

THE FREETHINKER

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Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Atheism Again

IF we were to accept an article in "The Times," there is a marked difference between Atheism in France and Atheism in England. It is as startling as would be the statement that France has a multiplication table that differs from the English one. For Atheism is so simple in its statement, in its application and implication, that wherever it appears it means exactly the same thing. It means without belief in God, just that and nothing more. The question of its validity is another question. That is a matter of justification. We are told that the French Atheist thinks that the non-existence of God matters very much. It is exciting, and the Frenchman becomes an enthusiastic missionary on behalf of Atheism. The British Atheist does not call himself one, and he is not in the least excited by his unbelief. He lives as though the question does not matter.

If I were in the habit of counting opinions by silence instead of by speech, I should agree with "The Times." But as I do not count the existence of opinions in that way, I content myself by saying, for the moment, that the difference between the French and English is a matter of honesty of speech rather than a difference of belief. In England, for example, the term of "Agnostic" was deliberately coined by one of our leading scientists to ward off the term of "Atheist." His public explanation was that he knew nothing just where, he said, others professed to know. But that was exactly the reason given by an Atheist. They were both without God. Neither believed in God, each had the same equipment for considering the value of the evidence for God, and reached the same conclusion. The French disbeliever in God simply decides that the evidence was against the belief in God, and there are no degrees of "Nothing." Moreover the French people were in close touch with the Roman Church, and so were more ready to carry reasoning to its logical conclusion.

But now things are changing in England. The leading clergy are themselves proclaiming from the house tops that the real issue now before all Christians is Atheism, and nothing else. Only here and there do we meet with any real defence against Atheism, but the recognition that the vital struggle is not between the Churches and doubters of more Christianity, but between Atheism and "all the gods that be." We are driving the enemy into the open. Even that good old solid weekly journal, "The British Weekly," has to admit that the old argument against Atheism—the drunkard, the wife beater, the plunger into all kinds of indecency and villainy—has now disappeared. It quotes approvingly the following quotation written by a man who has committed the "miracle" of being an Atheist, and then returning back to godism. I hope to

examine that wonderful experience later. Meanwhile we take the rebuke given by this dual convert, and which is approved by the "British Weekly":—

"We ought to be quite clear, that Secular Humanism (a respectable name for "Atheism") sets up, or discovers a standard and a very high one, namely, devotion and service to human nature itself. Affection, arising perhaps through desire, does discover in human quality something uniquely and incomparably good and which calls forth spontaneous reverence . . . this service to man, directly inspired by love of nature, is not as much moved by any recognition of super-human authority."

That is a great development from the age-long Atheist of the Churches who began to indulge in childish misbehaviour, proceeded as he grew older to gamble, forgery, drunkenness and unspeakable villainies and then died shrieking for God to forgive him. We can only hope that as unbelievers throw overboard all pretences of believing in any God, and recognise that godites and Atheists are the only real groups of humans, that they will not pretend that Atheists are without moral blemish. They are not; and I have always protested against any attempt to prove that Atheists are without their portion of ill-doing. A man may be honest even in his rascality. What I have always fought against is that a man is better because of his religion. That has never happened, and it never will.

The article that I am quoting from is by one who writes under the heading of "Ilico's Columns," and he is evidently hard pressed to hold on to the old Christian theory and at the same time run with more up to date ideas. Poor man, it is very difficult nowadays for a Christian to run with the dogs and keep good friends with the hares. He says that a Harley Street doctor informed him that "most of his patients come from educated and well-to-do families, that a few of them, mostly women, are addicted to Anglo-Catholicism, and that of the rest hardly any show the slightest interest in religion or any consciousness of any need which religion might claim to satisfy."

All this, with other matters, disturbs "Ilico's" very much. He finds it "staggering, for I cannot imagine how people manage to get on without religion." He adds, "If there is no God and no meaning in life, why bother to maintain the decencies?" The best answer to this typical Christian confession is to offer another question or two. The first is, does "Ilico" really believe that moral conduct is in any way dependent upon a belief in religion? And in answering that it would be well to remind him that the Christian religion is held by only a section of the world's religious. What sort of a code have these people? Looking at the world generally, all of them have ideas of honesty, they practice kindness, honesty, truthfulness and so on. They fall in love, they have children, duties to each other are taught, and while there are differences, while all those

social and moral duties may differ in form, in essence they are not different from others. Giving ease for ease from Christian and non-Christian there will be found that one is as good as another. Candidly I do not believe that "Ilico" is nearly so hopeless a person as he paints himself. When we are told that the decencies of life need not bother us if there is no God, the reply is that the decencies of life were not created by God and they certainly will not suffer when "God" takes his place as an example of the nonsensical beliefs our remote ancestors bequeathed us. The truth that our Christian critic forgets, or does not know, is that during a great stretch of human existence, Man had no god at all. During that time—say, half a million years—family life developed from a mere horde, habits of conduct were formed, and man learned to stand erect mentally and physically. Then came the development of gods, and man in his groping created what we have come to call religion. And that, instead of being a blessing became a curse, and not the blessing that our religious delight in calling a force which has been responsible for more evil than any other single factor.

"Ilico" says, with what is so characteristic of good sound Christian impudence, "It is not only the thoughtless who manage to do without religion." Consider the downright impudence of that expression, "not only the thoughtless who do without religion." What amount of serious thinking does it require to be a Christian? As a child it is dedicated to this or that religion. He is within a certain religious circle and forbidden to become part of any other. He is trained to be socially impotent, religiously ignorant, and to grow up without any knowledge worth talking about concerning religion. But, thanks to Christian bigotry and viciousness, it does require some degree of courage and thought, even today, for anyone to proclaim himself, or herself, an Atheist. Successful religion has always been a field in which honesty was barred, and where lying for the greater glory of God was most pronounced. The result is that religion, and particularly the Christian religion, has done its best to kill off the men and women of independent mind, and by results has made independence of thought the greatest of sins.

As things stand "Ilico" either has a curious lack of knowledge of the history of religion or he is trying to pull the legs of his readers. It probably never struck him that there have been two great systems, each 500 years before the date on which Jesus is assumed to have been born. Picture Buddha and Confucius looking down on our modern life and also listen to the conversation that might have taken place:—

BUDDHA: What strange people there are now inhabiting the world? Twenty-five hundred years ago, just about the time you existed, Confucius, I laid down a teaching that would show man a path in life that would enable him to face the fact of existence, to do kindness to all, to tell the truth to all, not to trouble about legendary gods and impossible heavens and hells, but above all, if men could not agree to walk the way of life peacefully, to take another road, and reach truth by a more devious path. And yet today some people who believe they move in the way of God and by the grace of God, animated by the lust of power, by counting riches that which fail to bring happiness and enlightenment, all in the name of God, and in bitter sarcasm call my teaching a religion.

CONFUCIUS: True, Buddha. You and I recognised that the belief in gods made not for peace but for hatred and bloodshed, and I taught in addition that human frailties are to be conquered by study, by appreciating the power of righteousness and the benefit of justice. I also have been placed among the "Great religious leaders of the world" by a people who for many years have raided my country and branded my people as inferior to themselves. They have, as with yourself, accused me of giving the world more gods, when man's great need was to keep the gods at a distance. They see in war the greatness of a people, and in the slaughter of their fellows the making of high character. Twenty-five hundred years ago we taught that whatever was the cause or purpose of war, it could only coarsen life and leave the conqueror with the necessity for wiping from his nature the scars that war always leaves. And we have both been placed among the "Religions of the World"! We left no religion, we promised no heaven, we taught the uselessness of prayer. They have deceived the people by saying what they did. They have forgotten what we both taught, that the foundation of human betterment must rest upon truthfulness, kindness and honesty. The gods do not exist.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

CONCEPTS OF A FUTURE LIFE IN ROME

THE Oriental cults of Isis and Mithra won countless converts when they invaded the Pagan Roman Empire. For the ground was ready for their reception, owing to the traditional beliefs of the people, so closely associated with the adoration of the dead, and their presumed life after death. The problem of immortality has puzzled philosophers in all ages, and Roman intellectuals had largely abandoned all faith in a future life. But the populace craved for post-mortem bliss to compensate for the sorrows and sufferings of our earthly life. Thus, the assurances of the later Christians of future happiness for the true believer played a potent part in their ultimate triumph.

Still, as Dr. Samuel Dill states, in his scholarly survey in his highly instructive "Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius": "Even Christian teaching, while it offers a sure promise of a life to come, has not lifted the veil of the great mystery, and the material imagery of the Apocalypse, or the shadowed hints of Jesus and St. Paul, have left the believer in the 20th century with no clearer vision of the life beyond the tomb than that which was vouchsafed to Plato, Cicero, Virgil or Plutarch. 'We know not what we shall be' is the answer of every seer in every age." Moreover, as there was no priestly power to suppress opinion in Imperial Rome, philosophers were free to openly avow their unbelief or to expound their varying theories of immortality.

Among the masses, especially in rural Italy, the ancient cult flourished. If coloured by Greek and dark Etruscan traditions, the common beliefs of the Indo-European peoples prevailed. Life after death was pictured as a perpetuation of mundane life in the spectral domain. The departed were thought to linger near their graves which were revered as their everlasting homes. So their ornaments, weapons and tools were buried with them, while they were depicted on their tombs eagerly engaged in their customary crafts, quite unlike the later Christian dead who were represented as patiently awaiting the Resurrection.

To the Pagan, the sepulchre was a sacred memorial and the utmost care was imperative, as it was an altar as well as a permanent abode. Every precaution was taken to preserve the grave and its environs from alienation. The Manes, the good departed ghosts, were conceived as surviving in a shadowy form.

On stated occasions food and raiment were placed on their tombs; while there was an annual offering of violets and roses in order to maintain communion with the dead. Every February, it is recorded "there was a family love-feast, in which quarrels were forgotten, and the members of the spirit-world joined in the sacred meal. But besides this public and national commemoration the birthday of each departed member was observed with offerings of wine, oil and milk. The tomb was visited in solemn procession; dead and living shared the sacred fare; flowers were scattered, and with an *ave* or prayer for help or good fortune, the shade was left to its renewed repose."

As the proximity of the living was deemed essential to the dead, their burials occurred in busy centres, for secluded sepulchres were apt to be neglected. The Manes were friendly spirits; but persisting from an ancient and more repellent past were those sinister spectres, the Lemures, ever thirsting for blood because their earthly lives had ended in violence. Yet, these malevolent creatures were given their festival in the month of May, presumably as an appeasement, for the ritual of exorcism and other weird rites, especially offerings of blood, drawn in preference from the wounds of a dying gladiator, point to survival from a dark past.

The reality of these benevolent and baneful apparitions was for centuries unquestioned in the Latin world. Tales concerning them were legion. But as the cremation of the corpse became general a concept of the soul existing apart from the body won acceptance. The spirits no longer animated the corpse, but gathered together in our earth's centre where they were assigned to the custody of the keeper of dead souls in their sombre abode. So deeply misled by superstition is mankind that for a time Roman intellectuals solemnly affirmed their belief in repeated appearances of apparitions.

The disciples of Epicurus stood practically alone in their scorn of this absurdity. Even the younger Pliny seems almost as credulous as our own A. R. Wallace and Oliver Lodge, while the scandal-loving Suetonius welcomed these wondrous tales enthusiastically. In Republican days the rationalism of Epicurus and Laertius—the most modern of Latin writers—had dominated cultured Roman thought, as the openly avowed unbelief of Julius Caesar indicates. But, for reasons of State, a religious revival was fostered by Augustus and unreason became fashionable. Nevertheless, right down to the fall of the Western Empire, a sceptical spirit prevailed in Roman society.

Philosophers and literary men, who seemingly accepted a more refined form of faith, looked with utter contempt on the crude beliefs of the crowd. Such sages as Seneca and Plutarch treated the *Inferno* of Greek tradition as a tale of a tub, which even children no longer credited. Yet many adults apparently invaded the day of doom with its agonising sequel to condemned sinners. As Dr. Dill declares: "The belief in the gruff ferryman of the dead, who sternly exacted his fare, and drove from the banks of Styx those who had no right to cross the awful stream, was widely diffused and survived far into mediæval times. For many centuries, long before and long after the coming of Christ, the coin which was to secure the passage of the shade into the world below was placed in the mouth of the corpse."

During the expiring period of the Republic, any decided belief in personal immortality was rare in cultured circles. As Dill notes: "Lucretius was certainly not a solitary member of his order. His great poem, by its combination of dialectic subtlety, poetic charm and lofty moral earnestness, may have made many converts." With all the fervour of an apostle, he strove to relieve his countrymen's minds from the terrors of death. Also, in the debate on the fate of the Catilinarian conspirators, Julius Caesar could assert, without fear of contradiction and disapproval, that death was the final term alike of joy and sorrow in human life. This philosophy, indeed, was waning in force in the time of Augustus. . . . Yet the elder Pliny, who saw the reign of Vespasian, inveighs almost fiercely against the vanity

or madness which dreams of a phantom life beyond the tomb, and robs of its last charm the kindly boon of nature."

The great Emperor Hadrian was evidently a sceptic. He was intensely interested in the cults of his Empire and in his travels visited, studied and restored many of the most famous shrines. Still, as Dill observes, Hadrian's "last words to his soul, in their mingled lightness and pathos, seem to express rather regret for the sunlight left behind than any hope in entering on a dim journey into the unknown."

If, in the Antonine Age, superstition increased its hold on the crowd several of its most eminent men still doubted or denied immortality. Epictetus, a deeply religious thinker, found the future life a purely superfluous hypothesis. Death is as natural as birth, and when we die the elements of our bodies are resolved into other forms. A medical celebrity and also a devout theist, Galen, who became physician to Marcus Aurelius, devoted considerable attention to the theory of immortality, but he maintained an agnostic attitude to the last. For, "On these speculative questions, the cautious man of science will not venture to come to any dogmatic conclusion."

The Stoic Emperor Aurelius seems more concerned with ethics than with theology, and if on the problem of man's mortality he seems at times uncertain, he shows little sympathy to those who urge that the desire for life's continuance is an argument in its favour. As Dill interprets Aurelius: "The longest life is hardly a moment in eternity; the shortest long enough if it is lived well. . . . To repine at its shortness is no more rational than to mourn the swift passage of the springtime."

In the nature of the case there exists no positive proof or disproof of human survival. Yet, every analogy in Nature, both in the plant and lower animal realms, powerfully suggests that all things that live have their day and then cease to be.

T. F. PAIMER.

MESSAGE OF SCIENCE

IN the measureless depths of the heavens science has found nothing but the rolling spheres, stars, planets, planetoids—all relatively speaks of matter in a limitlessness of space that otherwise is empty and dead. In the sky above and the sky below (for there is the sky over Australia at the bottom of the globe) concourses of constellations, stars and nebulae careering in a boundless "ocean" of nothingness! It is found that the substances of the heavenly bodies, and of the earth, are alike in their atomic structure—consisting in the ultimate analysis of electrons, protons, neutrons and positrons—in essence, Electricity.

In its search for fundamental reality, science finds movements of units of electricity at the core of each atom—a million of which can be accommodated on the head of a pin. The basic physical constitution of all matter, suns and satellites, flora and fauna, mice and men is the same—particles of electricity. And now we arrive at nuclear fission, the inexhaustible atomic power that can bestow undreamt-of material benefit to the whole human race, if kept from private interests. Today there are higher motives to serve than the profit motive. While the Quantum theory suggests the reign of chance in the cosmos, there remains the veil past which science cannot see—the impenetrable screen that obscures the whence and wherefore of the fathomless, mysterious universe and, indeed, of Being. In the perspective of science the clashing and storms of envy, hatred, malice, jungle ethics and lust for possessions seem pathetically futile and foolish for, relatively, the tenure of individual existence is but a pinpoint of time and—"you can't take it with you."

There is a common destiny for all men in this great adventure of living, and verily life is much too short for any code that is not consistent with sincerity and truth, understanding and brotherhood, love and community spirit in the human caravan. Forward to universal humanism is clearly the message of science.

Let us, then, speed on enlightenment throughout the world.

A. D. HUNTER.

ACID DROPS

The British Institute of Public Opinion recently made a survey with regard to broadcasting discussions on the question of Atheism. There is no question of more marked interest to-day. Is Atheism resulting from a more open confession of disbelief in all religion than has ever existed? The clergy generally have dropped the old plan of assuring the world that Atheism is very rare and are now proclaiming the nearer truth that it is rapidly gaining ground. But what one may note is that there is no turning back to religion where Atheism is concerned. An Atheist may pretend he has altered his opinion, but knowledge once gained remains.

The result of the test applied to the situation by the Institute of Public Opinion ran thus. Approving discussions on Atheism—forty nine per cent. Disapproval—thirteen per cent. Twelve per cent. were undecided. But the hag-ridden religionists of the B.B.C. are not concerned with getting the truth about religion and Atheism, but it is concerned with securing from three to nine lessons on religion day after day. Very timidly the question has been raised in the House of Commons, but the B.B.C. follows a plan that is an insult to large numbers of men and women in all walks of life.

In Carlisle animal lovers have held an intercession service—in Church—on behalf of animals who were used during the recent experiments on atomic bombs. We are afraid the service showed much greater strength of heart—to use a common word—than of head. "Doth God care for oxen" is the right phrase here. The people of Carlisle are not the first group of men and women who are—without knowing it—much better than their creed. Had it not been so original Christianity might have wiped out the race. As it is, the Church had to content itself by nearly wiping out European civilisation.

We note that in Edinburgh the Education authorities, after taking the opinions of Church authorities, have decided to set aside the syllabus of religious instruction. That really might be called the beginning of a revolution. But we fancy that real personal interest in education is much stronger in Scotland than it is in England.

The Archbishop of Sheffield says:—

"It is not to the credit of the Church that some of our finest young manhood is finding Secular employment instead of entering the Ministry. We must give ourselves to finding the men and then to train them."

We quite appreciate the anxiety and his troubles. But we would point out that this scarcity of first-class men in the pulpits has been going on for many, many years. In fact, the challenge to the Church was made by the revival of the culture of Greece and Rome. For nearly a thousand years the Church did manage to choke the older culture. And so long as the Church ruled able men—often merely because that would permit the study of science and literature. Roger Bacon is an illustration; Bruno is another. They were surrounded by Church enemies, but they kept on. Then later came Copernicus and Newton, to be followed by the development of other branches of science, and literature. But the final blow was a scientific Anthropology, and during these developments, of necessity the quality of the Christian preachers grew poorer and poorer. Our bishops and other superior persons engaged in and by the Church, shrank in ability and in honesty. As we have so often said, one cannot hope to fool all the people all the time. If we were Christian we would go on our knees and thank God every time a semi-idiot was born. The Churches are running their last round.

Even Papal pronouncements have not altogether allayed a few Catholic misgivings about Fatima. In a totally Romanist country anything and everything would be accepted from a priest, but in a country where Romanism is in the minority as in ours, the laughter of the people at the bilge of Fatima must have some effect; and so the "Universe," in a recent number, courageously points out that "any statement made by Our Lady to the children at Fatima is of the nature of a 'private revelation' and in all private revelations due allowance has to be made for possible

inaccuracies in the transmission of messages." In case this is not properly taken in, the newspaper adds: "And remember that the Church never guarantees any private revelation."

What a come down for the faithful! Here is a "miracle" boosted up to the utmost by the Church with pilgrimages and broadcasts—a miracle that is so utterly silly that even the most sheep-like Catholics are obliged to utter a mild protest; and immediately then it is given up, unless "piously" believed in by people who want to believe. The Church throws it overboard as completely as it does a Mahommedan miracle. That means that you can take your choice, believe or not believe, just as you like. And the Church has the audacity to object to being called a nose of wax! It is more than audacity; it is deliberate roguery.

Here is a gem from that much-praised—by Christians—defender of the faith, Mr. C. S. Lewis. He says that "Christianity is only one of the great religions that could not exist without miracles." Really, Mr. Lewis has profound faith in the gullibility of the people whom he addresses. The beginning and the end of Jesus were clogged by miracles. The Churches that came after were built on miracles. The Roman Church is at present turning out miracles at full speed. Take away from any Christian faith in the world the element of the miraculous and it will fall to pieces. Mr. Lewis is a formidable person when he is facing people who believe what he says before he says it. We should enjoy seeing contested a matter where the audience were of a very mixed character.

Mr. M. Christopher, M.P., is a man with quite a fine capacity for seeing things. With the obvious intention of cheering up his fellow Christians, he announces, in "The Catholic Herald," that there has been a "clean defeat of those secular influences which seemed so strongly entrenched. The old Secularism has collapsed surprisingly." We are surprised, and we should like Mr. Christopher to make plain the evidence on which he forms so startling a conclusion. We do not make it a policy to challenge discussions with Christianity, but we do challenge Mr. Christopher to make his statements good. We are dead certain that he will continue to tell to Catholic groups "just as many falsities as he cares to spin." His listeners are trained to believe the impossible. We do not know of any Secular party that expressed itself in the recent general election as champions of Secularism, though there was among the godly a tremendous drop of religious believers. But Mr. Christopher may rest easy. Nowadays there are not nearly as many people who expect a Christian advocate to tell the truth. Things have altered very much during the past half century, and mostly in favour of the Secularism that we are told is dead.

With an air of saying some new and important thing the "Church Times" lets loose the information that the Christian Church is a teaching Church. Of course it is, but was there ever a Church or a priesthood that was not a teaching institution, or a primitive rain-maker who did not encourage war? The existence of every miracle-worker from the earliest days until to-day were teachers, and each of them taught substantially the same thing. They all demanded obedience in the shape of belief in them, and each had some sort of magical performance by which they stood, and cursed those who would not listen and obey.

In sober truth we are all teachers, more or less valuable. The mother is the teacher of her child, the father takes a hand later, then comes the schoolmaster, and also with it, for good or evil, the influence of our environment. That teaching may be good or bad, but it is there, and most of it so unobtrusive that we are largely unaware of it. What then is left for the priest? All that remains is for the Churches to do what they can, not to develop pupils, but to prevent the truth about religion being discovered. From the highest social station down to the street corner preacher has the same aim—that of keeping the truth about religion being widely known and appreciated. The aim of the Church is to educate the young in the hunkum.

"THE FREETHINKER"

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

- T. H. DARLINGTON.—You have suggested a very interesting subject, and we will bear it in mind.
- W. H. WOOD.—Will get it in as soon as possible. Thanks.
- E. W. JAMES.—Thanks for letter. It is valued the more because it comes unasked. We hope that we deserve at least some of the good things you say.
- T. WATERS.—Why not do the selection? As you say, it is a pity that so much good material should lie buried after a brief life in a weekly issue of "The Freethinker."
- J. CULTHARD.—Thanks. Shall appear.
- BENEVOLENT FUND N.S.S.—The General Secretary N.S.S. gratefully acknowledges a donation of 5s. from Mr. Heckford to the Benevolent Fund of the Society.

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SUGAR PLUMS

Sir Ronald Storrs recently cheered up the Christian Literature Association by dwelling on the Bible as English literature. Of course, anything that is of importance or pleases readers may well come under that heading. But what Sir Ronald means we fancy is the enriching of English literature through the study of the Authorised Bible. And that is just nonsense. The richest burst of English literature took place just before and through the Elizabethan era. But the revised Bible was not in use until after Elizabeth was dead, and did not create much fuss until the Puritans gained strength. We suggest to those who wish for evidence to read the preface to the authorised version, and if they do not perceive that the language of the preface stands for the current higher English, they should give up all attempts to feel there is a different tongue to that which rules the biblical text. The Biblical language only gained force in the later years. Substantially it was always a jargon that stands by itself.

Professor Harold Laski has seriously offended the Roman Catholics of this country by saying that the defeat of the Monarchy was also a blow to the Vatican. But that was only the plainest of plain issues. It is true that our English press had not the courage to say what Laski said about the impudent tactics of the Vatican which consisted in threatening all Christians with eternal damnation who opposed the monarchy. Had it not been for the intervention of the Pope, the number who voted against the King would have been much greater.

We remember an incident which is apropos. Many, many years ago, when we first went to Italy, we fell into the company of some of the old followers of Garibaldi. We enquired of them how it was they elected a King. The reply came quickly: "We had to decide between two evils, the Pope or King. We chose the latter to keep back the former." That seemed interesting.

FRANK SKIDMORE

The many friends of Frank Skidmore sadly gathered, last July 12, at the Golders Green Crematorium to pay their last homage to a faithful comrade in the best of causes. They listened with deep emotion to Mr. R. H. Rosetti's fine tribute to Frank Skidmore's sterling qualities, and those who have known him and worked with him could but mutely re-echo his great appreciation of a valued friend. Certainly his memory will be long cherished by all who came in contact with his cheerfulness and never-failing courtesy. I have lost a good friend, and the Freethought movement an untiring worker.

C. C.

Freethinkers in the Dumfries area willing to help form a local Branch of the N.S.S. are invited to communicate with Mr. James Gibson, Rowan Cottage, Hightae, Lockerbie, Dumfrireshire.

The Catholic Church continues to record the number of people who turn from the foolish creed of the English Church to adopt the still further absurdity of the Church of Rome. For instance, there is a case before us which concerns a Mr. James who tried several creeds, marched through the absurdities of a number of creeds, and then he finally decided on patronising the Roman Church—perhaps he thought he could get more absurdity for his money out of this Church than he could get from many. The Roman Church will boast of converts it makes, but it never publishes how many of its members it loses. If we may use the words of Charles the Second, replying to a similar question, "I suppose his foolishness suits their foolishness." Charles was the last monarch of England who could claim a marked intelligence.

We have been asked whether we believe that some people really see ghosts? Our answer is that so far as the testimony is honest we should accept it—for what it is worth. If a man is honest why should we, and on what grounds, declare that the man is a liar? He has seen something. It may be a dead friend whom he recognises, or some other dead person whom he does not know. But he has seen something, and that something was not a delusion so far as he is concerned. The plain truth of the situation was properly expressed by the author of the "Vicar of Wakefield"—"Whatever is, is." As an Atheist with just a little grip of the scientific attitude, and a little tighter hold on philosophy, we agree with the "Vicar." A delusion is as real as anything else, but they do not both belong to the same category. In science the reality of A or B is that which is independent of our own vision or handling. Where ghosts are concerned they belong only to the people who see them. We do not say that a man who suffers from intense alcohol drinking that he did not see snakes crawling round the walls. We say that we have never seen one. That is all. But they are quite real to the other fellow.

We wonder how many ministers of South Africa are passing through the same test as the Rev. A. A. Marias of Cape Town. He has explained that for some time he has been uneasy with his job. He feels hurt over his sermons, and he has resigned. He says he is ready to do anything than to preach the gospel. Not many clergymen would act in this way, and if we were rich we would soon see that the job was forthcoming. Most clergymen, when they feel as Mr. Marias feels, find another interpretation and go on contentedly, preaching in a way that would make the other disciples tear their hair. The general rule in such circumstances is for the person to talk largely about the ethics of Jesus, and then manage to preach a sermon that would send Jesus with one of his threats to ease his feelings.

The Rev. W. White, Vicar of Haughley, Suffolk, says there is no scriptural authority for using the phrase, "Almighty God." Now that is really a very important discovery, and here are people wasting their time and energy wondering how long will the bread supply hold out.

BENEFACTORS AND DETRACTORS

PHILOSOPHERS and theologians have spent an inconceivable amount of time and energy endeavouring to fathom the "problem" of pain. Endlessly they have laboured (and still do) in an attempt to reconcile the suffering which they see all around them, with their postulated beneficent deity. Their labour is in vain; their task hopeless, for the presence of pain in the world is completely incompatible with the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God. How much better it would have been for humanity, if this wasted time had been devoted to the alleviation of suffering instead of meditating on its metaphysical significance!

Fortunately, some men have striven to ease our lot—more often than not without recognition—and a number of these are considered in a recent work on the story of anaesthesia entitled: "The Conquest of Pain," by George Bankoff, M.D., F.R.C.S.* This book is obtainable for the very reasonable price of 6s., and makes thrilling reading. Those who glory in military leaders may have them, and countries, as always, will be ready to bestow honour and wealth upon their successful warmongers. I prefer to honour the memory of real human benefactors, and those of like mind will welcome this little volume.

It is not without faults. At times it could possibly do with a slight sobering down, and it would definitely be improved if its references to Providence were eliminated, particularly as the workings of this mysterious force prove anything but providential at times. When, for example, we are told: "At last Providence had smiled on the unfortunate couple" (Dr. W. T. G. Morton and his wife), and we read on to find that they suffered terribly from poverty and hardship, until Dr. Bankoff is compelled to admit that Morton was "treated abominably" by Providence. One cannot help noticing, either, the prejudiced reference to "good crusaders who went out to fight the infidels . . ." (my italics). But these are only minor blemishes, far outweighed by the book's good points.

It provides the layman with an easily-readable history of surgery, enabling him to perceive the great boon of anaesthesia. We take it for granted now and are inclined to forget the terrible state of affairs which existed prior to its discovery. Tempted, also, to overlook the opposition which it encountered, mainly from religious quarters. Readers of this book are unlikely to lapse like this again. They will remember what Professor A. D. White mildly described as "theological discouragement of medicine."

From earliest historical times religion has hindered and often prevented man's attempts to heal his fellow man. In ancient India, in Egypt, as in Christian times the tale is the same. From the Edward Smith Papyrus, dated about 1600 B.C., we learn that Egyptian methods of surgery were very similar to those used today. Dr. Bankoff writes of the surgeon of 3,500 years ago as follows:—

"The treatment prescribed for the dislocation of the jaw, for example, is practised in all the hospitals of the world today. For fractures he used splints made of wood or linen dipped in glue. Adhesive plaster was known to him. He made good use of the endless bandages supplied to him by the embalmers."

But the "baneful influence of religious mysticism" asserted itself. The surgeon was "interfering with the course of nature"; amulets, phallus-images and incantations should be relied upon to work cures. It is significant that the later George Ebers Papyrus contains far less science and considerably more superstition than the Edward Smith, which "casts a cautious scorn on the charms and magic formulas . . ." Religion triumphed to the detriment of humanity.

The Greeks were the great inheritors of the earlier Egyptian knowledge, and this remarkable people continued the advance

of surgery. Dr. Bankoff devotes a chapter to Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and points out, among many other things, that he even anticipated our modern refrigeration surgery. This in the fifth century B.C.! If the Grecian studies had been followed up Europe would unquestionably have been spared untold suffering, but the coming of Christianity dealt a severe blow to scientific medicine. So much so that the Saracens were surprised at the barbaric methods employed by the Christians during the Crusades. In medicine, as in other spheres, the Arabs and Persians had utilised and extended Greek knowledge, and it was from them that Christian Europe learned new ideas. Demoniacal possession was considered the cause of disease in the Dark Ages, and in 1215 Pope Innocent III denounced the shedding of blood in his Papal Edict, "Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine," thereby preventing surgical progress.

Indeed, right to modern times the representatives of the so-called religion of love have insisted upon the purifying nature of suffering, and have opposed attempts to relieve humanity from its ravages. In their scheme of things, pain was the work of God and a necessary part of this life in preparing man for endless bliss to come. Anaesthesia, perhaps the greatest of all man's discoveries, was condemned as an interference in God's province. And when Dr. James Young Simpson (later knighted) advocated the use of chloroform in obstetrics it created havoc among the Scottish clergy until Queen Victoria availed herself of this blessing at the birth of her seventh child, Prince Leopold. Professor White instances a case in 1591 when a lady of rank was burned alive in Edinburgh for seeking aid for relief of pain in childbirth,† and there is little doubt that many would have liked to do the same with Simpson in the last century, so fierce was their antagonism. As it was, they branded him a shameless heretic. "Citizens of Scotland, beware of this satanic invention"; "Do not go against the Almighty who Himself pronounced this primal curse of pain during childbirth. It is God's will and woe to him who opposes it"; "Beware, Edinburgh!"—these are some of the utterances quoted by Dr. Bankoff. The Calvinist preachers who uttered them, would, of course, all be men!

Simpson, after his royal patronage, was richly rewarded for his work, but Dr. William Thomas Green Morton was nothing like so fortunate. Yet it was he who really gave anaesthesia to the world. Others had experimented before, but he adapted it for use, and demonstrated its worth, and this truly great man spoke these bountiful words: "If the disclosure of my secret means the sparing of needless pain to thousands of sufferers, then I have no right to withhold it. I am prepared to divulge to all medical men the composition of my liquid."

Those words deserve to be remembered among the magnanimous sayings of men, representative of a human benefactor who was later deserted and forgotten by his fellows; representative of the many whose names and stories appear in "The Conquest of Pain," and of others whose names are even forgotten or not known—from the ancient Indian and Egyptian surgeons onwards.

Our debt to them can never be assessed, let alone paid.
C. McCALL.

*Published by Macdonald. The book contains no date of publication, but was written in the war years.

†"Warfare of Science with Theology," Vol. II, page 62.

THE FAULTS AND FAILINGS OF JESUS CHRIST, by C. G. L. Du Cann. (Second Edition.) Price 4d.; by post 5d.
SPEAKING FOR MYSELF, by Lady (Robert) Simon. Price, post free, 2s. 8d.
THE MOTHER OF GOD, by G. W. Foote. Price 3d.; by post 4d.

THE JOLLY ROGERS

LET me begin with an incident of my schooldays, at the time Foote was in gaol eating skilly and picking oakum to prove the boasted love of Christians for their enemies.

My father's place of business was a rendezvous for local Freethinkers. I listened to these men praising Bradlaugh with a depth of feeling I have never known equalled. I heard them express their indignation at the treatment meted out to Bradlaugh and Foote.

I listened to lecturers like Wallace Nelson (who later emigrated to Queensland and became a member of their Parliament) and James Hooper, of Nottingham. I had some acquaintance with freethought literature and delighted in the comic sketches in the "Freethinker."

Whether what follows was owing to my freethought environment, or to an inborn streak of contrariety, I don't know, but one day at school during Catechism I wilfully refused to answer any of the questions. I was hauled out and punished in front of the class. Returning to my desk to be again questioned, I repeated the offence and got more punishment, which only aggravated my obstinacy.

During playtime, not having recovered my equanimity, I trotted off home.

The same evening the headmaster visited my father, and the result of the interview was that I was freed from religious lessons.

This etching on the tablets of memory was brought to a focus in my mind's eye on reading, in the "Freethinker," the editorial approval of the revolt against religion by the "Jolly Rogers Club," a youth club somewhere in Essex. As I mused I was led to the notion that religious teaching in our State schools might well receive its quietus from the pupils themselves, if freethought societies provided them directly with the instruments of warfare instead of relying upon their parents whose minds, in the main, have been cast in the mould that threatens their offspring.

Freethinkers have advocated that speculative matters like the belief in God should not be forced upon schoolchildren; and quite chivalrously they have proclaimed that non-belief in God, also, should be kept out of school—such disputable subjects to be left to the mature.

Religious bodies are more astute. They realise that secular education, if not palpably anti-theological, is certainly godless; and they are aware that to leave out God until minds are matured, is to handicap Omnipotence so heavily that He or It might as well be scratched. They are, therefore, driven to what Mr. Cohen calls kidnapping. But kidnapping proper is a crime involving severe punishment. The clerical form of kidnapping, on the contrary, is sanctioned and blessed by our law makers, and parents in general silently assent to it.

Numbers of freethinking parents refrain from taking advantage of the right to withdraw their children from religious instruction, some because they fear such action may seriously jeopardise their own economic and social position, others because they are afraid their offspring may be victims of intolerance at school.

So far then, concerning the direct method with schoolchildren, we have a powerful and active clerical organisation, becoming more and more meddlesome, and a passive secular party. In view of the determination of the clerics to saturate all school lessons with religion, even aiming to take charge of religious instruction themselves in the State schools, it seems obvious that the men of God must be circumvented, not through the action of the elders—that way appears hopeless—but through the youngsters.

How is this to be done? By inducing them to hoist "The Jolly Roger" against useless religious teaching.

I feel sure the N.S.S. can do effective work in this field. Once a campaign is started opportunities not as yet foreseen will open

out, and the present alarm of the black army over their empty pews will rise to a panic.

The simplest way of starting the campaign at the least cost would be, perhaps, by circulating leaflets written especially for young folks, showing the falsities and absurdities of Bible stories; leaflets containing questions for the youngsters to heckle the teachers of religion, and comic sketches of artistic merit. Not long ago a sketch appeared in a shilling magazine depicting an elderly male, clad in a white nightie with wings, and crowned with a halo. He was inside a celestial kiosk, telephoning to earthly friends this message: "If you want to get in touch with me ring up HEA—123456."

Comic pictures, then, by all means! Foote used them, and the Christians got their teeth into him. It would be interesting to learn whether those teeth are still there, or only toothless gums.

Children are taught to save their bodies from destruction while journeying to and from school. Show them how to save their minds, while in school, from professional mongers of a primitive delusion.

II IRVING.

CORRESPONDENCE

THE GOD OF BERNARD SHAW.

Sir.—Under the above you publish a very interesting letter in which Mr. Bernard Shaw enlarges on your own and Mr. Du Cann's comments on his philosophy. I venture to make one point of criticism. Mr. Shaw alludes to man's readiness to face obloquy and martyrdom for the sake of conscience or a cause, and proceeds to say: "Rationalism, Materialism, Hedonism cannot account for this—it is just a hard fact of incalculable importance and promise." Nevertheless, it seems to be that Mr. Shaw himself supplies the answer in "The Devil's Disciple" where Dick Dudgeon refuses the implorations of Judith, wife of Minister Anderson, to save his own life by revealing that he is Dick Dudgeon and not Minister Anderson whose place he has taken and impersonated. His reason is that he must fulfil the law of his own nature, gallows or no gallows. He faced his fate in accordance with that law. That is the natural explanation. It was great! It was grand! There is, however, no mystery or miracle about it.—Yours, etc.,

A. H. SHAWFAN.

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, 4 p.m., Mr. L. Ebury. Highbury Corner, 7 p.m., Mr. L. Ebury.
West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park).—Sunday, 6 p.m., Messrs. SAPHIN, HART and PAGE.

LONDON—INDOOR

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

COUNTRY—OUTDOOR

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Market Place, Blackburn).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. CLAYTON will lecture.
Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Car Park).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m., a Lecture.
Kingston-on-Thames Branch N.S.S. (Market Place).—Sunday, 7 p.m., Mr. J. W. BARKER will lecture.
Liverpool Branch N.S.S. (Ranelagh Street—opposite Lewis's).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m., a lecture.

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

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

GATE CRASHER

IN 1919, with a strange sense of sadness, I packed my case and stepped ashore for the last time from the iron grey rakish little submarine chaser which had been my home for over three years. For the next 25 years, I have not been able to handle a car wheel, lean out of a window, or hear a bell clang, without imagining I was on the bridge, peering over a wind swept dodger or handling an engine telegraph of a power driven vessel. Sail never attracted me, because, I presume, all that was over before I became infected with whatever it is which makes the landborn victim long always to go "down to the sea" again. I soon found that travelling as a passenger was worse than no cure at all. To be aboard a ship and not of her was a particular kind of torture, especially when confronted with such notices, for instance, as "Passengers must not pass this point" or "ships company only." No. That would not do. So I tried boating in a small way both on the river and at sea. Flying—but here again, there was something missing. I know now what it was, but we'll leave that for a moment.

At the beginning of last season, I happened to hear that the proprietors of the steamers running the regular services from Kingston to Oxford on the Thames were having the greatest difficulty in finding skilled navigators. Should I apply? I did, but before doing so I had ascertained from various lock keepers and watermen that Thames Skippers were specially trained men who knew all the tricks and hazards of the narrow waters, and above all the tricky channels which were the only courses available to passenger carrying steamers, and that they were uncharted. More than that, it had long been a tradition on the upper Thames that only Skippers who had trained as boys on the actual course could possibly handle them safely. "I should be aground in an hour" and so forth. However, I decided to apply. The traffic manager was courteous but not encouraging. "You realise," he said, "you will have anything up to 300 passengers in the season." I did. "And you will have to keep time." With some misgivings, especially after he had told me of deep sea captains who had applied for the work and retired in 24 hours, I agreed to take over one of the schedule steamers for the summer. There was little time for any training, and I had to be satisfied with one run over the return course with one of the company's oldest captains who quite clearly considered his time wasted and told me very little indeed. I made copious notes, a thing itself quite out of keeping with river tradition, but they were to serve me well.

On the great morning my passenger list was mercifully light. At any rate, the fiasco which I felt sure would put an early end to my career would not have too many witnesses. At 9 a.m. I gave the order to "let go" (I think the greatest moment in a life by no means devoid of high lights) and clearing Wallingford Bridge by inches—lesson one, allow for the stream at this point—I set my course downstream. All went well, but had the passengers known the state of their skipper's mind they would have come ashore at the first stop. Goring, Pangbourne, Mapledurham, Reading. Approaching Reading I saw in the distance a terrifying crowd of people waiting on the landing stage, and I was a little late! Could I make the landfall neatly enough and without disaster amongst the crowd of small boats? On they came, an endless stream of them, pushing and jostling at the gangway rails—filling every inch of the deck. Is this the Henley boat? What time do we get back here? And there I sat by my wheel, wincing at every question which the purser, poor soul was answering with a confidence not shared by the one man who was to get them to Henley, and get them back again! But there we were again at the evening time, not very late. The turn, or "swing" at Henley was a nightmare I shall never forget. Would she go round? Would I clear the rows of valuable motor boats moored all over the place, or would I be carried by

the stream, athwart ships, to disaster against Henley Bridge? It had happened before. How my brain worked! "Stop the engines early enough, take a look at the wind (a look at the wind) estimate the stream, and give a final burst of steam in the middle of the turn to keep her from falling off—keep her head up!" All at once, all within seconds, and all before what felt like a vast audience of passengers straining towards the gangway to be first ashore so that we had a decided list. But it was all in order, and I have made that turn 50 times since, with much heavier loads.

Coming back upstream it appeared that the various lock keepers had been passing on from lock to lock in the manner of their craft, a kind of running commentary on my progress for the benefit of skippers all the way down the river. "He has got to Sonning" "He's still going" "He wasn't very late at Henley" and so on. And there was Sonning Bridge. I can repeat the name now without turning a hair, but for the first week, the very mention of it sent me into a cold sweat. For at this ancient bridge there are only inches to spare for the passenger steamers. I had heard frightful tales of all the upper works being torn off by misjudging the cross current and so forth, and it appeared that every so often one met the opposite steamer just as you entered it, and only with the greatest difficulty avoided colliding. This did happen (a real steamer not the imaginary one I saw every time I headed into the dreadful hole, which grew smaller and smaller as one approached). But it was not for many weeks after my early days, and I no longer cared.

Once, long after I had acquired complete confidence, I did run aground, and with a full load aboard. But we got her off, and all was well. Had it happened in the first week I should have promptly resigned like the rest.

It was a wonderful summer. I grew to love the weather-beaten men and boys whose life it was, and it cured me of much of my restlessness and longing which had been with me for over 25 years. All through that summer, I plyed the river in my little 60 year old steamer and carried thousands of passengers through the finest scenery in England, including many American Service men who had found in these journeys the best possible way of seeing historic and scenic Britain in the shortest time and with the greatest comfort. When the season closed, I was able to count myself a fully-fledged Thames skipper, and I subsequently broadcast several times on the experience.

And what can one say of all this. Well, there seems to be one observation worth making, though it is essentially a personal one. It enabled me at last to track down the illusive longing which has haunted me half my life, and explain its cure. It worked, because it satisfied (for me) a sense of power. Others may be able to apply the lesson in terms of their own temperaments. At last, I was again able, after a lifetime of amiable futility in many spheres, to find myself on that enviable "seat." Once the lines which moored the little ship (tied lovingly by my own hands) were let go, I had anything up to 300 persons in my care. There may, of course, have been amongst them those who could take my place on the bridge, but there could not be many, and anyway, the illusion held. Yes. That was it. It must have been, for the finest moment of each day was when I finally rang down to the engine room that sustained clang on the engine telegraph "finished with engines" and leaned, tired and happy on the dodger watching the patient crowd of happy passengers filing across the foredeck under my gaze. "Goodnight, Skipper—thank you."

J. STURGE-WHITING.

THOMAS PAINE, by Chapman Cohen. A Pioneer of Two Worlds. An Essay on Paine's Literary, Political and Religious Activities. Price 1s. 4d., post free.

THE MORAL LANDSLIDE. An Inquiry into the Behaviour of Modern Youth. By F. J. Corina. Price 6d.; postage 1d.