trailing from God, he is the mere product of a biological urge. . . There is no Hereafter except that of dust and ashes."

I do not wonder that some philosophers have placed Christianity as belonging to the Pessimists. In fairness it should be said that whoever said so offered a reasonable explanation of their position. Mr. Ward just adds foolishness to impossibility and then pats himself on the back.

And here is another specimen from another preacher who writes in that very respectable and very religious journal "The Record." He is the Rev. D. R. Davies, and he says:—

"It is now universally admitted that England, which embraces Wales and Scotland, is no longer a Christian country in any sense of the term whatsoever. This statement can be further elaborated into the judgment that Western civilisation has also ceased to be Christian. Reduce the contents of the term 'Christian' to the thinnest, barest minimum, and it is still impossible to affirm that civilisation is Christian."

The only sense in which it can be contended that England is Christian is by sticking the label 'Christian' on ideas, beliefs, and values in which all Christian elements have long since been diluted out of existence. You surely cannot argue that a tank of water containing a thimbleful of whisky is correctly described as whisky. A publican who sold such a mixture as whisky would get into trouble. In brief, civilisation is no longer Christian in the traditional and only sense in which civilisation could be described as Christian."

We agree with this, but with certain considerations. The things of to-day are truly the outcome of yesterday. The law of cause and effect is as operative in human life and human actions as surely as in the falling of a rock down a mountain side. Man may not be always able to trace the causes of his own actions and foresee their remote consequences, but the play of cause and effect remains none the less unceasing.

But we cannot put the decay of the Christian religion as being due to the wickedness of the people. It is true that that is the form often taken; but the Christian religion is an historic fact, and the power exerted by the Churches is another historic fact. Atheists are not made because clergymen may be objectionable persons, they are more inclined to dislike the clergy because of their creed. And as clear-sighted men and women, they are concerned not so much whether clergy are good men, as whether they are honest ones. And here the clergy fail.

The first thing we have to bear in mind is that the Christian religion had its beginnings in the days of two great cultures—Greece and Rome. In the beginning of its history the Christian religion did not move very quickly, neither did it move very slowly. But from the outset the Church did show animus to both. It was antagonistic to new ideas, intolerant to all forms of religion save its own. Both Greece and Rome were tolerant of all religions. The Christian hated every religion but his own. The Roman motto was that the best religion a man could have was the religion of his own country.

Further evidence of the truth of what we have said is that when the Christian Church decided formally to kill people for religious offences—which might have included not being a Christian—it placed the matter on a strictly legal ground by creating the famous, or infamous, instrument of legal torture and killing, the Inquisition. There was no precedence in either Rome or Greece. Nor should it ever be forgotten that the first ten centuries of unbroken Christian rule have the historic title of "The Dark Ages."

On that head I may cite a few lines from a recently published and charming book, "The Creative Centuries," by H. J. Rendall. He says:—

"The Dark Ages were long ages. It was as long as the time between our first Edward and our seventh. Yet it invented nothing and created nothing. The Dark Ages were long ages and they deserved the name."

There is one other item that is also worth notice. Some four hundred years after the imagined birth of Jesus, the religion of Mohammedanism came to life. It inherited something of the ancient Egyptian learning, and much from the Greek and Roman cultures. More important, it gave Europe a place in civilisation. The dishonesties of

Christian tradition have done much to hide the debt Europe owes to the Mohammedans for our science and civilisation. The Church has always buried its sins deeply, and truthful tombstones have been very scarce.

Take now a step further and consider what good has been derived from the Christian Churches in the struggle of the people — the common people — for a better life. The established Church in this country has always been the protector of the few, and its chief duty was to keep people obedient. In every war we have had, even the wars that were fought against China to force opium on her, had the support of the Christian religion in this country.

I must stop here. I have already taken up too much space, but it will not do for men like the two I have quoted to be permitted to wipe their Churches clean of all responsibility for the last two world wars. That there were other factors is admitted, but even then war might have been avoided if the Churches—and the Governments of the day—had not used their influence against "Atheist" Russia. "There is blood on the hand . . ." Every reader will be able to fill in the missing words.

CHAPMAN COHEN

OTHER PEOPLE'S GODS

III. THE GOD OF SHAKESPEARE

TO the religious and the irreligious alike the ideas of William Shakespeare on the subject of a God must be of profound interest. Shakespeare is acknowledged to be one of the master-minds of humanity; and in spite of the fact that he has been over-eulogised, chiefly by professors and academic students (though Coleridge and other writers have also been extravagant in laudation) this fact is not to the point. One naturally seeks with eagerness to see what Shakespeare has to say about God.

Of course since the days when Bernard Shaw, a sensitive student and just appreciator of Shakespeare, protested against "Bardolatry," over-reverence has been at a discount everywhere. The quality of Shakespeare's thought as a whole is less deep than affection and admiration of his genius has led most of us to suppose. Indeed, as a thinker, Shakespeare, no less than the rest of writers, does "abide our question"—in spite of Matthew Arnold's dictum to the contrary. He remains, however, supreme poet and word-musician; a magic character-creator; a great dramatist, and a writer whom it is impossible not to love.

Now Birch, in his "Inquiry into the Philosophy and Religion of Shakespeare," maintains that Shakespeare was an Atheist, as Professor Dowden briefly notices. I have not read Birch's book is difficult to get. But I do not think Shakespeare was an Atheist. More exactly, he could be claimed to be a Freethinker, and indeed his name is included in Wheeler's "Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers" (a work needing improving and bringing up to date, by the way).

When I say that Shakespeare was a Freethinker I use the term in its wide—and I suggest its proper—sense. A Freethinker in this sense is one who is no more bound to irreligion than to religion; a free, that is an untrammelled, thinker on the two subjects of religion and irreligion, of theism and atheism. Indeed a Freethinker is one who holds himself free to think with his own head instead of feeling compelled to use other people's.

In attempting to classify Shakespeare, however, one must note that zealous partisans have "proved" him (to their own satisfaction if not to that of their cooler-headed fellow-partisans!) respectively a Roman Catholic, a true-blue Protestant, a real Democrat, and all that. By the same process of reasoning one could call Charles Bradlaugh "a true Christian."

in spirit" and Winston Churchill a Socialist-in-spite-of-himself. Such special pleading, however, is ridiculous. If Shakespeare is to be classified bond or free, religious or irreligious (or neither) the claim must rest on surer foundations than special-pleading of this type.

Another caution is necessary in Shakespeare's case. One must beware of attributing to any dramatic author as his own convictions, the sentiments he puts—properly and naturally—into the mouths of his characters. The "divinity that doth hedge a king" on the lips of Claudius, King of Denmark, does not mean an attachment to the current doctrine of "the divine right of kings" in Shakespeare's heart. But when the dramatist forcibly and unnaturally drags into the mouth of a Prince Hamlet emphatic views on over-acting, faulty elocution, and inopportune "gagging," we sense the personal resentment of an angry author who has suffered from these afflictions as no prince-spectator could. Here, indeed, we can say: "Shakespeare himself speaks."

With these cautions in mind, looking at Shakespeare's work for his God, what does one find? One thing has struck every candid inquirer, religious and irreligious alike. Although Shakespeare knows his Christian theology, whenever he might be expected to utter the words "Resurrection" or "Immortality" or "The After-Life," he abstains as no fervent believer could or would.

Nor does he merely abstain. He goes in the opposite direction. "The rest is silence" is his verdict on the dead Hamlet. Romeo sets up his "everlasting rest" with Juliet, not a re-union. Cordelia laments that poor Lear "will come no more, never, never, never, never." "Dead and rotten" is Shakespeare's verdict. Once dead, nothing remains but "to tell my story" as in Hamlet, to relate the heavy act with heavy heart, as in Othello. Never once did Shakespeare, like Robert Browning, preach of "other heights in other lives, God willing."

Over Shakespeare's own grave at Stratford-on-Avon is merely a plea—possibly his own, or if another's possibly reflecting his own wish—for non-exhumation. His corpse is to be undisturbed. There is no expressed hope of a glorious Resurrection. It is true that "for Jesu's sake" we are adjured to respect his dust. But that may be mere recognition of the most powerful deterrent word to accomplish his desire for an inviolate tomb.

Still more significant is the famous Hamlet-soliloquy on suicide. Shakespeare, not his Hamlet, talks in "no traveller returns," for Hamlet had seen the returned Ghost. And although the Queen makes Ophelia's death accidental, "an envious sliver broke," yet Shakespeare must tilt at the Church's treatment of dead suicides and drag in Elizabethan coroner's "quest-law to express his resentment, so Ophelia is a suicide. No Christian can treat the problem of "To be or not to be" as "a question": for Christians the question is answered in the affirmative.

If the very heart and soul of Christianity be the Resurrection doctrine, as St. Paul and others have argued, then Shakespeare was no Christian. Plainly he did not believe in it. Over and over again he struck the contrary note of "the end." Whoever speaks: Richard, Vincentio, Prospero, Claudio, Hamlet, Lear, Romeo, and the rest, the word is always finality.

In Shakespeare's time the most religious folk were the Puritans. His numerous reference to them, as Sir Sidney Lee points out, are invariably discourteous. Naturally—considering they persecuted stage-players and stage-authors. Indeed, gentle Shakespeare was as rude to Puritans as gentle Jesus to Pharisees. But Shakespeare could speak feelingly of "sweet religion" and his mind was mystical rather than materialistic.

Certainly he was no conventional religionist. For dramatic purposes he constantly broke the Third Commandment, "taking God's name in vain," often unnecessarily and on the most trifling occasions. Equally, he availed himself of God and Christian doctrine as serious invocations on serious occasions. But what is this after all but using God as a stage-property and

using the audience's standard of values, for he was equally willing to use "the gods" as God for his immediate stage purpose. Those inclined to argue from a serious employment of God that Shakespeare therefore believed in one might reflect that equally he must have believed in a multiplicity of gods!

Of God, Shakespeare has nothing original to say. He uses the conventional ideas, but not one such usage shows that his God was a burning reality in which he personally believed. God, Jesus, the Angels, Purgatory, were all useful to him, but he said nothing about any of them that matters.

* This is indeed disappointing. Here is the master-mind, the myriad-minded, the rarest spirit of those who "steer humanity," and he appears to be so little interested in his God as to have nothing significant or new to say. Was his God-concept only a stage-property? It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Shakespeare was either an unbeliever or a half-believer—I will not say disbeliever, for there is no evidence of that as in his fellow-dramatist, Kit Marlowe's case.

One cannot believe that the man Shakespeare had nothing worth hearing on the subject in him. Why was he silent? Well, Shakespeare personally may have been an armigerous gentleman, but professionally as an actor-author he was legally "a rogue and a vagabond" with a censor-Church watching for heresy, blasphemy, atheism, and the like. Marlowe only escaped his prosecution by dying. This may be the explanation.

To sum it up. Shakespeare's God is a wooden image, a theatrical "prop" and no more. A thing of shreds and patches, a tale borrowed by a literary craftsman full of sound and fury signifying nothing! He can mean little to the student of Shakespeare. Perhaps he meant little to Shakespeare himself.

C. G. L. DU CANN.

REPLY TO LIBEL

IT was never my intention to write any serious reply to Miss Oxburgh's viperish condemnation of my attitude towards Field-Marshal Montgomery. Unfortunately, her hero-worship of the Field-Marshal has led her to libel me in a most vicious manner for what she appears to have mistaken for my attitude.

I am blatantly accused of narrow-mindedness, bigoted views, and a collection of vices which I declare to be the antagonistic concoction of a destructive critic.

I deny having written any words which could have cast an aspersion on the quality of Viscount Montgomery's generalship. I only indicated that Patton was a *greater soldier*.

I noted the indisputable fact that his men hated his religious policy. I am "answered" by being told that they all admired his generalship! How long has admiration of a man's capacity for his job been a condonation of a hatred for his religious bigotry?

Miss Oxburgh condemns Patton for what she might well have described as his Quixotish style. The judgment of a man's character should not be based on what might have happened as a result of his actions, but on what did actually happen. Had the Spanish knight destroyed the windmills, he would not have been held up in ridicule to future generations.

I did not deny that Lord Montgomery believed in the strength and the skill of his men, I only suggested that to howl psalms to some deity for what those men had done was sacrilegious. I held up Patton as being less puritanical and more manly.

Finally, I put it to my readers who must judge between me and my erroneous critic, that any person "with the gift of the gab" could have, as Miss Oxburgh did, given a completely twisted and almost unrecognisable version of what I wrote; and that anyone with a twisted enough mental outlook could have misinterpreted an honest criticism of a great general into an instrument with which to praise him to the skies.

FRANCIS I. GOULD.

ACID DROPS

Europe—or a very large part of it—is starving. The different nations are doing what they can to help, and only the minority would complain if their own rations were short. And there are the Pope and his followers praying that their people will give what they can to help. But above and beyond ordinary folks, there is the "Holy Mother" and the "holy saints," who can perform miracles almost enough to stagger the most hard-shelled unbeliever, and they are doing nothing. That is surprising enough in itself. But the astonishing fact, and a proof of the demoralising result of over doses of supernaturalism, is that people can still go on their knees and thank God for giving them the "courage" to help starving men, women and children. Perhaps some may find comfort in a favourite remark of a friend, "Thank God, there isn't any."

Exactly how religious the Germans are can be seen from the report made by a New York lawyer, Mr. T. Dengler, who has spent six months in Berlin. In the American zone, with a population of 17,500,000, over 90 per cent. attendance at the churches was recorded, and there is a great demand for Bibles, prayer books, catechisms, etc. That the Nazi high-ups wanted to put the Churches in their place is quite true, but the vast majority of the German people were always religious. During the war every attempt was made to show that the Nazi onslaught on civilisation was due to the German people being "materialistic." Now every attempt is made to show that they are all good Christians—and in fact always were. We agree.

We are not certain whether the U.S.A. preachers are more artful than our preachers, or that American citizens are more easily taken in than we are. At any rate, the Rev. J. W. Hamilton, of Florida, has arranged a large stretch of ground where men may park their cars and hear "divine service" while sitting in their cars. The parson calls it a "pray and park" movement. The only condition is that the cars must be so placed that room is left for a collection. The parson says he is doing well.

"With indignation," writes a correspondent in the "Sunday Dispatch," "and healthy disgust, I read of vast sums being given to restore churches damaged by air raids. I have yet to read of someone giving a few thousands towards new houses for bombed-out people. Some cities are so full of churches which no one attends, that it would have been impossible not to hit one in a raid. The man who gives money to rebuild a church when thousands of his brothers are homeless is, in my opinion, a heathen and guilty of rank heresy." We agree with everything here, and indeed we have said the same thing over and over again in these columns—except the last few words—which are most insulting to both the heathen and the heretic. Surely the people who prefer to repair a church rather than a bombed house are genuine Christians!

Our Lady of Lourdes seems to have behaved very shabbily to Mgr. Choquet, the Bishop of Lourdes. For two years he had suffered ill-health, and he died the other day at the age of 58. Here was a God-given chance to show the world that miracles do take place at Lourdes, and the Bishop could have worked one in his own case. Yet "our Lady" allows the poor man to die. Perhaps, however, a miracle has been shown in the mysterious way in which God always moves!

One of the cowardly and lying statements of the Catholic Church appeared in the "Catholic Times" of May 3. It ran thus: "The greatest obstacle to people joining the Church is that it would stop them leading a certain kind of life." That is the most damnable passage we have seen for some time. We do not know the figures for the number of Roman Catholics in prison, but for many years the proportion of Catholic prisoners stood well to the front. We challenge "Catholic Times" to publish the numbers of Roman Catholic offenders, and occupying prisons compared with any other body in the country. The "Great lying Church" is true to its historic character.

The Committee of Churches has solemnly announced to the world that it has to solve the problems created by the discovery of atomic energy. Well, we never imagined that the Church could solve the problem. Nor does it even come within the scope of the Christian Churches to do so. But what the atomic energy has done is to prove that not one of the world's religious bodies can do anything towards making countries sufficiently civilised to turn atomic energy into a blessing instead of a curse. Not one nation can trust the other to act decently when an end can be gained by brutality and murder. All the talk of the value of religion falls to pieces when we remember that the nations that threaten another world war are those that have been soddened with religion for nearly 2,000 years.

Mr. W. Butler—evidently a Christian—finds himself shocked that the Churches can do nothing with regard to the atomic bomb. He is shocked by their being unable to offer an alternative. He asks, "What would Jesus do in a similar case?" Now we like fair play even with parsons, and one would like to know why blame the clergy? As to Jesus, we can only surmise that if he retained the same mentality that led him to perform his miracles, and his contests with the devils inside the pigs, he would call the evil spirits out of the atomic bomb, and after some bargaining, cast them out and arrange for them to take possession of Freethought societies.

The Catholic Church has had to face a great many setbacks of late. Its chance of forming some sort of coalition with Rome is gone. Then in Poland, the outlook is black, and at any rate it is not likely to retain its old position. Its best chance for the moment is Germany, where by playing the kind father it hopes to get a solid hold on that country. But the latest setback has come with the Commonwealth movement, which once coquetted with the Vatican. Now the Vatican has taken a serious attitude and indicates that "The Commonwealth" is forming some form of Communism, and in addition it has favoured "no compulsion of teachers at religious services or classes." That, says the "Catholic Times," means abolishing religious teaching. The poor Father in God!

"Paquin" of the Catholic "Universe" explains to his brother priests why men should raise their hats to women. He finds there "is something special and holy about a woman." We haven't noticed it. There are, of course, differences, or if "Paquin" prefers it, specialities, but the difference of woman from man is really not greater than the differences of man from woman; and after all it is a fifty-fifty chance whether a child be male or female, and one is as necessary as the other. "Paquin" also decides that the adoration of woman rests upon "Our Lady." But that "lady" is only met by a few favoured people and never appears under conditions that are not open to doubt, and are of no greater cause for treating the "Vision" of a woman as a miracle than a doctor has for finding something supernatural in the visions of a man who sees an elephant running up the wall of his bedroom.

In the same journal a reader inquires how old was "our Lady" when she died. No one knows; she disappeared after the execution of her son and Paul, Peter, John and James never mention her. That was very scurvy treatment of God's mother, but perhaps silence was best.

The Rev. Ronald Thompson of Burton-on-Trent says that God's cry in every age is "Wanted: A Man." We are not surprised that God is now advertising for a man; his first effort in man-making was not very encouraging. The situation was only mended by the wit and courage of a woman. She and Satan did manage to set the race on the line of inquisitiveness. If, as Mr. Thompson says, God is constantly crying out for a "man," why does he evidently has not managed to find one or create one, why does he retire from business and let man alone have a try?

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

Please note, readers ordering cloth copies of "God and Me," that supplies are expected shortly and will be forwarded in rotation.

Mrs. R. RICHIE.—Thanks for letter. We try—so far as space in the "Freethinker" permits—to hold as level a head as we can.

A. W. ARCHER.—The use of an affirmation in place of a religious oath is a legal right in any case. There is very little bother now made in any court.

C. H. WATERS.—The shifting of professed interest of our leading clerics in social affairs is in itself an illustration of the decline of interest in Christianity. The aim is not so much a desire to improve social life as it is to cover the fact of the declining interest in the Churches. By hook or by crook, but mainly by crook, the Churches are making their last stand.

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1, 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 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1, by the first post on Monday, or they will not be inserted.

SUGAR PLUMS

Members of the N.S.S. attending the Annual Conference at Bradford on Whit-Sunday, June 9, should give immediate attention to the following items and, where applicable, send their requirements to the General Secretary, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1: (1) Hotel accommodation, giving date of arrival and departure; (2) Conference luncheon; (3) Seats for a coach trip it is hoped to arrange for Whit-Monday. Early attention not only makes for easy working but will also avoid disappointments.

An Oxford "scientist," Dr. Sherwood Taylor, has been adding an account of his conversion to Romanism to those of Jews and others, and we are not surprised that in his case he had made a study of "Huxley and the various Victorian rationalists." The result of his reading was that he believed neither in the Christian revelation, nor in the existence of God. He was quite sure, though, that "there was something worth knowing and it could not be told by science." We can only say that if Dr. Taylor had come to the conclusion after reading the Victorian rationalists—and particularly Huxley—he could never have understood what he was reading. However, he added to his confusion the study of spiritualism, Buddhism, Theosophy, Hime's Essays, and Alchemy; and eventually found peace in the arms of the Church. Perhaps he would have done better had he taken smaller doses.

The result of all this wandering is a delightfully naive announcement. Dr. Taylor now says, "There is one Church and I am in it. I am no more likely to criticise the Church than I am likely to criticise my own mother." He is a flawless example of the way the Church can kill every scrap of independent thinking. We have an idea that Dr. Taylor would have been specially welcomed by the Hitlers and Mussolinis—of whom it need hardly be said the Church always had a plentiful supply.

A sentence that caught our eye while looking through some religious papers was that "whatever some people may say there are millions and millions of men and women who cannot stand without God." We admit that taking things broad and deep that may be true, even if we read God in its right meaning that given the chance to steal, or illuse those under their control, etc., they cannot be trusted with complete freedom. We are afraid we must grant that much, and that appears to be the reason why prisons exist. But we do not think that it is quite fair to put all people, even all Christians, under that head. If the writer is correct, it seems that every Christian of that type ought to wear a badge, covered in big letters, "We are Christians. Look after your movable properties." But we do not think that Christians are quite as bad as the clergy would have us believe.

We were glad to see that one of the speakers before the Town Council of Blackburn was Mr. Clayton, who claimed to represent the National Secular Society and "a vast number of people in the town who wished to have Sunday entertainments." Mr. Clayton appears to have made a very reasonable plea for Sunday freedom. But, according to the report in the Blackburn paper, a very "noisy minority" tried to do what they could to prevent him being heard. That uproar may be taken as a very good sample of the amount of fair play which would be given by the majority of Christians if they could have their way. We congratulate Mr. Clayton on the useful bit of work he did.

We were pleased also to see in the "Gorton Reporter" a summary, apparently a very fair one, of an interesting address delivered by Mr. McCall before the Droyden Discussion Group. What appears to be a very fair summary of the address was published, and all for the better, the address was followed by a "live discussion." That is all for the good.

We are glad to note that opinion is rising against the B.B.C. and its championship of the most stupid forms of the Christian religion, while sternly denying even the more liberal forms of religion a hearing. In "The Times" was published:—

"We have no objection to the traditionalist being given the chance to state his case by the B.B.C. or through any other medium, but the constant presentation of traditionalism in religion and morals by the B.B.C. is difficult to understand. . . In these days we may all with profit remember the words of Thomas Paine, 'He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.'"

We have for many years constantly asked all that is asked here. The B.B.C. is a monopoly and ever since that number one bigot, Sir John Reith, planted himself—or was planted by his friends in power—the B.B.C. has followed a course of declining to permit anything that would tend to expose the most ignorant form of the Christian creed. But the question of renewing the monopoly enjoyed by the B.B.C. will come before Parliament, and it would be a good move if all interested were to worry their members to raise a protest against the conduct of so deadly an organisation. Avowedly the B.B.C. takes the most ignorant form of the State religion for its use. This question might also serve as a test of how the present Government has the courage to act as liberty-loving people would have them act. They might even take a hint from Thomas Paine as a guide.

A released soldier, who signs himself "T.P.W.," gives his experience with Church Parade in the Army. He says: "The powers responsible for abolishing Church Parades in the Services are performing a good work. During my twelve and a-half years in the Army instead of being a parade for good it was a means of bringing out obscene language during the Saturday afternoon devoted to polishing up for the Sunday's Church Parade." But "T.P.W." forgets that the purpose is not so much for the benefit of the men as to keep alive at home the belief that the church services are beloved by the men who are better for the parade. Its abolition should come soon if our Government is bold enough to defy the churches. That requires some real courage.

WHAT THE CATHOLICS ARE AFTER

PROFESSOR HAROLD LASKI writing recently in the "Daily Herald" on the question of Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party (extracts from a pamphlet to be published shortly) selected the trite heading, "What the Communists Are After," in order to present arguments for keeping the Communists out of the Labour Party.

I am not here concerned with the pros and cons of the affiliation dispute, however. That is a question which will be finally settled one way or another according to the extent to which the Labour Party as a whole regards Communists as a desirable or undesirable element.

But I am concerned that while so much time is spent in discussion of the "Communist menace" by the main progressive party in this country, there is at the same time a deliberate "hush hush" attitude regarding the Roman Catholic menace in progressive politics. At least it can be said for the Communist Party that it shares with the Labour Party the fundamental principle that Socialism must be achieved by way of Materialism, and that whatever differences exist the ultimate aims are similar.

That, however, certainly cannot be said of the Roman Catholic creed, which detests materialism of any sort (except its own) whether it be political, economic or scientific materialism, and which never sleeps in its endeavours to corrupt and ruin the movements which favour materialism.

Hence I have the feeling that Professor Laski (for whom I have a high regard) missed his way in using space and time to deal with "What the Communists are After" before he had dealt at least as effectively with "What the Catholics are After." Indeed, his article in the "Daily Herald" could very well have been left as it was, with the substitution of the word Catholic in place of Communist, and he would have performed a more useful task for his party.

Professor Laski, re Communists, emphatically asserts that:—

"In our party organisations and in the party as a whole there can be no place for any groups or sections, for any hostile anti-party nests. Where such nests appear they must be purged (horrid word) mercilessly . . . Obviously the assumption is that one aim can be announced and another aim practised."

And so on. Now this may or may not be true. Not having delved deeply into the question I cannot say. But even if it be true, and if the policy of repudiation be justified, how much more true is it of the Catholic Church within the Labour Party, and how much more justified would be a policy of Catholic repudiation. Yet on that Laski is silent—though I feel he knows perhaps even more than I know about such matters.

The Labour Party is rife with groups and sections, and anti-party or hostile "nests" of Roman Catholics. So is the trade union movement, so is the Co-operative Movement. Priest-ridden nests of men and women—tiny minorities where they are proportionate, larger minorities where success has made them disproportionate—who carry back for consideration by the Church, and from the Church's point of view, all the activities of the progressive movements; who plot and scheme under the influence of a most fanatical religion to alter the course of materialistic socialism so that the flow of the social stream shall be turned from the firm river bed of materialist progress into the squelchy, treacherous, boglands of the crudest of Christian superstitions, wherein every mark of culture and every piece of materialistic science may be sucked down into the depths.

To reply that the Catholics are not a political party within a party is not to answer the point. The Catholic element in the Labour Party is like a head (and a cunning head, too) without a body. It lacks the political body simply because it lacks numbers, but it has discovered that so spineless and de-principled

are many Labour leaders that it can do better without the body than with it.

Father Ronald Knox made this clear (if it needed making clear) in "The Catholic Herald" recently, when, advocating Catholic activity in social and political movements, he said Catholics were "still a long way off from being in any position to count as a single political force, therefore their Protestant friends may take comfort from the admission if they are disposed to be frightened of us." The insolent Catholic approach is well exemplified in the words, "if they are disposed to be frightened of us." Father Knox apparently has many a good laugh up his black sleeve at the boneless wonders of "progress" who can be so easily given the jitters by a genuflection; or at the dehydrated democrats who are transfixed by a crucifix.

Yet, while Knox admits they are so few in number, and while the Catholic Press openly brags about the big percentage of influential posts they hold, and while the Vatican steers policy along the lines of blackest reaction, we can be regaled with a Communist "scandal" that screams from Labour paper headlines while the Catholic menace is heard of only as a distant rumble, much muffled, and only audible because a few wild and bolder spirits can shout above the crowd.

Again I am not taking sides in the affiliation argument, but one wonders if the strength of the Catholic "nest" within the Labour Party is such that its sheer hatred of the U.S.S.R. has had an infectious effect upon the rest! They seem to be able to get away with anything.

For instance, who told R. R. Stokes, the Catholic Labour M.P., to go to the Vatican for the Cardinals' Circus? He was, of course, perfectly free to go in a private capacity as a Catholic, but to suggest on his return that he thought it desirable that the British House of Commons should be represented there was a piece of classical impudence probably unparalleled in a Protestant country.

Also, it is to be hoped that the Leeds Labour progressives next time a Catholic grant of public money is being considered will recall Councillor Bertha Quin's opposition to a birth control clinic grant, and show her that they are not much impressed by the Catholic Hell, which can "rock with laughter when such a thing is called racial progress."

It is to be hoped, too, that the intervention of Cardinal Griffin on the State health scheme will be duly noted as typifying the Catholic approach—public money with "perfect freedom" for private people to do as they please with it; that is, freedom to do as they please so long as they do as they are told by Rome, which has a "policy" even for Catholic hospitals. This plea is typical of the Catholic educational approach—public money for private Catholic schools, with perfect freedom for the parents, to do as the Church tells them.

No, Professor Laski, it won't do. You say, "It (the Labour Party) would be foolish indeed . . . to . . . substitute for its own philosophy an outlook which is built upon distrust of the common people and denial of their right to experiment with the institutions of freedom."

But that is precisely what the Labour Party is doing in tolerating within its organisations influences which are primarily and specifically pledged to work for ideas as remotely removed from democratic sociology as heaven is from the earth; as remote from Socialism as the Pope is from the common man; as woman; as remote as black reaction is from real progress.

You should deal with first things first!

F. J. CORINA.

MISTAKES OF MOSES, by Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 3d.; postage 1d.

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

THE MOTHER OF GOD, by G. W. Foot. Price 3d.; postage 4d.

A PECULIAR SECT

A freakish theological sect styled the Peculiars have their places of worship in Essex. A number of the members of The Church of The Peculiar People are conscientious objectors, but they have not the sense of logic to organise effectively against militarism. Their eccentricities often lead one to doubt their sanity, and they are Peculiar by name and nature. Divine aid is their remedy for ills afflicting the body, the members of The Church of The Peculiar People will have you faithfully believe. I have seen a boy, whose father was a member of this quaint sect, groaning and writhing in pain. The parent refused a doctor's aid to alleviate the suffering of his own child, and the lad groaned for four nights in utter agony. A drug would have eased the lad's pain in quick time. The father called on supernatural aid to heal his son, he is still calling, but none of the many gods have cured him yet. For years this suffering lad has endured his agony, but the parent still clings faithfully to a worn out hobgoblin for peculiar spiritual aid to administer its healing balm. The youngster's cries of agony have been piteous to hear, and neighbours have given sufficient proof to the father that drugs would alleviate and possibly effect a permanent cure of the malady. Some may remark that the father is wicked in continually seeing the boy in pain, when a few shillings spent on drugs would, possibly, heal the sufferer. This case savours of blind prejudice, steeped with religious superstition and utter ignorance. Sound advice and reason given to this freakish disciple of the Peculiars, being totally ignored. . . .

While the aid of scientific knowledge is scoffed at disease will always exist. Many logical minds will see the necessity of spreading scientific truth amongst these deluded disciples and their antiquated beliefs. These religious oddities do nothing to war against the ills of the body and prefer to keep the young in total darkness. Logic and scientific facts based on research are abhorred by the Peculiars and are considered dangerous and heathenish. Thus this quaint brand of superstitious mythology, in company with the thousands of others, will undoubtedly be rejected by those who still hold fastly to their beliefs in a diety of any form.

CLAUDE LEN O'SHEA.

CORRESPONDENCE

DICKENS AND ATHEISTS

Sir.—Re Dickens's religion, the only instance I remember of his using the word "Atheist" is in "Little Dorrit," where the Father of the Marshalsea is reprimanding his son for being rude to Cleman. Here is the passage:—

"Besides, if you are not filial, sir, if you discard that duty you are at least—hum—not a Christian? Are you—ha—an Atheist? And is it Christian, let me ask you, to stigmatise and denounce an individual, for begging to be excused this time, when the same individual may—ha—respond with the required accommodation next time? Is it the part of a Christian not to—hum—not to try him again?" He had worked himself into quite a religious glow and fervour.

Speaking of my favourite novelists, I would like to say also how much I liked and appreciated Mr. Palmer's recent article on William de Morgan and his books. Occasional literary articles like these, I think, should be a help in rendering the "Freethinker" interesting to new readers.—Yours, etc.,

A. W. DAVIS.

AN APOLOGY.

Sir.—I was not aware that Mr. Lunn had met Mr. Howell Smith and Mr. Joseph McCabe in debate, and gladly tender my apologies to Mr. Lunn for my error.—Yours, etc.,

H. CUTNER.

OBITUARY

FANNY PANKHURST

IT was a sad little family group, with a number of West Ham Branch members, that assembled in the City of London Crematorium, Manor Park, London, E. 12, on May 11 to give a farewell tribute to Fanny Pankhurst, wife of Edwin Pankhurst, a veteran of the West Ham Branch N.S.S. Although in poor health for a long time, the end came quite unexpectedly on May 6, in her 81st year. Her death brought to an end over 60 years of married life, during which her absolute loyalty to husband, children and home inspired a happy domestic circle in which mutual affection and good will were very marked features. Generous and cheerful in spirit and action, every ready to lend a hand at any function of the West Ham Branch, she was always a welcome companion. Our sympathy goes out to the husband and two daughters, one of whom, Mrs. M. Quniton, is a member of the N.S.S. Executive and Director of the Secular Society, Limited. A secular Service was read at the crematorium by the General Secretary, N.S.S.

R. H. R.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Report of Executive Meeting held May 9, 1946

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

Also present: Messrs. Hornibrook, A. C. Rosetti, Griffiths, Ebury, Lupton, Silvester, Horowitz, Morris, Page, Barker, and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. The President drew attention to the death of Mr. H. R. Clifton, Treasurer of the N.S.S., one of its Trustees and member of the Executive; he paid a tribute to the charming personality and life-long devotion and cheerful service to the Society and its work given by Mr. Clifton. The financial statement was presented, and new members admitted to Newcastle, Felling and the Parent Society. Permission was given for the formation of a Branch at Felling, to be known as the Felling Branch N.S.S. A report on the World Union of Freethinkers recent Conference was presented and discussed, with an agreement that a useful objective had been achieved. Lecture reports, arrangements and correspondence from various parts were dealt with. A further remittance from the Chapman (India) Estate was announced. The handbook committee reported progress. The next meeting of the Executive was fixed for Tuesday, May 28, and the proceedings 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. Parliamentary Hill Fields, 4 p.m., Mr. L. EBURY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m., MESSRS. E. C. SAPHIN, J. HART and E. PAGE.

LONDON—INDOOR

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m., JOSEPH McCABE: "The Larger Education."

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Car Park, Bradford). — Sunday, 6-30 p.m. A lecture.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Platts Fields). — Sunday, 3 p.m., Mr. F. J. CORINA (Bradford) will lecture.

Nottingham (Old Market Square).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m., Mr. T. M. MOSLEY will lecture.

BOOKS WORTH WHILE

"Stories of the South Seas." By Jack McLaren, Pendulum Publications; 2s.

IT is always interesting to read a book written by a man who knows his subject. Jack McLaren is recognised as an authority on the South Seas where he spent so many years of his adventurous life; and in this book of short stories he gives us, besides local colour, an insight into many phases of native life.

Sir J. M. Barrie, John Galsworthy, Sir John Squire and Thomas Burke have all testified to the vividness and merit of Jack McLaren's stories. This is an ideal book to take on a holiday or to pick up at any time to pass an hour away.

"Drums Under the Window." By Sean O'Casey, Macmillan and Company; 15s.

It is the fashion amongst a certain section of our so-called intelligentsia to criticise unfavourably anything that Sean O'Casey writes. These little folk will be forgotten when O'Casey's works will be read by thousands. In the same way, nobody to-day can remember or ever heard of the critics of men like Darwin or Bradlaugh.

"Drums Under the Window" is Sean O'Casey at his best. Here humour, tragedy and biting sarcasm hold the reader: and what a master of satire he is—a modern Voltaire. It is not surprising that the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland have put his books on the Index. The one weapon the Church fears more than any other is ridicule, and if any devout Catholic was tempted to read this book, even he, if he possessed any sense of humour, would be hard put to it to keep his face straight.

But there is more in the book than this. A child of the slums himself, O'Casey hates, with a bitter and righteous hatred, the system that makes these ghastly hovels possible. He hates the degradation of the human spirit that the miserable slum-dweller has to endure and detests the smug complacency with which so many of "our betters" regard these festering sores, and the wretched charity which the victim of the system receive, to ease the conscience of the giver much more than the hunger pangs of the afflicted.

The Church smugly informs its dupes that Darwinism is out of date and unscientific. O'Casey shows that the Roman Catholic Church has no delusions about the dangers of any of their followers reading Darwin. They have found out that although Darwin is dead, Darwinism lives. In the words of the old comic song, "He's dead but he won't lie down."

Sean O'Casey is not interested in whether his reader agrees or disagrees with him. His opinions are his own—he says what he means and he means what he says.

Ask at your library for this book. If you are lucky enough to get it it will give you much pleasure and profit.

"Yours Fraternally." By Arthur Peacock, with drawings by Philip Mendoza; 126 pp., price 9s. 6d. This is also a Pendulum Publication.

The author of this book is well known to a large section of people as the Secretary of the National Trade Union Club, London, a position he has filled since 1931.

Naturally his book deals with many of the prominent figures of the Labour Movement—Sir Walter Citrine, Ernest Bevin, George Hicks, are some of the men of whom we get vivid pen portraits. Perhaps his favourite amongst them was old Ben Tillett, but there were others whom he regarded with feelings of admiration and affection, such as Tom Mann, Ernest Toller, etc.

Mr. Peacock's book is not a story of Labour leaders from all over the world however; he has strong views on many subjects, especially on the shameful betrayal of Spain, and he is honest enough to say that, in this respect, many of the Labour Party

were also guilty. The author did fine work in helping with the Spanish Medical Aid Committee in sending supplies to Spain.

Here is one arresting piece from his book:—

"I have listened to Winston Churchill's broadcast in which he made reference to Eire's attitude in the war. About the position taken up by De Valera and his friends, I make no comment. What I would remind Mr. Churchill is that among the first men to lose their lives in the battle against totalitarianism were some of the bravest and youngest of Eire's sons. They lost their lives long before many of Mr. Churchill's supporters and colleagues were alive to the dangers of Hitlerism; at a time when these people lacked the vision to see the true significance of events in Spain."

It is, however, when Mr. Peacock deals with the religious side of the Spanish struggle that he displays an ignorance of the Roman Catholic Church and its methods which is quite astonishing for a man of his broad reading and liberal views.

In his book he says:—

"Alas, in those early days in the fight against Fascism to Mr. Churchill's supporters they were just 'Reds.' Among those who took this view were prominent contributors to the Catholic Press. Their attitude gave rise to anxiety to many Labour Party members who were Roman Catholics. So much so that it was felt desirable that approaches should be made to the Catholic Hierarchy and information given regarding the true position of the Republican Cause. Reg. Young, of the Post Office Workers' Union, was very helpful. He led an important deputation of Catholics who belonged to the Labour Party and Trade Unions to Archbishop's House. It was pleasing to find Cardinal Hinsley was by no means unsympathetic."

How the wily Cardinal must have chuckled at the naïveté simplicity of the members of the deputation. The Vatican has supported Franco and still supports him. The Vatican has always supported reaction and opposed liberty, and the Labour Party's greatest fault and terror is that they have allowed themselves to be influenced and, in many cases, intimidated by the Roman Catholic vote.

F. A. HORNIBROOK.

LOOKING BACKWARDS

"GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE," FEBRUARY 21, 1809.—In addition to the information given on page 571 of the seventy-eighth volume relative to our ancient mode of executing deeds, Mr. Urban, the following paragraph from Dr. Burn's "Antiquities of Cumberland," p. 324, may not be unacceptable to an "Antient Briton" in p. 400: "In many antient Charters, where a man could not write his name, he put the symbol of the Cross; which kind of signature is even yet not out of use. In the original *Synodical League and Covenant*, now in the British Museum, there is an abundance of marksmen; all of whom, from their abhorrence of Popery at that time, leave the Cross unfinished, and sign in the shape of the letter 'T.'"

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