

THE FREETHINKER

Founded 1881

Editor: CHAPMAN COHEN

Vol. LXVI.—No. 50

Sunday, December 15, 1946

Price Threepence

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Persecution and Piety

Bishop Bossuet was one of the ablest of the French theologians of the seventeenth century. He was a staunch son of the Church, his sermons were those of a man who believed what he said, and his criticism of Protestantism was both deadly and acute. He had a breadth of view—in spite of his devotion to the Roman Church—which few Protestants could rival. This was probably due to the fact that he belonged to a Church which claimed to be universal, and so developed the habit of thinking in continents while his opponents thought in conventicles. Looking over some of his writings, I came across the following passage which formed part of a lengthy sarcastic comment upon a writer who had been praising the toleration displayed in Holland. He said:—

“Happy country, where the heretic is at rest as well as the orthodox, where vipers are preserved like doves and innocent animals, where those who compound poisons enjoy the same tranquillity with those who prepare remedies; who would not admire the clemency of these reformed States.”

Bossuet, I repeat, was a very able man. His ability was unquestioned as was his humanity when Christianity was not on the carpet. He was eloquent, and kindly in disposition, and even where religion was his theme he could not completely set aside his natural kindness. But where heresy was concerned, he could see but one proper course to adopt, and that was to carry out the policy of the Roman Church—the oldest, strongest and the most logically brutal of all the Christian churches. The Bishop saw that heresy must be suppressed at all costs. That was so self-evident to him that the mere existence of a State in which non-Christians enjoyed the same freedom as ordinary Christians was so absurd that merely to state it was enough to condemn it. It was, to him, as though one proposed establishing a State in which thieves and murderers should enjoy the same privileges as decent citizens.

Bossuet lived at a time when Christians were not yet ashamed of their religion; when they not merely said that nothing would save the world but Christianity, they actually believed it. It was a time when the principle of toleration was advanced by a few and was received as a sheer novelty. Locke's famous letters on toleration may be read to-day with profit and interest, but in the seventeenth century they came as something new and great, for neither with Protestant nor Catholic was there any question of the duty of the State to suppress attacks on Christianity. Protestant and Catholic were—and to some degree still are—agreed that it was the duty of the State to uphold the *true* religion. The main trouble was to decide which was the true faith.

In fact, Bossuet's famous argument against the Protestants was, in substance, the rules laid down by Protestants against Catholics. Each was supporting the *true* religion. They are still at it.

Both agreed that to give everyone the right to form and express their own opinions as to what was “true religion” was opening the road for destroying “true” religion. Denying the right of the “true” Church to enforce the “true” religion paved the way for unbelief. Actually, that conclusion has been justified over and over again. Give the people opportunity to enjoy absolute freedom where religion is concerned and the result is religious chaos ending in complete unbelief. In fact and in substance that is going on today. Bossuet was justified, historically, when he said: “Deny the right of the Church to prohibit ‘false’ religion and you will end in chaos. Heretics and unbelievers must be met with the full force of the civil power, enforced and encouraged by the spiritual thunder of the Church.” Men reasoned thus because they were Christians. Also they persecuted because they were Christians. Those who persecuted were not of necessity bad men, they were simply carrying their religion to a logical conclusion. Their conviction as to the necessity of persecution weakened only as their faith in Christianity grew faint. Persecution was born of religious fear. Toleration was born of the decay of belief in religion.

It is a favourite thesis of the modern Christian that intolerance and its product, persecution, does not belong to religion. That is not true. On the purely secular side the tendencies are all of the opposite direction. Among primitive people there is a readiness to discuss all things, save the ghosts with which they are surrounded. The gods are there, they are not desirable facts, but as facts they have to be faced and dealt with. One of the greatest delusions concerning primitive man is that he looked for Gods and was not happy until he found them. That is turning facts upside down. In time—not in the earlier phase of human existence—the gods dominate everything. Ignorance is felt, and ignorance is one of the most potent factors in the growth of religion. The gods rule everything. They cause the food to grow, they send disease, they determine success and failure. If offended the gods inflict punishment in the most careless manner. A single offence by one man is enough to cause the gods to almost wipe out a whole tribe. That feature of the carelessness of gods persists today. Certainly not *all* the people are responsible for the evils of the world war, but the gods are quite unconcerned, and display a brutality that simply staggers human understanding. Collective responsibility is the rule with the gods, and indiscriminating punishment is the method. What the offended gods look for is revenge. What the tribe must do is to see that none of “our” people offend him—or her or “It.”

All this really gives us the groundwork of Bossuet's conception of the heretic as a viper threatening the safety of doves, or of a poisoner who concocts deadly things for the destruction of mankind. It was this primitive conception that the Christian church revived, and which has been more responsible for cruelty and misery and racial degradation than was ever seen before, and was only equalled by the religious Nazi system. And if the Christian theory be true the established Churches were justified in their conduct. Man is an immortal soul; his destiny is determined by his belief in God while he is on the earth. The unbeliever, the heretic is thus a very centre of contamination that will lead humans direct to hell. If Christianity be true that reasoning is unimpeachable. There is as much reason, and as much justification for suppressing the heretic and the Atheist as there is for isolating the carrier of a deadly disease.

I think Bossuet would have denied that considered as a mere man the heretic may have been unobjectionable. He might be honest, truthful, sincere, a good citizen—but he was an unbeliever, a living danger to man's eternal welfare. It was thus that persecution came to the Christian as a sacred duty. And if Christianity be true that reasoning is unimpeachable. It was thus that persecution came to the Christian Church as one of the first duties of a good Christian; and if Christianity be accepted persecution inevitably follows. A Christian ought to persecute; it is part of his duty to his Christian brethren. He can only cease to persecute when his religious belief weakens. He must become a poorer Christian in order to become a better man.

It may be noted as a fact that there was nothing in Roman law that provided for the kind of cruelty that was common under the rule of the Church. The point is worth noting that when the Christian Church gained full power, and wished to develop trials by torture, and by burning and torturing religious offenders, the Church could find no fitting legal system. It was this that led to the creation of the infamous Inquisition *by the Church*. That helps us to appreciate the love that the worship of Jesus brought in its trail.

To return to our mutton. Primitive heresy is an act of treason to the group, and, therefore, the removal of the heretic is an act of social justice. At a later stage of social growth and when the belief in gods is weakening, the ethical motive is dragged in. In the early stage, that of pure religion, the unbeliever is bad because he is dangerous, in the later stage he is dangerous because he is morally bad. The Christian aim is to strengthen the belief in gods by associating it with morals. But the Church came to power while the Roman respect for social ethics was still strong, and ethics was taught, not for the purpose of pleasing the gods, but for quite human reasons. But from the outset the Christian Church did what it could to place "mere ethics" in the background, and intolerance based on religion grew stronger and stronger. The idea that good behaviour was of prime importance was fought as discarding the teaching of the Church. Good behaviour was not enough. That cry is still in being so far as our Christian leaders are concerned. But in mediaeval Christian times it broke down the respect for truth and self, so far as it was possible to do so. The priesthood went so far as to

weaken domestic ties by setting, as an Act of God, husbands to spy on wives, wives on husbands, and children on parents. Here and there the secular powers did what was possible, but the Church was not easily frustrated. History has labelled its opinion of the Christian church by calling the period when it had the greatest power "the Dark Ages," and then when the awakening came the impetus to a better day came from the revival of Roman and Greek learning, and science and literature that came from the Mohammedan world.

There is no better side to Christianity in itself. Its goodness can only be measured in terms of its weakness. And social development is possible only when men and women are doubtful as to the truth of the Christian religion and uncertain of its social utility.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

WHAT IS ATHEISM?

I

THE fundamental trump card which theologians (of all shades of opinion) never tire of using against what they regard as the atheistic menace is the old-as-the-hills accusation that Atheism is an entirely negative philosophy. It is a clever move from the debating standpoint. For since in logic no one can "prove" a negative, it follows that a purely negative philosophy is thereby reduced to the rather sorry role of always seeking to demonstrate the impossible. Which is one up for the theist at the start! Innumerable clerical careers have been made by new shuffles of this old debating ace of tricks. Indeed, its monotonous repetition, from Cicero (cp. "De Natural Deorum"—"On the Nature of the Gods") to our latest champions of an ever more desperate orthodoxy, indicates the paucity of real arguments at the disposal of modern theology.

For, in actual fact, the philosophy of Atheism is, essentially, a *positive* philosophy. Its essence is the *positive* assertion, not that "God" does not exist, but that the Universe does, and that it exists necessarily, inevitably, and as a necessary result of its own nature. The fundamental proposition upon which stands or falls the whole philosophy of Atheism is not the non-existence of "God," but the existence of cause and effect. The proposition, an essentially affirmative proposition, that two and two equal four, contains in germ, as the acorn contains the oak, the whole philosophy of Atheism. For no theist as a theist can ever accept that proposition. For such a one, two and two must always equal, not four but five; "God" being always the hypothetical fifth! In final analysis, Atheism is simply determinism, is simply the philosophy of science—every cause produces its necessary effect, and every effect has its efficient cause. Such a philosophic conception does not "deny" the existence of "God." It rules out any such hypothesis as unnecessary and, indeed, as logically impossible. The infinite web of existence, the endlessly complex interplay of cause and effect has no room either in space or time for a hypothetical "first cause," which is, by definition, not even a bona fide "cause," since it is not itself the necessary effect of any preceding cause.

The philosophy of Atheism is, consequently, not a mere critical negation of "God." How, indeed, could it negate something which has, and could have no conceivable existence: the negations of 0 also equal 0? Atheism is not the "denial" of the existence of something which does exist: no one "denies" a real existence outside a lunatic asylum! Contrarily, Atheism merely involves the exclusion of an unnecessary hypothesis.

It is, after all, the theologians themselves who are the dealers in negatives. For, to assert the existence of their hypothetical

deity, they are forced to deny the adequacy of factors which, in every other sphere of activity, they assert to be self-sufficient. For example, in scientific questions no religionist, no theist can be a scientist in his religious capacity. Let us consider the hypothetical case of, say, a Catholic astronomer—there have been astronomers at the Vatican! In his capacity as astronomer, as scientist, he foretells, let us say, an eclipse of the moon on August 15. He reaches this conclusion by the ordinary astronomical processes of observation, deduction and computation. He is dealing, throughout, with purely natural forces. As a scientist he knows no other, and his entire conclusions depend, throughout and entirely, upon the rigorous and unvariable application of cause and effect. Throughout, he assumes that the moon will act in a rational manner, and that, in brief, two and two will always make four.

In short, our hypothetical Catholic scientist becomes a complete atheist for the duration of his scientific labours! He says, like a good atheist: "From self-sufficient causes I predict certain inevitable results." He does not add "D.V."; he does not invoke saints and angels to assist the moon; not even the Blessed Virgin, the Feast of whose Assumption into Heaven, incidentally, falls on August 15, the date of our hypothetical eclipse! In short, he is only a religionist in his spare time. As a scientist he is necessarily an atheist. For the philosophy of Atheism is simply the philosophy of science. And the entire edifice of modern science is built upon its initial assumption of causality.

If, accordingly, Atheism is the philosophy of a self-caused, self-sufficient universe, it follows necessarily that teleological conceptions, conceptions of Purpose either in the Universe at large, or in the life of man upon this minute fraction of the Universe, are entirely ruled out in advance. The Universe does not move consciously and purposefully towards "some far-off Divine Event, towards which the whole creation moves," as a theistic poet (Tennyson) once expressed it in excellent English but with execrable logic! There are no "purposes" in the Universe except what conscious beings put into it. (And as far as our, at present, extremely limited knowledge of the Universe goes, no other animal except man is capable of the necessary abstract thought to have any purpose.) Such a view of nature is, in a certain sense, depressing. None the less, it has its consolations: for we are no longer obligated to believe in such glaring absurdities as that, say, Mr. Winston Churchill, not to mention past and present incumbents of the Bishopric of London, were the conscious considered purpose of an Infinite Intellect!

Accordingly, the Philosophy of Atheism is humanistic in the fullest sense of the term. It is a social philosophy in the fullest sense of the term, since it acknowledges no other purpose, and serves no other ends than those of human society itself. It extends the principle of "self-determination" to the human race. Mankind makes, or mars, his own history, and there is no one else, god or devil, who can do it for him—he must sink or swim by his own unaided efforts.

And, if this be, indeed, so, we are faced with the resulting conclusion that the fortunes of Atheism, as a product, purely and simply, of human society and of human social evolution, cannot be separated from the evolution of human society. Atheism must not and, from its very nature, cannot be separated from the general evolution of the society which has originated it, and in whose future lies its own. The philosophy of Atheism is not a philosophy of "isolationism"; it flourishes in, and not apart from the general processes of human society. The Atheist is not a "Robinson Crusoe," a denizen of an ivory tower remote from the social and intellectual struggles of his species.

Quite the contrary! The whole history of Atheism indicates with overwhelming emphasis that Atheism can only flourish, can, indeed, only exist at all when human society has reached a very advanced level, and when the human intellect has arrived at a similarly advanced level. In "dark ages," whether naturally primitive as in prehistoric times, or artificially induced by religious or political reaction, there is no place for Atheism.

Historically, its only place in such societies has usually been upon the scaffold.

There are no arguments against Atheism, only prejudices! But these prejudices are strong. And they have found and still find strong support in the social conditions of the past and present. For it is, unhappily, the case throughout history that Atheism has only flourished exceptionally, and then usually as the philosophy of élites, of advanced minorities, rather than of the broad popular masses. To find confirmation of this fact let us direct a glance at Atheism and History. For even where the history of the human intellect is concerned, the history of philosophy is often unintelligible without the philosophy that is to be derived only from history.

F. A. RIDLEY.

FABLES FOR MODERNS

THE market square of Shan Zur Rhein lay deserted in the moonlight. Just a lone cat wandered forlornly across the cobbled stones, searching for romance. Alas! it was its destiny not to find it, not upon this most portentous of nights. A rat scuttled through a silver patch of moonlight, but was ignored by the tattered feline, for who can think of food and love at the same time?

Out of the night and wind came a voice, which spoke with solemn accents upon things which it would have been better for mankind not to hear.

"I am Jehovah, the God of all things. It was my sacred hand that was the cause of everything. It was my sacred breath which breathed life into a lump of clay and made it man. O noble man! The most glorious of my myriad creations! O noble man, fall down and worship my sacred name. O noble man, prostrate yourself before my altars and fear my justice! O noble man, shriek and shout my praise, so all my creation may tremble before the sacred din. O noble man, debase your intellect, the most glorious of my gifts to you, that which raises you above the beasts; debase your intellect and accept my truth only. O noble man, grovel in the dust! Grovel, and give thanks to my sacred name, that I have caused you to be!"

Lonesomely the cat wandered through gutters, which reeked of garbage and urine, in search of love and heard not the dreams that thundered above the cobbled stones of the market square of Shan Zur Rhein.

High in the night piled massy clouds, and the wind burst into a crescendo of sound, and the surf thundered on the Lake of Ramakare. The stars wheeled. All Nature answered silently the voice, which had spoken so boastfully and yet so non-existently.

"To you, Jehovah, we bid defiance. You dare to usurp the deeds of creation's eternal mechanism, and call them your own? But this cannot be.

"What need had the amoeba of your breath as it slithered in primæval mud and slime? Where were you when Earth burst from the sun, a glowing blob of fiery elements, which seethed and burned with a creating fervour of their own? Where were you when the mighty star mated with Sol to produce this natural miracle? You were not there!

"How little thought Trynossaurus Rex of your power as, with mighty muscles, he shoved aside the ferns and towering grasses, and fought beside vast marshes. He mated and produced his kind, and never thought of you. You were not there!

"Where were you when the first ape-like creature dropped from the trees on to the ground, to mutato into primitive man? Where were you when he built his first fire, and cooked his first meal? You were not there!

"But, yes, Jehovah, you came at last. When the first altar dripped blood upon the ground, you were there to drink in the odours and laugh.

"But think not that you can usurp the place of natural laws. They created man, and man created you. Man made his own Frankenstein, and called it God. Now slink back into the minds of men, where you belong and where alone you have existence."

Silence hovered above the market square of Shan Zur Rhein. There was the sense of something, which had been, but now had gone. The air was cleaner.

A lone cat meowed in vain upon the cobbled stones and nuzzled a fish head. Shan Zur Rhein was spared the revelations of a God.

W. E. KLEIN.

Ohio, U.S.A.

A DEFENCE OF HATRED

III.

WHAT are we most afraid of to-day? A third world war in which, if it comes, the atom bomb will be used to blast civilisation to bits. What is likely to bring about a third world war? Or rather, *who* is likely to bring about a third world war? So far as we know the only power which possesses atomic bombs is the United States. The Americans are afraid of the monopoly of the atomic bomb passing out of their hands, as in a matter of years it will no doubt do. They are above all afraid of sharing their monopoly with the Soviet Union. Certain American diplomats (Joseph Kennedy for example) publicly advocate dropping atomic bombs on Russia before the Russians are in a position to drop any back. So far as I know, these American diplomats, and the Hearst editors who support them, and those European reactionaries (chiefly Catholics) who look to them with hope in their eyes, are the only people in the world who desire a third world war. We do not. The Russians do not. Most Americans do not—only those men do. So far as there is danger, it is there.

Now what are we to do about it? How do you arrest a conflagration which threatens to destroy a city? You blow up houses in the path of the conflagration. You fight destruction with destruction. And how do you arrest national hatred which threatens to destroy civilisation? In the same way: you must fight destruction with destruction. You must use class and ideological hatred to exorcise national hatred, directing them particularly at those who are whipping up national hatred. After all, they deserve no mercy. They asked for it.

There is no other way. Conscientious objection to war may satisfy the soul of the conscientious objector, but it never yet stopped a war. All struggle is painful; but if struggle there must be, I prefer a class or ideological struggle to a national struggle. Hence I welcome every development which hampers and embarrasses those big business interests which threaten the world with atomic warfare. More power to the elbow of the C.I.O.! I remember too how that stout old Tory, Samuel Johnson (and what a good hater he was!) once shocked Boswell by drinking a toast "to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies." We have read lately of lynchings of negroes in the Southern States. May the soul of old John Brown, the rebel of Harper's Ferry, still go marching on! It has work to do.

I come now to an objection. There is a traditional belief that civil war is more destructive and more cruel than international war. It may have been so in the past. It is certainly not so now. International war is now fought with atomic bombs, and may very soon be fought with disease germs which wipe out lives in millions at a time. There is this to be said in comparison for civil war: you cannot fight a civil war with atom bombs and disease germs, for the simple reason that, if you do, you exterminate your own people equally with the enemy. In international war the belligerents are geographically separated; in civil war they are mixed up together. Of the two undoubted evils, therefore, civil war is now the lesser. Lenin's maxim, "Turn the international war into a civil war," was coined by

him as a contribution to the technique of revolution. It may turn out in the last resort to be the sheet-anchor of a sinking civilisation. But only in the last resort. It will be better if civil upheavals, short of civil war, break the power of big business before we allow it to sink civilisation, and best of all if it can be broken by the mere display of strength, without actual violence.

By this time some of you may be saying: "This man is obviously one of those venomous, creeping, crawling Communists against whom Mr. Churchill warned us the other day. He is briefed by Moscow and by King Street. Let us not listen to him any longer." To such I reply: Keep your jeers for youngsters. My withers are unwrung. I am speaking to my own brief. I do not know whether any party endorses me or not, neither do I care. It was not a Russian and it was not a Communist who taught me that capitalist democracy was an organised sham, in which fraud had succeeded to feudal force, and in which the majority, with no leisure for thought or education, were the natural victims of every sophistry and lie propagated by platform and press. It was not a Russian and it was not a Communist who taught me that only an active minority could inaugurate the revolution which would usher in Socialism, and that for that minority to disregard the opinion (or lack of opinion) of the inert majority was no more tyranny than to prevent a drunken man from getting out of a moving railway carriage. It was not a Russian and it was not a Communist who taught me that frontiers were an anachronism, that love of country was no nobler than love of class, and that the Socialist should welcome as an ally everything which made for the disruption and disintegration of the empire of which he was a subject, and for the union of the workers of the world in a firm and equal friendship. These lessons were taught me over forty years ago, before I ever heard of Lenin or Stalin, by Ernest Belfort Bax, the friend of Friedrich Engels and of William Morris, and a Social Democrat in days when Social Democracy had not yet changed the colour of its flag from red to pink and from pink to something like a dirty yellow. Those were my beliefs then. If they are still my beliefs, it is not I who am the renegade.

The ancient philosopher Empedocles taught that love and hatred, *eros* and *eris*, were the two powers which eternally bore sway over the world. The men who built up the modern progressive movement—the Radicals of the early nineteenth century, the Chartists of a hundred years ago, the pioneers of trade unionism and co-operation, and the multitude of workers, known and unknown, who laid the foundation of the Labour Party—were moved by love and hatred: love of their comrades, and of the common man and woman who sought sufficiency and security and found them not; hatred of the hard-faced landlord and capitalist, and of the frock-coated politicians who hoodwinked the people for pelf and place. We cannot picture early Radicalism without Cobbett, or Chartism without Ernest Jones, or the early Labour Party without Keir Hardie, or any of these men as without hatred. Their spirit is still alive, but in the leaders who have ridden to power on the crest of its wave it is very largely dead. They have gone to Parliament; they have joined the best club in London; and it is difficult to hate and fight members of the same club as yourselves. Far too many Labour politicians have forgotten how to hate, and in forgetting how to hate they have also forgotten how to love.

But the enemy has not forgotten. The Ethiopian does not change his skin, nor the leopard his spots. I know my history. The Tories of to-day are the descendants of the men who passed the Combination Acts, applauded Peterloo, and sent the Tolpuddle martyrs to the antipodes; the grandsons of the men who hounded Bradlaugh from the House of Commons and chased the people from Trafalgar Square on Bloody Sunday; the sons of the men who led the Curragh mutiny and broke the General Strike. They pretend that they have changed. Like certain other hypocrites of old, they say: "If we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." Let us answer them as those other hypocrites

were answered: "Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye offspring of vipers, how shall ye escape the judgment of hell?"

To make the world safe, not for democracy, but for common men and women means unrelenting struggle. Civilisation is at stake—not the "Christian civilisation" of which the friends of Franco cant, but the dearly bought fruit of the labour of millions of men and women like you and me all the world over—men and women who want peace, but whom press lords and dollar diplomats will not leave at peace. It is not pleasant to hate. But as long as hateful things and hateful people exist on earth, it will be necessary to hate and destroy them, that we may live and not die.

ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON.

A DEAD HORSE ?

THE Freethought lecturer of to-day is often told by a member of his audience that he is "flogging a dead horse," that the struggle against religion is won, and that he could be doing more useful work elsewhere. "Elsewhere," of course, is a very vague location, but in such instances it usually means the field of politics, and more particularly the political party to which the critic himself belongs. It is highly improbable that the choice of party would meet with general acceptance by the rest of the audience, but in view of the frequency of the criticism it is advisable that we should give it due consideration. For it is a curiosity of human psychology that the success of one's cause may prove in some ways a frustration, ending a struggle which has gratified one's pugnacity, produced comradeship, and so on. It is just possible, then, that we may be loath to admit that our fight is over and our work no longer of value.

The power of religious institutions has been lessened in all "advanced" countries. The Christian churches can no longer dictate to governments nor thunder their orders to the people under fear of punishment here and hereafter, as was their wont. The people as a whole attend church less frequently, and pay little attention to the statements of clergymen. Indeed, most of them enter religious buildings only for christening, confirmation, marriage and funeral ceremonies, and are far more concerned with the utterances of Winston Churchill than those of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is upon such points as these that the criticism is founded, and they are indisputable—so far as they go. But this is only one side of the picture and it is important that we should take a glimpse at the other.

In the first place, so long as the churches wield any power whatsoever over individuals or communities, our fight remains unwon, for apart from the actual harm being done, there is always the danger that such power might be increased, with dismal results for mankind. It is a serious mistake to overlook this threat or to regard the churches as tolerant and liberalised, as so many political parties do. Retrogression is by no means unknown in human history, and there is no valid reason to account for our own civilisation immune from it. The aim of the various religious institutions is to extend their influence, and the Roman Catholic Church is at least straightforward in this respect. It makes no secret of its desire to control the world, and it hardly requires a prophet to foretell what would happen if that organisation succeeded in its endeavour. The late H. G. Wells recognised this menace—which most political parties overlook or treat with indifference—and he wrote in "Crux Ansa" (p. 83):—

"The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church puts the Faith before any other social or political consideration, and the Roman Catholics in any country and under any form of government constitute an essentially alien body. The over-confident liberalism of the early nineteenth century enfranchised this body of outsiders, believing it would in some mysterious manner play the game of mutual toleration which seemed so natural to the

essentially sceptical and secular liberal mentality. Nothing of the sort ensued. Steadily, persistently, the Roman Catholic Church has worked for the destruction of that very liberalism which restored it to political influence. Persecuting relentlessly where it was in the ascendant, and canting about individual liberty of conscience wherever it was faced by a modern organisation of society, this mental cancer has spread itself back to destroy the health and hope of our modern world."

Compared with Catholicism, the other Christian churches are rather insignificant, but they are far from unimportant, and constitute hindrances to the progressive development of society in proportion to their power. In this country the Bible is still used for oaths and treated with respect. Parliament has its prayers and so do our schools, the radio and press emit Christian propaganda, Sunday is still a special day, and in numerous different ways Christianity still makes a considerable impression upon society.

Principally, of course, the impression is upon the children, and this channel is exploited to the full, with disastrous results. The Christian teaching of their early years at home and at school is only completely eradicated with great difficulty, though other factors in life may force them to discard parts of the Scriptures. In adult life they may not accept the Biblical story of the Creation, they may even reject the whole of the Old Testament, and possibly the Virgin Birth, but the majority of them will still believe in a supernatural being responsible for a creation, and will revere Jesus Christ as a great teacher—perhaps as the "first socialist." Thus is their reasoning ability impaired. And make no mistake, a large percentage of those persons who have been indoctrinated in childhood accept the Christian superstition in all its essentials, Virgin Birth included!

Obviously this has to be countered, and the Freethought propagandist sets out to tackle the job, striving to induce the people to think for themselves instead of accepting the words of parsons, priests—and politicians—on faith. If independent thinking was encouraged in children, the cultural level of the adult population would be considerably improved. As it is, abundant evidence of the incapacity to reason intelligently can be found, on the one hand in any bookshop or library, and on the other, wherever human beings congregate and converse. Metaphysical nonsense is produced by authors of to-day to an alarming degree. Men of standing, university professors and the like, display a fondness for high-faluting absurdities in preference to plainly stated common sense. The problems with which they deal are not always simple, of course, but involved foolishness does not help our understanding of them. "Life," "mind" and "soul" are just three of the topics on which they write profusely yet with paucity. But this state of affairs will continue as long as there is a religious education and environment from which neither writer nor reader has freed himself.

Centuries of Christianity have had a tremendous effect upon our society, and the continuance of religious influence in childhood and youth is perpetuating that effect. Most people in this and other lands rarely think for themselves: they accept their opinions at second-hand, and those opinions are the ones that the powers that be want them to hold. At the present time, a large section of the world's populace takes its opinions from Rome, while other sections for the most part adopt the nationalistic ideas of the country in which they happen to have been born. All may prate about a "brave new world," but it will always be a hope for the future while such conditions persist. Democracy, in itself, offers no solution, for the vote of a fool nullifies that of an intelligent person, and the mass of the electorate can be easily swayed. Something more is required, which, so far as I can see, can only be supplied by Freethought. When men and women are able to think clearly and form their own opinions, then they will cease to be tractable and an easy prey for dictators. Then they will be less ready to follow leaders "even unto death."

C. McCALL.

ACID DROPS

We know little about Sir Bernard Paget, save that he was a soldier, and probably a distinguished one. But we get a sample of his sociological value by his declaration at a religious meeting in Glasgow that we must have two things constantly before us, those of Religion and Education. All we need say of this very commonplace advice is that the two things named are in opposition to each other. The essence of religion, any religion, is giving people set doctrines that must not be questioned. Education consists, not in telling people what they *must* believe, but in bringing out all that capacity can unfold. Sir B. Paget's capacity as an educational leader is indicated by his surprise that after what we have gone through in the last few years "religion should count so little in the lives of men." We have a deal to thank men and women for getting out of our war difficulties, but we do not see any grounds whatever for thanking the gods. Sir B. Paget should stick to his trade.

The Reverend Brinnley Jones, Rector of St. Matthew's Church, Ipswich, is arranging to have a part of his Church turned into a theatre. He says "people are so tired of sermons" and he fancies he sees a way of filling his church—where and when the plays are shown. Well, we have no doubt that if the plays are good, and not saturated in religion, and if the actors are good, and charges modest, the theatrical part of the Church should be a success. And if any of the plays are of a very humorous kind they will certainly bring many who do not usually attend. If some of the plays display clowns we could name several preachers who would fill the gap.

After all, a great many of the religious ceremonies in Egypt, Greco, and elsewhere were played as theatrical performances, and modern writers have attributed nearly all the New Testament exhibitions to sacred dramatical performances. Such scenes as the raising of the dead; Jesus pulling a plank to the desired size to help the husband of the mother of Jesus; the feeding of a multitude of people with a few loaves and fishes and having more food left than there was in the commencement—nowadays these would be very taking exhibitions.

The other day the "Evening Standard" published a full-length portrait of the Princess Elizabeth wearing a new laurel leaf hat. Just that and no comment. Whether it was meant as an advertisement for the hat or the Princess we know not, but we may rest assured that our daily press will not hesitate to say that it is of real importance.

The newspapers remain fairly well filled concerning the matter of Sunday cinemas. When all is said and done this is solely a religious matter. No one is the worse for going to the "Pictures," and it is not fair the clergy wanting to close cinemas because they hold their show on that day. Evidently people prefer the pictures to the church, and it is really not playing the game to shut up shows belonging to other people. We believe that there is an Act which prohibits anything that seriously interferes with trade. We wonder what would happen if someone summoned the heads of this or that church on the charge of injuring a legal business such as that displayed on the screen.

One Catholic has reacted very strongly to the attack made by the "Universe" on the way the B.B.C. has been lately treating, or rather ignoring, the claims of the Roman Church over the air. He is Fr. Andrew, who, it appears, is the Catholic adviser to the B.B.C. and—though he also has a little grouse—he feels compelled to point out that Catholic services have increased three-fold during the last twelve months. Services have come from Scotland, and even from Ulster they are once a month. In other words, the more one gives in to the Roman Church the more it whines it is not being fairly treated. We wonder how many of the other Christian sects would be given any chance of broadcasting if Roman Catholicism had the chance of ruling the roost? As for Freethought—well. . . !

The inhuman side of Christianity was clearly shown over the historic discussion as to what would happen to babies if they died before they were baptised. Theologians are, and always have been, divided on the matter. Some have held that they would go straight to hell, others have decided that children will go through some penalty for dying before they were baptised, and others that they will go to some special place in heaven, and so forth. The only plain fact is that the discussion is one that decent people would consider too childish to take seriously, and would probably be too disgusted with the implied brutality to bother about it. Still it is a phase of Christianity that is worth thinking about as an example of the brutality and foolishness when the Christian creed is examined with a frown or a laugh. We hope that it will be mostly with a laugh.

It is a curious thing that when religion is on the carpet, believers can seldom be either truthful, useful, or even amusing. To those who look at history from afar the fact of having a world war initiated by countries in which Christianity has been the strongest single force in operation, it would seem that Christianity failed either because of its intense weakness or because of its essential anti-human quality. Here, for example, is a leading article in the "Durham Chronicle"—Durham, by the way, is a fairly strong Christian centre—which calmly tells us that evil around us is due to "the religious atmosphere disappearing." But in that case what kind of power did Christianity possess if it could not give something of a more enduring character? Take the whole story of Christianity as an historic item and it has failure written all over it.

The writer in the "Durham Chronicle" passes from false statements to impudence when he says that "The religious atmosphere is disappearing in a mist of Secularism." That is indeed putting things upside down. Until a century and a half ago the dominating fact of which men were conscious to the greatest extent was connected with religion. Secularism, as a recognised factor in life is little more than a century old, and the editor must be very foolish—which we do not believe—if he puts the last two world wars as being an outcome of Secularism. We have been living in an atmosphere of religion, and mainly in that of Christianity. At best we can indict Christianity as showing its weakness for good, and if we turn to unbiased history we should connect much that was evil as coming from Christianity in action.

The "Glasgow Citizen," for November 25, gives the following, and as absolute truth:—

"As Father P. Mayhew, vicar of St. Aidan's Anglo-Catholic Church, Roundhay Road, Leeds, walked to his pulpit to give his 15-minute sermon, 24 choirboys were handed paper-backed copies of detective yarns, cowboy-and-bandit thrillers, and the like.

"Heedless of many anonymous letters condemning his blood-and-thunder plan to keep the boys happy and not 'bored-stiff' at sermon time, Father Mayhew now appeals for further books of adventure.

"Sermons for adults are not suitable for children," he says."

That is the best humane touch connected with religion that we have met for some time.

The "Sheffield Telegraph" for November 2 says that the Rev. John Webb (Methodist) is trying to make Christians of citizens by giving the information that some unnamed person is telling children that "religion is nonsense." We have not heard of such a man, and we cannot imagine a man who had outgrown religion to grab little children and tell them religion is nonsense. But if it were true is that worse than telling children who look up to their elders for instruction that Christianity is true when they know that the best brains in the country know that it is not true? Mr. Webb tells his listeners that, "It is high time we did something." We agree, and what they might do is to tell young people the truth about Christianity and other religions and so put them on the way to form their own conclusions.

"THE FREETHINKER"

41, Gray's Inn Road,
Telephone No.: Holborn 2601. London, W.C. 1.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

- J. ENKEL.—Have sent on your letter to the proper quarter.
- J. A.—We are surprised at what you say. We looked for better regard to principle. But we remember Meredith's summing up the morality of politics: "Politics is like climbing the greasy pole, mutton or no mutton, you are sure to get the grease." The morale of politics is always fairly low.
- A. Z.—Received, and will appear as soon as possible.
- C. HOLLINGHAM.—Thanks, but there is already an answer in print.
- F. B. BOULTON.—For "Freethinker," £5 5s.
- A. MITELONIS (Detroit, U.S.A.).—To "The Freethinker," £1 12s. 4d.

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

We seldom publish complimentary letters, but we think this will interest many of our readers:—

"Please accept my thanks for help and pleasure received during the past forty years through your articles in the 'Freethinker.' After a term of three years in Africa as a missionary, I returned home to find that the influence of the Church was being used to advocate war between two Christian peoples—Boer and British. This caused me to realise that the God of Peace counted for little when earth demanded support for war. If the followers of Jesus could so readily discard his words about love and peace, I wondered how much also was mere pretence. A friend of mine gave me a copy of the 'Freethinker.' With its help I found that my beliefs were not logical or true. Hence my gratitude to that trinity of Cohen, Lloyd and Foote. Your articles in particular have always been a great help on account of their logic expressed in plain, homely language. For forty years I have enjoyed being an Atheist, free from the absurdities of the Christian superstition. May you carry on for years to enlighten men and enjoy health and happiness."

We do not usually publish letters of this kind, although we receive many. But some of those who have worked with us will realise that their efforts are not without appreciation.

What complete faith our religious leaders have in those who have their heads muddled by religious training. For example, the newspapers and all the Churches have dwelt on the lawlessness that is now chronic for us day after day. Of course, to honest men and women there is no surprise. For over five years we have all been fighting, in one way and another, one of the largest of wars that have been waged. The war has been fought with a complete disregard of the higher aspects of life.

That, we hasten to say, is the feature that marks all wars, whether they are inevitable or not. War means, and always has meant to sensible people, a suspension of the equalities between people and the setting aside of most of the laws which mark a civilised society. If there is more dishonesty and brutality to-day than existed before the "Great" War was fought, it is obviously a product of war. And, indeed, the man who is horrified at the conduct of the people since the war ceased—perhaps we ought to say "was suspended"—must be either a fool or a first hand on humbug.

But the greatest expression comes to us from the Churches and our religious leaders. Neither of them—we might add our very courageous Members of Parliament—have the courage to honestly analyse the reason for this outbreak of robbery in streets and houses, or the dishonesty that is going on in every direction. The Churches, with tongue in cheek, bawl and bawl of the lack of religion, and shout at the top of their lungs that the people are suffering from a want of religion. But there is no other single force that has wielded the same power as our churches and chapels. Religion has been pushed into the young, and the older ones have until recently been believers in religion in considerable numbers. And the result is—what? Well, it lies before us in the state of the world, as well as in the behaviour of individuals. If the dishonesty, the cheating, the brutality and the cant had been present, say, in Russia, or China, or some other country, we would have our Christian leaders explain that we are seeing the consequences of disregarding the true God. Well, we have seen the results with a society that has kept Christianity before the people. The result is that lawlessness, dishonesty, burglaries, etc., is greater now than it has been for many years in this Christian country of ours.

The Blackburn Branch N.S.S. has a lady speaker to-day. Mrs. M. Whitefield of Glasgow lectures in the Public Lecture Halls, Northgate, at 3-15 p.m., on "The Philosophy of an Atheist." The local saints will make every effort to ensure a good audience with a good attendance of ladies. Admission is free.

The Birmingham Branch N.S.S. will hold a Whist Drive and Social on Saturday, December 14, at 38, John Bright Street (Room 13), at 7 p.m. Tickets, including refreshments, are 2s. each, and include the possibility of winning a prize. Those in search of an enjoyable evening should make a point of joining the company.

The belief in God is one which, with even the most devout, assumes different degrees in intensity. Religious autobiographies are full of accounts of men whose minds have been constantly torn by doubt. The doubt is always likely, and it suggests itself to good and bad alike. In the most civilised times the doubt is suggested and strengthened in a thousand different ways, while there is little or nothing from which it can draw renewed strength. All is not right with the world, even though God may be in his heaven. Punishments and rewards do not follow in a manner they should follow if the religious theory be true. Instead of the religious basis of the moral sanction being strengthened by time and experience, its efficacy undergoes steady deterioration. And even if the belief in God never wavered in its intensity the religious sanction would still be of very doubtful value. A slight punishment may deter, if it is inevitable; a much severer one will fail if its operation is doubtful. Remoteness of reward or punishment frustrates the purpose of both. A punishment that is certain to take place to-day or to-morrow may have some value as a deterrent. If it is to take place fifty years hence its value will not be great; while if it is only likely to take place in the very distant future it will be of no value at all. But the presumed sanctions of religion are neither near nor certain. All the probabilities are against such a sanction exerting a great and steady influence on human nature; and the facts support the probabilities. All that the power of religion seems able to do is to rouse particular feelings into a state of temporary activity, for them to become quiescent so soon as the exciting cause is withdrawn.

THE MYTH PROBLEM AND THE DEVIL

ONE of the points which the Rationalist believers in a real man Jesus seem always to urge is, that it is the duty of the Mythicist to account for the origin of his story as related in the Gospels.

It is not enough, they declare, or quite fair to ask for evidence of the existence of Jesus. That is admittedly not easy to find as his story is so covered with myth and fabulous accounts that they have almost submerged the real man behind them. How could the story have originated in the first place if a real man had not been there—a man whose memory left an indelible impression, and whose acts and sayings were in consequence magnified to such an extent that his later followers took him to be a God?

The Historicist will go still a little further. He points out that even that arch-heretic, John M. Robertson, has admitted that there may have been behind the mythical story of Jesus some unknown man—or men. And if Robertson can make such a striking admission, the Historicist may well feel that he has a better case behind him than the Mythicist is willing to concede.

To put the problem in another way, it is contended that those of us who maintain that Jesus is a myth, pure and simple, must not only be able to give a clear account of the origin of Christianity, but show how the story could possibly have arisen without a real man as the Founder—as even Sir James Frazer was forced to admit. No one more than this noted writer had shown the part custom, myth, folklore, and ignorance played in the origins of all kinds of religions, and yet he would have nothing to do with any theory of Christianity which left out the "man" Jesus. Let me admit that by vigorously contesting the issue in this way, the Historicist can put up a good show—and yet I feel his case must fail in the light of sober analysis.

First of all, I do not see how we can possibly deny that behind the story of Jesus there may have been some "unknown" man or men. I am willing to admit much more. Behind the story are many myths as well—all told of Gods who were once believed in with just as much fervour as is Christ these days. Take as an example the story of Robinson Crusoe. Nobody in his senses would deny the plain fact that the story of this gallant hero of our boyhood is pure, unadulterated fiction. There may have been as well some symbolism in relation to Defoe's own life behind the story. Yet even the average schoolboy knows that the idea of making Crusoe live alone on an island was taken from the well-known account of Alexander Selkirk, whose years of solitude on the island of Juan Fernandez, where he had been marooned, were described by his rescuer, Captain Woodes Rogers, in his account of circumnavigating the world published in 1712. Selkirk actually lived, but does this make "Robinson Crusoe" a real life story?

It is not easy to *invent* a complete narrative, and some of the details of the God Jesus living in this world may quite well have been taken from real life stories. Does any Historicist actually claim that every event in the life of Jesus, every saying and parable, are entirely unique with him? That not one story or saying can be paralleled anywhere else?

And when we are asked to account for the origin of Christianity apart from a real founder, I point out that we are never asked to account for the origin of the Egyptian religion in the same way. Why is this?

How can you account for the thousands of years of complete belief in Osiris, Isis and Horus? Is it contended that there was once this happy domestic triumvirate, just simple human beings, and that only later were they turned into Deities? How do we account for Jupiter and his galaxy of minor Gods inhabiting Olympia—with occasional excursions into purely human territory?

Mythicists like J. M. Robertson, Arthur Drews, Edourd Dujardin and others have put forward many illuminating speculations on the origins of the story of Jesus Christ, but

unless something like mathematical proof is offered, it is not very difficult to pick holes in these hypotheses. You need only pose speculation against speculation, or you demand better proof, and it is not often easy to reply.

But I certainly feel inclined, whenever I am asked to account for Christianity without a real Jesus, to ask my opponent to account for Christianity without a real Devil. Although His Infernal Majesty is not the hero of the Gospels, he yet plays a big part in them. What I should like to know is, what made the Gospel writers insert so many adventures of the Devil in their account of Jesus? What is the origin of the story in which Jesus is carried about by the Devil and eventually put upon the pinnacle of the Temple? Surely the "sacred" authors must have known that some of the immediate followers of Jesus would indignantly deny that any Devil carried their Saviour through the air, or indeed that they ever saw a Devil at all?

I know it is the fashion for Historicists, in common with many "Modern" Churchmen, contemptuously to reject the Gospel Devil as either credulous nonsense, or something "symbolic." Not one ever attempts to account for him or his insertion into the "Holy" narrative. I have even met pious and all-believing Christians who drew the line at the Devil, and refused to believe either in his existence or in his aerial voyage with "our Lord." The way the difficulty is surmounted is by simply saying, "I don't believe it." Thus is the matter settled, and the Devil impolitely escorted out of the Holy Book.

But if I, in common with other Mythicists, wish to eliminate Jesus in precisely the same way, I am sternly forbidden. Where, I am firmly asked, could his story have come from if he had not actually lived? And when I ask the same question of the Devil—"Where could *his* story have come from if he had never lived?"—the only answer I get is a stony silence. But I hope some Historicist will get out of his shell for once, and provide a real solution to my question; for unless he does so, I am compelled to come to the only one possible, namely, that the story of Jesus is pure invention, just as is the story of the Devil. In other words, both are literary creations.

The real facts of the matter are that the origins of Christianity are hopelessly obscure. We simply do not know how the story of Jesus Christ got credence—any more than we know how Moses became firmly believed in, or the origin of the story of the Devil or even those of David and Solomon. There must have been a time when the world knew nothing of any of them and then we find they come into a book somehow, or into a narrative, and there are people who begin to believe. Or perhaps they formed part of a story orally told and only later written down. But the stories did not spring into existence ready made, so to speak. They grew and grew, they began to be embellished and preached, and in an age of ignorance, when history as such could never be challenged (for there were precious little written materials with which to do so), any story, any legend, could be imposed on an ignorant multitude and be believed.

The story of Jesus is packed with utter nonsense and the only way to save it is to separate what is incredible from what "could have been." Why any of it should be saved at all is a mystery I have not been able to solve, and I wish someone who calls himself a Rationalist would tell me. In none of the books purporting to prove his existence is the slightest clue to this.

For my own part, I am content to put the Christian Deity with all the other Gods who have misled mankind; and I am sure that one day he will, like them, be merely an object of literary curiosity and inquiry, just as they are. It has been "exit Christ" in the past; it will be "exit Jesus" in the future.

H. CUTNER.

When Zarathustra was alone, he spake thus unto his heart: "Can it actually be possible! This old saint in his forest hath not heard aught of *God being dead*."—NIETZSCHE.

WAS BYRON A CHRISTIAN?

[This article was written by G. W. Foote, founder of "The Freethinker." Chesterton never replied. That at least showed wisdom. It is reprinted because it is to-day as fresh as when first published.]

MR. CECIL CHESTERTON protests against our calling Byron a "sceptic," and claims him as a good Christian. Mr. Chesterton appeals to Byron's letters and Byron's "works." We also will appeal to both, and show Mr. Chesterton that he is mistaken.

Byron did repudiate "the religious dogmas of Christianity," and did not merely assail the "follies and hypocrisies of religious people."

There are many evidences of this fact scattered over his letters. Writing to Ensign Long, on April 16, 1807, he said:—

"Of religion I know nothing, at least in its favour. We have fools in all sects, and imposters in most; why should I believe mysteries no one understands, because written by men who chose to mistake madness for inspiration, and style themselves Evangelicals?"

Byron was then in his twentieth year, and it may be objected that his mind was not then ripe, but the earlier facts of his mental history will help to interpret the later.

Four years afterwards, in 1811, writing to his friend, the Rev. Francis Hodgson, he said:—

"I do not believe in any revealed religion. . . I will have nothing to do with your immortality; we are miserable enough in this life, without the absurdity of speculating upon another. . . The basis of your religion is injustice, the Son of God, the pure, the immaculate, the innocent, is sacrificed for the guilty."

We will now jump forward to 1822, the year of Shelley's death, and two years before the death of Byron. Mr. Chesterton quotes from a letter of Shelley's to Horace Smith, in which he says that if he had any influence over Byron he would "employ it to eradicate from his great mind the delusions of Christianity, which, in spite of his reason, seem perpetually to recur." Mr. Chesterton regards this as decisive. But we are astonished that he does not see how it helps to prove that Byron *was* a "sceptic." The delusions of Christianity could not "recur" without having been absent, and if they recurred in spite of his reason, we must infer that his reason had rejected them.

Shelley's "speculative opinions," with which Byron desired to have nothing in common, went very much beyond the distinctive truth of Christianity. Shelley was an open and notorious Atheist; he also held strong and "startling" views on political, social, and ethical questions. Byron was, if anything, a Deist; and, except in regard to Republicanism, he had little sympathy with Shelley's numerous "heresies"—above all with his Atheism, which at that time was worse than the cry of "mad dog."

Mr. Chesterton ought really to have read Byron's two letters to Moore in March, 1822, more carefully. They should be taken, also, in connection with a letter to Mr. Hoppner, dated April 3, 1821. Byron placed a natural child of his in a convent school. He meant her not to have an English education, and thought that by living "abroad, with a fair foreign education and a portion of five or six thousand pounds, she might marry very respectably." It was a part of such an arrangement, of course, that she should become a Roman Catholic. But it was natural that Byron should not put it in that way. "It is, besides, my wish," he wrote, "that she should be a Roman Catholic, which I look upon as the best religion, as it is assuredly the oldest of the various branches of Christianity." These are surely not the words of a believer. If they are, it follows that Byron was a Roman Catholic—which is quite a novel view of his religious condition, and one that Mr. Chesterton would hardly welcome. Now for the two letters to Moore. Mr. Chesterton quotes just enough for his own purpose. Had he quoted a little more freely

he would have spoiled his case. Byron does say, "I am educating my daughter a strict Catholic." He does say, "I incline, myself, very much to the Catholic doctrines." But between these two statements he gives a reason, and Mr. Chesterton has omitted it. "For I think," Byron says, "people can never have *enough* of religion, if they have any." It appears that Mr. Chesterton is blind to Byron's humour when it plays the deuce with his argument. That it *was* humour is corroborated by a striking passage in the second letter to Moore. Byron says:—

"I am really a great admirer of tangible religion; and am breeding one of my daughters a Catholic, that she may have her hands full. It is by far the most elegant worship, hardly excepting the Greek mythology. What with incense, pictures, statues, altars, shrines, relics, and the real presence, confession, absolution—there is something sensible to grasp at. Besides, it leaves no possibility of doubt; for those who swallow their Deity, really and truly, in transubstantiation, can hardly find anything else otherwise than easy of digestion."

Mr. Chesterton must pardon us for saying that the brother of "G. K. C." cannot, in his heart of hearts, regard this as serious. Byron's humour, not his piety, is speaking in these sentences.

A little later on, Byron says, "I do assure you I am a very good Christian." So far Mr. Chesterton is right. But there is an important addition. "Whether you will believe me in this," Byron says, "I do not know." The very expression implies that he *did* know. Moore did *not* believe him. In the "Conclusion" of his "Life of Lord Byron," he says that "Lord Byron was, to the last, a sceptic." He denies, what does not need denying, that Byron was, like his friend Matthews, an Atheist. He even denies that Byron was ever a "confirmed unbeliever." But he does not say *in what*. The poet was evidently an unbeliever in Christianity when he wrote those letters to Long and Hodgson, and there is no serious evidence that he changed his mind subsequently.

Is there not a certain trickery in the adjective? Byron was or was not a "confirmed unbeliever" according to the meaning attached to the word "confirmed." Certainly he was not like Shelley; he did think out his opinions to definite issues, and stand by them. But it is perfectly obvious that he was not a Christian in any honest meaning of the word.

Turning now to Byron's poems, it is all very well for Mr. Chesterton to attribute the poet's satirical treatment of Christianity to his "humour" and "combativeness"—with or without the adjectives; but Byron was consciously and deliberately a soldier of freedom, and his satire was not mere rollicking fun or wild audacity; it was the gleaming whirl of his bright keen sword when it played around falsehood, wrong, and oppression. He hated, for one thing, the doctrine of heaven and hell and exclusive salvation. The strong and almost cynical lines upon his dog's grave are well known. In the magnificent "Vision of Judgment"—the very top of English satire—he speaks of hell contemptuously as—

"that immortal fry
Of almost everybody born to die."

In the great shipwreck scene in "Don Juan" he damns the same wretched doctrine:—

"And their baked lips, with many a bloody crack,
Suck'd in the moisture, which like nectar stream'd;
Their throats were ovens, their swol'n tongues were black,
As the rich man's in hell, who vainly scream'd
To the beggar, who could not rain back
A drop of dew, when every drop had seem'd
To taste of heaven—if this be true, indeed,
Some Christians have a comfortable creed."

In the same splendid epic—for such it is—Byron takes his own way of pouring ridicule upon other Christian dogmas:—

“The truth is, I’ve grown lately rather phthical:
I don’t know what the reason is—the air,
Perhaps; but, as I suffer from the shocks
Of illness, I grow much more orthodox.

The first attack at once proved the Divinity;
(But *that* I never doubted, nor the Devil);
The next, the Virgin’s mystical virginity;
The third, the usual Origin of Evil;
The fourth at once establish’d the whole Trinity,
On so incontrovertible a level,
That I devoutly wish’d the three were four,
On purpose to believe so much the more.”

The first half of the second line is entirely serious—“*That* I never doubted.” We have already said that Byron was not an Atheist. The second half of the sentence is either quizzical, or it is the poet’s subtle way of suggesting that God and the Devil hang together, each being the other’s logical complement. All the rest of the stanza is unadulterated satire—even to the wicked wish that forms its fitting conclusion. We know that old Sir Thomas Browne expressed a somewhat similar wish. It was not like to like, however, but like in difference. For the seventeenth century Christian was so full of faith that he sincerely wished his religion were more difficult of belief than it was—which seems well-nigh impossible—while the nineteenth century Sceptic only employs the wish as a means of raising fresh laughter at a religious absurdity.

Byron saw clearly enough that if Theism, or perhaps Pantheism, survived in the future it would be independent of all the deities of the world’s worship. He did not add “Christ” to the following passage in “Childe Harold,” but it inevitably suggests itself:—

“Look on this spot—a nation’s sepulchre!
Abode of gods, whose shrines no longer burn.
Even gods must yield—religions take their turn:
’Twas Jove’s—’tis Mahomet’s—and other creeds
Will rise with other years, till man shall learn
Vainly his incense soars, his victim bleeds;

Poor child of Doubt and Death, whose hope is built on reeds.”

There is not a line or a word in Byron implying the slightest belief in the deity of Jesus Christ, but many a line and word implying the contrary. Even the expression “diviner still” in connecting his name with that of Socrates is necessarily a tribute to him only as a man and a teacher. Three lines in “Don Juan” represent the poet as a Pantheist, far removed from all the special doctrines of Christianity:—

“My altars are the mountains and the ocean,
Earth, air, stars—all that springs from the great Whole
Which hath produc’d, and will receive the soul.”

The pantheistic conception is also expressed, with regard to the whole life of this planet, in another powerful stanza of the same poem:—

“Between two worlds life hovers like a star,
’Twixt night and morn, upon the horizon verge:
How little do we know that which we are!
How less what we may be! The eternal surgo
Of time and tide rolls on, and bears afar
Our bubbles; as the old burst, new emerge,
Lash’d from the foam of ages; while the graves
Of empires heave but like some passing waves.”

Man’s personal immortality is a ridiculous idea in view of that conception of the life of the world. And it must be confessed that Byron constantly recurred to the idea in a spirit of scepticism. The following lines present a very pertinent reflection:—

“Our days are too brief for affording
Space to disrepute what *no one* ever could
Decide, and *every body one day* will
Know very clearly—or at least lie still.”

All the talk of all men, and all women, and all clergymen (Sydney Smith’s three sexes) does not alter the fact that we must die to ascertain whether there is a future life, and that, after all, there may be nothing to be known—and nothing to know it.

The eternal Whence and Whither, questions which George Meredith treats with such high disdain, haunts the human mind without ever finding an answer:—

“What are we? and whence came we? what shall be
Our *ultimate* existence? what’s our present?
Are questions answerless, and yet incessant.”

In the very first Canto of “Don Juan” the sceptical position with regard to a future life is stated with a brilliance that fools might mistake for frivolity, and a force that leaves nothing to be added:—

“Few mortals know what end they would be at,
But whether glory, power, or love, or treasure,
The path is through perplexing ways; and when
The goal is gain’d, we die, you know—and then—
What then?—I do not know, no more do you—
And so good night.”

How a man of intelligence can read Byron and conclude that he was really and truly a Christian, passes our comprehension. Not only in the text, but in the spirit—not only in the lines, but between them—the scepticism of this great writer seems to us as obvious as the sun on a glowing summer day. The whole tone of his compositions—and there *is* such a thing as tone, although it is indefinable—is either non-Christian or anti-Christian. It was a true instinct on the part of those who denounced him as a lost soul, denied him burial in Westminster Abbey, and tried their utmost to keep his writings out of young people’s hands. The idea of fondling “infidels” had not arisen in those days. It only arises when the battle of Faith and Reason is practically decided. Then the great sceptics who were cast out as a disgrace are brought back as a credit. They were misunderstood, forsooth! Perhaps they misunderstood themselves! They were good Christians without knowing it! Yes, the prodigal son is welcomed home again with feast and dance, and the cooking and consumption of the fatted calf. Voltaire himself has been treated in this way—to say nothing of the grave Darwin and the valiant Bradlaugh. And it appears that the same posthumous appropriation is to be attempted in the case of Byron. What a cynical smile would flit over that handsome face of his if he could see this odd game being played! Byron’s face and Voltaire’s together would make a superb picture in front of such a spectacle.

Byron was *not* a Christian. Great writer as he was, he was not an exact thinker in the sense that Shelley was; moreover, there was a morbid taint in his mind and blood, and this inherited defect asserted itself in many ways, one of them being the occasional recrudescence in his feelings of the superstition he had expelled from his intellect. One sees something of the same thing in the great Robert Burns. His penetrating intellect saw through all the dogmas of religion, but he never quite got its influence out of his nerves and blood. We believe that Shelley’s words contain the essential truth about Byron.

G. W. FOOTE.

THE ROAD TO FORTUNE

(After Rudyard Kipling's poem: "If")

If you can mend the drains or dig the road up;
Or hawk round fish or sell ice-cream to kids;
The riches of the world are yours to load up,
And you'll sit pretty on a pile of quids.

If you can knock down walls of bricks and mortar;
If you can wield a hammer, shovel, pick;
Or carry coals or dust-bins—then you oughter
Pick up five pounds a week or more, and quick.

If you can use a monkey-wrench and spanner;
Or chip off rust—then why with *slide-rules* play?
For *brains*, my boy, today aren't worth a tanner;
For *braven* you'll get at least a quid a day.

If you can tighten nuts or fix a washer;
Or build a chicken-coop or rabbit-hutch;
Why envy any petty grab-and-smasher?
For knocking nails in you'll make twice as much!

If you can bark and bawl your silly head off;
If you can brag and boast and bang the drum;
No need to find a mug to win your bread off,
It's Easy Street for you and yours, old chum.

If you can break into the Dealers' racket
And learn to soak and cheat your fellow men:
Then it's a cinch you'll clean-up quite a packet
And quaff champagne with Park Lane's Upper Ten.

But dare to be an artist or a writer;
Or sage who seeks the Hidden Truth beneath;
Or poet—then you've "had it," silly blighter:
Just use your *brains* and you will starve to death!

So please remember Intellect is played-out;
And Thinking—well, it simply isn't done.
Just follow, if you *can*, the rules here laid-out:
But, if you *can't*, you'll be a *Can*, my son!

W. H. WOOD.

SPIRITUALISM DURING WILLIAM II.'S TIME

Under the episcopate of William de Carelpho, the friend of Robert, Earl of Normandy, there was one of the bishop's knights, named Boso, who, having been attacked with a strange form of sickness, appeared to be about at his last gasp. There was visible only the slightest possible breathing from his mouth and nostrils during the whole of the three days during which he lay senseless, and he lay for the world like a dead man entirely removed from the world of life. Yet, to the complete amazement of his friends, he "returned to himself" upon the third day, when he confessed to Prior Turgot that he had been carried away in a vision to various places, of which, he said, "some were terrible and some were pleasant." During his trip into the unknown regions, he claims to have seen all the monks of Durham who had been unfaithful to their vows punished most severely, and also a number of women—the wives of priests—who were having appropriate chastisement meted out to them by the most horrible of fiends, and all the crowd assembled there were dimly awaiting the eternal sentence of utter condemnation to hell.—From "Legends of Durham." E. H. S.

CORRESPONDENCE

CHRISTIAN CHRONOLOGY.

SIR,—In reference to the question raised by A. M. Davis, "When do B.C. and A.D. first make their appearance?" I once searched for it myself, and found the information in Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," the famous fifteen and sixteenth chapters. I am not in a position to give exact references, but if I remember rightly, it began to appear about the end of the sixth century and was not in general use on the Continent until the twelfth century, and not in this country until the fourteenth. The period will be some indication if he cares to search for it.—Yours, etc.,

H. H. PREECE.

SIR,—In reference to the letter of your correspondent, Mr. A. M. Davis, regarding the adoption of the Christian chronology, as Mr. Davis referred to me by name I take it upon myself to make a brief reference to the point made in his letter.

There were, of course, quite a number of chronologies in current use in the Ancient World. For example, the Greek chronology dating from the First Olympiad dated 776 B.C. The Romans dated theirs from "the Foundation of the City (Rome)" calculated by the antiquarian Varro (1st century B.C.) as from 753 B.C. Amongst the Jews, and also the early Christians prior to the adoption of the present chronology by the Church, two chronologies were widely used: the Seleucid Chronology dating from the accession of Seleucus Nikator, Alexander's "successor" as King of Babylon in 311 B.C.; and from the capture of Jerusalem by the Roman General Pompey in 63 B.C.

Our present chronology was first worked out by a monk, Dionysius Exiguus (the Little), a Roman abbot (a Scythian by birth) in the 6th century A.D. Dionysius dated A.D. 1 from the Feast of the Annunciation, nine months before Christmas, on the 25th March. The new chronology was adopted by Britain and France in the 8th and 9th centuries, and gradually made its way throughout Christendom.—Yours, etc.,

F. A. RIDLEY.

SIR,—With regard to Mr. A. M. Davis's letter in the December 1 issue of the "Freethinker" re "Christian Chronology" and "when do B.C. and A.D. first make their appearance in world history?" he will find an answer in Gibbon's last note to his Chapter 40, note numbered 161 in Bury's edition of the "Decline and Fall," Vol. IV, c. XI. (1901).—Yours, etc.,

A. G. PYE.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

LONDON—OUTDOOR

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

LONDON—INDOOR

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, December 17, 7 p.m.: "Rationalism and the Modern Universities," Mr. KENNETH URWIN, M.A., D.Litt.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—11 a.m.: "The Growth of Leisure," Mr. H. L. BEALES, M.A.

West London Branch N.S.S. (The National Trade Union Club, 12, Gt. Newport Street).—6-30 p.m.: A lecture. Mr. B. B. BONNER.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (38, John Bright Street, I.L.P., Room 13, Birmingham).—Saturday, December 14, 7 p.m.: A Whist Drive and Social.

Blackburn Branch N.S.S. (Public Lecture Halls, Northgate, Blackburn).—3-15 p.m.: "The Philosophy of an Atheist," Mrs. M. WHITEFIELD (Glasgow).

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room, Mechanics' Institute).—6-30 p.m.: "What is Truth?" Councillor J. BACKHOUSE.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—6-30 p.m.: "A Tour of Holland," Dr. C. A. SMITH.

★ For Your Bookshelf ★

- AN ATHEIST'S APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY.** A Survey of Positions. By Chapman Cohen. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.
- THE BIBLE: WHAT IS IT WORTH?** By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 2d.; postage 1d.
- BRADLAUGH AND INGERSOLL.** By Chapman Cohen. An Appreciation of two great Reformers. Price 3s.; postage 3½d.
- CHRISTIANITY—WHAT IS IT?** By Chapman Cohen. A criticism of Christianity from a not common point of view. Price 2s.; postage 1½d.
- CHALLENGE TO RELIGION** (a re-issue of four lectures delivered in the Secular Hall, Leicester). By Chapman Cohen. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.
- DETERMINISM OR FREEWILL?** By Chapman Cohen. Price, cloth 2s. 6d., paper cover 2s. Postage 2d.
- ESSAYS IN FREETHINKING.** By Chapman Cohen. First, third and fourth series. Price 2s. 6d. each; postage 2½d.
- THE FAULTS AND FAILINGS OF JESUS CHRIST.** By C. G. L. Du Cann. (Second Edition.) Price 4d.; postage 1d.
- THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGION.** By Chapman Cohen. New Edition. Price 6d.; postage 1d.
- GENERAL INFORMATION FOR FREETHINKERS.** Price 2d.; postage 1d.
- GOD AND EVOLUTION.** By Chapman Cohen. Price 6d.; postage 1d.
- GOD AND THE CO-OP.** Will Religion Split the People's Movement? By F. J. Corina. Price 2d.; postage 1d. 12 copies 2s.; post free.
- GOD AND ME** (revised edition of "Letters to the Lord"). By Chapman Cohen. Price, cloth 2s. 6d., postage 2d.; paper 1s. 3d., postage 1d.
- GOD AND THE UNIVERSE.** By Chapman Cohen. A Criticism of Professors Huxley, Eddington, Jeans and Einstein. Price: Cloth 3s. 6d., postage 2d.; Paper 2s., postage 2d.
- A GRAMMAR OF FREETHOUGHT.** By Chapman Cohen. An outline of the philosophy of Freethinking. Price 3s. 6d.; postage 4d.
- HOW THE CHURCHES BETRAY THEIR CHRIST.** An Examination of British Christianity. By C. G. L. Du Cann. Price 9d.; postage 1d.
- HENRY HETHERINGTON.** By A. G. Barker. A Pioneer in the Freethought and Working-class Struggle of a Hundred Years Ago. Price 6d.; postage 1d.
- INFIDEL DEATHBEDS.** By G. W. Foote. Revised and enlarged by A. D. McLaren. Price 2s. 6d.; postage 3d.
- MATERIALISM RESTATED.** By Chapman Cohen. Price 4s. 6d.; postage 2½d.
- MISTAKES OF MOSES.** By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 3d.; postage 1d.
- THE MORAL LANDSLIDE.** An Inquiry into the Behaviour of Modern Youth. By F. J. Corina. Price 6d.; postage 1d.
- THE MOTHER OF GOD.** By G. W. Foote. Price 3d.; postage 1d.
- THE OTHER SIDE OF DEATH.** By Chapman Cohen. An examination of the belief in a future life, and a study of Spiritualism. Price 2s. 6d.; postage 3d.
- PRIMITIVE SURVIVALS IN MODERN THOUGHT.** By Chapman Cohen. Price 3s.; postage 3d.
- PAGANISM IN CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS.** By J. M. Wheeler. Price 2s.; postage 2d.
- PETER ANNET, 1693—1769.** By Ella Twynam. Price 2d.; postage 1d.
- REVENUES OF RELIGION.** By Alan Handsacre. Price 3s.; postage 2d.
- ROME OR REASON? A Question for To-day.** By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 4d.; postage 1d.
- THE RUINS, OR A SURVEY OF THE REVOLUTIONS OF EMPIRES, to which is added THE LAW OF NATURE.** By C. F. Volney. A Revision of the Translation of 1795, with an introduction. Price, post free, 3s. 2d.
- SHAKESPEARE AND OTHER ESSAYS.** By G. W. Foote. Price, cloth 3s.; postage 3d.
- SPEAKING FOR MYSELF.** By Lady (Robert) Simon. Price 2s. 6d.; postage 2d.
- THOMAS PAINE AND THETFORD.** Six postcards illustrating Paine's birth-town, including a portrait of the great reformer. Price 9d., post free.
- THOMAS PAINE, A Pioneer of Two Worlds.** By Chapman Cohen. Price 1s. 4d.; postage 1d.
- THEISM OR ATHEISM.** The Great Alternative. By Chapman Cohen. Price 3s. 6d.; postage 2½d.
- THERE ARE NO CHRISTIANS.** By C. G. L. Du Cann. Price 4d.; postage 1d.
- THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CHURCH.** By Colonel Ingersoll. Price 2d.; postage 1d.
- THE VATICAN MENACE.** By F. A. Hornibrook. The Vatican influence over ten countries. Price 1s., post free.
- VATICAN POLICY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR.** By L. H. Lehmann. An exposure of the Roman Catholic influence on politics and war. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.
- WHAT IS RELIGION?** By Colonel R. G. Ingersoll. Price 2d.; postage 1d.
- WILL YOU RISE FROM THE DEAD?** By C. G. L. Du Cann. An inquiry into the evidence of resurrection. Price 6d.; postage 1d.

Pamphlets for the People

By Chapman Cohen

What is the Use of Prayer? Did Jesus Christ Exist? Thou shalt not Suffer a Witch to Live. The Devil. Deity and Design. Agnosticism or . . . ? Atheism. What is Freethought? Must we have a Religion? The Church's Fight for the Child. Giving 'em Hell. Freethought and the Child. Morality without God. Christianity and Slavery. Gods and their Makers. Woman and Christianity. What is the use of a Future Life? Price 2d. each. Postage 1d. each.

THE PIONEER PRESS
41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1