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Price Threepence

IEWS AND OPINIONS

A Question of Ethics

I HAVE a liking for critical letters, provided that the ideas are intelligently expressed, and deal with a subject that is interesting. I have had one letter in hand for some time, but it keeps well, as good writing should. The writer of the letter is obviously above the average, and it is part of an attitude which, if not always put correctively, arouses interest. After all, ideas are ideas, and they serve a good purpose, even though one disagrees with the author. Besides, one may say with complete accuracy that we often gain as much from a thesis that is rejected as from one that is accepted. It is, too, the clash of opposites that brings the best out of one.

We have, for example, noticed with pleasure the development of Atheism in recent years. It is a subject that is almost as old as godism, and there is no question that today it is stronger planted than ever. Even the heads of the Churches are now driven to admit that never "in our Island history" was Atheism as strong as it is today.

The question put to me is rather lengthy, but it is full of meat. My critic asks "What is Atheism worth?" and he goes on to say, "Suppose it is true that nature is indifferent, and that 'events,' including those of mind, are mechanical; that there is no evidence of God even in the semi-patheistic sense of mind-plenum and no guaranteed permanence of values, I ask 'What about it?'"

"It has been said that we have no right to sacrifice intellectual probity to emotional comfort. I have asked to be told why and have invariably had an answer that would have put a Welsh parson to shame for its emotional quality. 'Truth wherever it may lead.' Why? Am I not entitled to strip pretentious clothes from even Truth herself and expose her essential ugliness? If I bid her begone for an uninspiring hag, am I irrational?"

"Atheistic ethics always seem to me to hang on a peg that is not there. I can understand the fearless worship of truth for its own sake, if you grant the condition of all worship, namely, belief in that which is greater than one's self. 'Humanity is greater than I'? Is it? If things are purely mechanical the mere multiplication of littleness is not greatness. If the mass is more of a spiritual entity than I am, it can only be because my ego is but a partial expression of that greater entity which in such a case must be at least as self-conscious as I am. And if humanity, why not all life—indeed all existence? There is no sound materialistic objection to the theory because there is no discreteness in the particles of the body than in the particles of the universe, yet I am a living unit.

"If I decide to be a moral anarchist, what leg have you to stand on if you object? Morals are purely a matter of

individual taste, and I claim to be the best judge of my own taste. You may say that moral anarchism, by injuring society injures me. It may do ultimately. But there are degrees of remoteness and I may decide to take the risk. A short life and a merry one is as good a philosophy as another if the whole damn thing is a meaningless dance of atoms.

"You ask me to prove my case for continuity and the rest. In the name of all that is rational I hope I have good reasons for my beliefs, but it is not easy to state, let alone impart, the most important of these reasons. But psychic research apart, why should I prove anything? Is it not sufficient that for me the thing 'works.' Science asks no more. Pray do not preach a sermon about 'right,' humanity, truth, and other Atheistic-cum-theological abstractions. There is no humanity but power, no humanity but largely inhuman man to whom I owe nothing. What have you to offer for my illusions?"

Considering the nature of the case, the matter is expressed with courage and ability. I might take the statements point by point, but I think it will be better to take this very able expression as a whole, and will try to set aside outbursts of morality, and so deal with the basic ideas before us.

I agree that if one believes in a God and that there is something awaiting man in another world, you will obey God's commands with all the pitiful poorness of a slave crawling to a not too kind master. But if one does not believe in a God, then rules of conduct must justify themselves. We must prove that all we think or can do finds a reasonable justification in life as we have it. And I commence with the fact that our critic has overlooked a very important consideration. This is that as a mere sociological fact "Man" and "Men" are not words that indicate two separate things, they mark two sides of the same thing. It is our relation to the race, past and present, that makes each of us what we are. Separating the two converts both into a nonsensical abstraction. I do not object to the expression "humanity in the mass is more of a spiritual entity than I am," provided it stands as a useful abstraction, but if it is more than that, if man is the entity and "Humanity" the mass, and are taken as distinct things, then my critic has not yet outgrown the theological stage of thought.

If we discard this proved useless theological reasoning and ask "What are the facts?" we find that willy-nilly we exist with certain established relations to others of our kind. We are conscious of feeling that we can only find satisfaction among our fellows. These feelings may vary in intensity and even, in some degree, in kind.

Moral feelings are to the body social, exactly what physiological cravings are to the individual organism. Of course, if I have determination enough I can end life, so far as I am concerned, and given determination enough on the part

of all, Humanity itself could be brought to an end. But the survival value of certain feelings makes it pretty certain that this consummation is not likely to be reached. The statement that the "greater 'entity'—Humanity—must be at least as self-conscious as I am" is beside the question. It does not follow from the premise. Why must the moral quality of a part belong to the whole any more than incandescence or digestion does? This is where my critic helps to prove, although he has, as he asserts, outgrown the Christian stage of mentality, that he has not yet got the poison of theology out of his system.

The next question runs thus: "If I decide to be an Anarchist what leg have you to stand on if you object?" Again there is behind the question the ghost of the hangman-God, and so far as that goes an effective police-force is as good as God and experience shows that if we had to choose between God and a policeman the latter would be preferable.

It is not true, by the way, that morals are purely a matter of individual taste. They never have been that, although the devotees of the hangman deity have tried to prove as much. But in reply to the question "What have I to say to one who decides to be a moral anarchist," my answer is "None at all." If I say to a man that he should so act as to promote the well-being of all and he replies "I will not" I am powerless. Also, if I tell a man that he should act as God would have him act, and he replies that he has no God, what power have I to coerce him? The truth is that every appeal depends for its power upon the acceptance—avowed or unavowed—of certain rules of life. In this respect the Theist and the Atheist are exactly on the same ground. If a man sinks to the low level of St. Paul, and can see nothing worth while in social decency—unless it brings a reward in heaven—I am powerless, and this is true whichever way we turn.

Now I have not tried to preach a sermon about Truth and Right, or indulge in any Atheistic-eum-theological abstractions. I have no special dislike to the theologian in his natural state, although I have a special dislike of the Atheist who is anxious to convince the Christian that he is as good as followers of Jesus, and the Christian who insists that he loves an Atheist as a wayward brother. My aim here is just to take things as they are and see what can be done. After all the concept of "Right" is something that is born of social life, but it is simply untrue for my critic to say that we owe nothing to "Humanity." We owe everything to Humanity. It is a series of human activities that translates a savage human being carried down a river by a moving tree trunk, that laid the foundations of one of our giant ships. For a man to say that he owes nothing to "Man" is nonsense; more, it is a lie. For all of our exhibitions of greatness in what we do and what we have are no more than the accumulations of man's labour and development. My critic may not be to blame for some of his misunderstandings, but he must be counted guilty for not rising above a mere dissenting preacher who fails to see what is going on every day of our lives. It is so easy for a man to become a disbeliever in all gods; and in a civilised world the acceptance of Atheism demands no more mental effort than a growing child may feel a difference between the nature of a toy horse and a real one. But a scientific Atheism involves more than the rejection of all gods. The Scientific Atheist is not exactly rare, but

he is not common. It takes more than "I do not believe in God" to make a man, or woman, a scientific or philosophical Atheist.

Finally, an attentive reader of what has been said will agree that the critic has spoiled his Atheism by being influenced by lack of appreciation of a genuinely scientific conception of a genuine Atheism. His argument is really on the level of the one who might say that life is not worth living if there will be no more whisky. The Atheist does not find less beauty in nature because it is man-made, and not God. It is this that makes beauty deeper and more varied. We do not place a lower value on life because man is not to live for ever, it may be said that the value of life becomes greater. He does not say what nature ought to be, it is enough that man can increase its interest and its value. We do not think less of individual life, we are content with all the greatness and beauty that we learn to admire. We do not say what nature ought to be, it is enough to understand what it is. But then the Atheist—the real Atheist—is not haunted with the form of a ghostly God, and to help create a world without a god is something worth striving for.

CHAPMAN COHEN

ENGLISH LIFE IN STUART DAYS

IN the 17th century, England was predominantly agricultural. The aspect of our country was entirely different from what it is today. Much of the cultivated land was still unenclosed, with heaths, commons, woodlands, moors and marshes occupied vast areas of England. Then, the rural population enormously outnumbered those in cities pent, while in our day the urban dwellers form the bulk of the community.

During the earlier Tudor days many of the open fields cultivated by the village community were surrounded by hedges and converted from arable to pasture lands. But even in the reigns of the first two Stuart kings, it is estimated that more than half of the corn acreage was still open land, cultivated only by the united efforts of the villagers, a method dating back to primitive times.

The gradual disappearance of the open field system coincided with the increasing importance of the yeoman and tenant farmer. The recently enclosed fields, protected from the depredations of straying sheep and cattle, enabled husbandmen to initiate those agricultural departures which later played a stupendous part in stock-breeding and rotation of crops. But these efforts were only tentative, and it was not until the 18th century that land owners spent lavishly in drainage and other scientific improvements which later made England pre-eminent for its livestock and abundant harvests.

It is noteworthy that the peasantry, despite the losses they had sustained from the extensive enclosures of the common lands, were in this period remarkably quiescent. For in earlier times they had risen in revolt when their customary rights were invaded. Not, indeed, until the French Revolution of 1789 did the peasants, both in France and elsewhere abroad, openly oppose their degraded condition and demand the restoration of their former rights. But while English visitors to the Continent were shocked at the poverty and misery manifested in French and German rural regions, the armed conflict between Crown and Parliament in England served to increase the wage of the village labourer, scanty as it then was.

Dr. G. M. Trevelyan, in his invaluable "England under the Stuarts," avers that: "The English peasant, though badly paid, was in some cases well fed by his employer. The 'servant in husbandry' only went into a separate cottage when he married. Until then he boarded in the farmhouse and partook freely

the family table of the staple dish of meat, though not always of the puddings and delicacies. There was a closer contact between master and men then than now; most of the farmers and yeomen were unpretentious people, living on intimate terms with their servants, whose families had often been on the same farm for generations."

In Lent, fish was the customary food, salted in inland districts and fresh near rivers or on the sea coast. This observance was a relic of pre-Reformation times but was also perpetuated by Protestant Parliaments "to encourage the fisheries as the great school of seamanship and national defence." Also, no fresh meat was available in early spring in rural areas, although town butchers sometimes slaughtered in secret in the prohibited season to supplement the salted beef and bacon to which the general population was restricted. At Midsummer cattle and sheep were killed and continued available until winter again arrived. Christmas, then as now, became the great festival of the year and from Christmas Eve till Twelfth Night, in the dark period, when little labour was possible on the land, the agricultural population made merry with mead, ale, elderberry wine and the more solid fowls, geese and turkeys, hares and rabbits, brawn, mince pies and plum pudding. For we must remember that in addition to flocks of sheep, herds of cattle and droves of pigs, "the countryside swarmed with rabbits, hares and birds of all kinds, which, as the game laws then stood, were the legitimate prey of the yeomen over whose land they strayed."

Obviously one cannot picture the economic position of the peasantry from their wages and purchasing power alone. And this is all that our available statistics reveal. As our eminent historian observes: "Common land for the pasturage of cows, pigs and poultry, common rights of collecting fuel and fowling on moor and waste were an important part of the cottagers' livelihood, although already encroached upon by deer-park enclosures and destined to extinction in the great robbery of the poor by the rich at the close of the eighteenth century."

Moreover, the wives and children of the cottar were employed by the farmer, while during the hay and corn harvests the entire population participated, thus increasing their monetary gains. Nor were the activities of country women confined to toil in the fields, as dairy maids or in other household occupations. The centre of the cloth trade was in the cities, but spinning and weaving were conducted in distant cottages to which the clothier repaired periodically to collect his woven wool. In this industry little children worked appallingly long hours as did their mothers. As Trevelyan notes: "English women and children were overworked long before the era of the factory system."

Both in town and country the people dwelt in constant terror of dire disease. The death-rate, especially among infants, was so high that the population increased very slowly. Medical science, such as it was, rendered little service. Dirt and disease went hand in hand among rich and poor alike. Indeed, cleanliness was almost unknown and even courtiers compounded for their neglect of the bath by the liberal use of scents and oils. The standards of common decency were such as we now deplore among the most backward of European peoples. Overcrowding was general, and the insanitary condition of the houses which were mostly unventilated, in which contaminated water was frequently used for domestic consumption, all served to raise the death roll.

In medieval times the city communities prided themselves on their independence and viewed other cities as aliens and rivals in industry and commerce. Freemen alone in competing civic communities could be bound apprentice, while the freedom of a city was rarely conferred on an alien who was usually considered a foreigner, even if he dwelt in a nearby village or town. In the Stuart era the idea of separate township was yielding to the concept of community. But, as Cunningham and others have pointed out, the old exclusiveness lingered. York, for instance, refused the admission of outsiders whether Dutch or English. Dr. Trevelyan states: "The cathedral city, starved of new

blood, gradually yielded its old supremacy in the northern cloth trade to Hull and to the western dales. But in many other towns a more liberal policy brought in its due reward. In London and Norwich, the first and second cities in England, the sons of gentry and yeomen from all parts of the island were welcomed as apprentices. Even race hatred was overcome by religious sympathy. The Huguenots of France, Flanders and Holland were made welcome in Puritan towns for their sufferings and for their skill. The Tudor and Stuart Governments generally allowed these strangers the privilege of separate religious organisation, for which true-born Englishmen clamoured in vain." Thus, despite the persecuting desire of the narrow-minded Laud, from the days of Elizabeth to those of Anne, England derived benefits from refugees from abroad which France had flung recklessly away.

The coal and iron products of England were almost all for home consumption, and wood was still used as fuel even in manufacture. Indeed, the primeval forests still supplied abundant fuel for the manufactures of the Midlands.

Our cloth, however, was dependent on the foreign buyer. In the Middle Ages the weaving industry arose in East Anglia and it grew greatly under Elizabeth, when it was strengthened and improved by the arrival of the French and Flemish refugees who had escaped the clutches of Alva and Guise. Still, our Eastern counties were slowly superseded by their Western county competitors, where the village looms furnished the wool of the Cotswold sheep-runs to the commercial cities of Bristol, Gloucester and Plymouth where their cloth was sent over the sea.

Despite the age's material progress, the masses were sunk in superstition. The day of Halley and Newton was yet to dawn. The gibberings of ghosts were heard after nightfall in the churchyards. Goblins, witches, will-o'-the-wisps and fairies abounded. "If a criminal was detected and punished, the astonishing event was set down as God's revenge against murder; if a dry summer threatened the harvest, the parson was expected to draw down rain by prayer. The charms that ward off disease, the stars of birth that rule fortune, the comet that foretold the wars in Germany, the mystic laws that govern the fall of the dice, were the common interest of ordinary men and women."

The dismal English Sunday was also established by the Puritans at a later generation, when Charles I. was overthrown and, despite certain concessions tardily granted by authority, we have suffered from its doleful influences ever since.

T. F. PALMER.

MATRIMONIAL TEST

At a village in Co. Durham, two pitmen were heard in hot dispute on the knotty point of whether or no a certain companion of theirs was married to the female who had the honour of sharing his bed and board. The following were the closing exchanges of the colloquy: "Wey Jack, man, aa tell thoo, they'se not married. Aa' knaa nicely!" "But they are, aa can tell thoo for a sartinty. Wey man, Bob, didn't aa see him hoy a glass at her? Dis thoo think he'd dee that if sho warn't married?"

THE PITMAN AND THE SPIRIT LEVEL

A miner busy laying down a new flagstone to his kitchen hearth had noticed with some interest on a previous occasion, the use of a spirit level by a bricklayer, and so believing it to be an essential part of the task, he had borrowed one from the Colliery Office. As his work proceeded, declining daylight compelled him to work in the gloom of semi-darkness. The job completed, he placed the spirit level on the flat stone to assure himself that it was "well and truly laid," but not finding himself able to distinguish the position of the bead in the level, he lifted it up, and carefully carried it to the door and examined it, exclaiming after he did so: "Mally, woman, it's just the varry thing tur a hair's breeth!"

ACID DROPS

According to Bishop Carey, England has "largely forsaken God," and the result is "selfishness, deterioration, dishonesty, crookedness, untruth, frustration." But the people who practise these qualities were all brought up in Christian England and would, in most cases, scorn to be called Freethinkers or Atheists. They invariably take the oath in a court of law, and would rather commit almost any crime than be convicted of saying that there is no God. Bishop Carey's solution is, however, a simple one. Before attempting to convert England we must convert England's clergy! And the way to do this is fervently to pray during Lent to God "to give the clergy true repentance, a new consecration, new humility," and so on. Poor clergy, even their friends can't stand them.

The number of striking defeats the Church has sustained in trying to stop Sunday cinemas brought the very dejected Bishop of Liverpool into the fray. At a meeting held the other day in his diocese he deprecated actively opposing the opening of cinemas on Sunday as it might mean forcing people into pubs or street walking. So he suggested that a "constructive" programme should be issued by the Church explaining "the Christian use of Sunday," and if the Sunday cinema was voted for, to see that it has "suitable films" and did not encroach on Sunday school hours. In fact, what he wants is a Sunday cinema entirely censored by the Church. There seems no limit to the effrontery of these parsons.

Roman Catholics have never liked their near brothers, the Anglos, and so there was a piquant flavour in the discussion they held recently about the claims of Anglicans generally. The principal speaker, Fr. Wheeler, admitted that converts were fewer than even the English Church supposed, and also that the Newman Association looked upon the Anglos as "muddle-headed." In the end, he sorrowfully confessed that there was little chance of converting the "high" Anglicans, in spite of their nearness, and had more hopes of bringing over the Protestants or "low" churchmen. But he was very pessimistic about the whole matter of conversion.

Canon Bennett (R.C.) has discovered why there are "problem" children—their parents rarely go to church. If only these Catholic parents went to church, and few of them do, there would be no real problem of juvenile Catholic delinquency. No doubt this explanation of why there are so many young Catholic criminals will go down with most of his hearers, but it must be a very sad blow to most pious souls to realise that in proportion to their numbers, more Catholics are in gaol than Protestants and Jews, and the Canon's "explanation" won't really hold water. He has first got to explain why, in the face of the Church's threats of hell fire, purgatory and eternal torments, any Catholic dare to keep away from church. And he dare not do that.

Most of our courts of law, in any situation where the oath is required, pay proper regard to the law concerning giving evidence. The law on this subject is perfectly clear, and in most courts an affirmation, without any unnecessary wording, is properly regarded. But there are exceptions, one of which occurred at Oxford recently. A retired university lecturer objected to take the religious oath, and no other question should have been more than "On what ground?" and the reply may take two forms. One is, "I am without any religious belief," the other, "It is against my religious belief." That is as far as the questioning; and the questioned person should decline to go further. Generally no questions are asked beyond the one mentioned, but the judge caught him in a trap. Asked why he did not take the oath, the reply given was an objection to a printed book. The judge replied that that was no conscientious objection, and ordered him to take the religious oath.

It must be admitted that the university lecturer replied that although he had a conscientious objection to taking the oath he would take it. The judge then ordered the oath be taken

in its proper form. The judge was within his rights, in the way the matter was raised, to say that the usual oath should be admitted; but the remark that the man must "take the oath in the proper form," while not wholly wrong, was open to objections. The oath by affirmation is as "proper" as "So help me God." With the plain affirmation wherever an oath is necessary, the religious formula can be set aside at the wish of the man or woman concerned.

These are times when the God whom Christians worship lend an obvious helping hand to set the world in state. He, or they, do nothing. When the war officially ended our Prime Minister marched to church to thank God for giving us help; but apparently he forgot all about the aftermath that was coming. We humans knew it would come, God forgot all about it, and so left the world in a state that grew steadily worse in many aspects, so far as a world peace is concerned. One of our modern apologists for God informs us that "God is within nature and necessity." If that means anything it is that God does not take regard to those who are earnest and honest. He takes all as they go, good or bad. He thinks no more of the Germans than he does of the British, all are alike and each will reap the consequences of his actions whether they be good or bad. God was there, looking on, when Hitlerism set the world on fire, and he did nothing. He is really a part of nature and so belongs to no part particularly; he has nothing to do with the movement of things, he is a part of nature and as helpless as man himself.

The following reaches us from the U.S.A. It does not exhaust all the work of Thomas Paine, it leaves out much of his work in England and France for example. But it helps readers to appreciate the sweep of humanitarianism and explains the intense hatred certain groups of English people had for him.

- The man first to name our country (United States of America).
- The man first to advocate independence for U.S.A.
- The man who did more to achieve this independence than any other man, giving his pen, tongue, sword and pocket-handkerchief (purse) to the cause.
- The man who in the darkest hour of the Revolution wrote the Crisis, commencing with the words "These are the times that try men's souls."
- Do you know that General Washington ordered this mighty work to be read to the Army once a week?
- The man who was joint author of the Declaration of Independence with Jefferson.
- The man who borrowed ten million dollars from Louis XVI to feed and clothe the American Army.
- The man who established the Bank of North America in order to supply the Army.
- Napoleon said, in toasting him at a banquet, "Every city in the world should erect a gold statue to you."
- The author of the Rights of Man, acknowledged to be the greatest work ever written on political freedom.
- This masterpiece gave free speech and a free Press to England and America.
- The man who first said "The world is my country, to do good is my religion."
- The man known as "The great commoner of mankind," the "Founder of the Republic of the World."
- The man first to urge the making of the American Constitution.
- The man first to suggest the Federal Union of the States and to bring it about.
- The man first to propose the Louisiana purchase.
- The man first to demand justice for women.
- The man first to plead for dumb animals.
- The man first to advocate international arbitration.
- The man first to propose old-age pensions.
- The man first to propose "the land for the people."
- The man who invented and built the first iron bridge—the bridge that spans the River Wear between Sunderland and Monkwearmouth.
- That man was Thomas Paine.

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TO CORRESPONDENTS

For the "Freethinker."—B.C.M./Sensebox, Cardiff, 5s.

T. S.—We are glad to say that the new edition of the "Age of Reason," with the long introduction by Chapman Cohen is well on its way and we hope copies will soon be available for sale.

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SCENES OF PARISIAN RELIGIOUS LIFE

No. 1—MIDNIGHT AT THE MADELEINE.

NO city is more serious than Paris, in spite of its false English reputation for frivolity, Parisians and Parisiennes in general are hard-working, serious-minded people. They take their religion—when they have any—most seriously; almost as seriously as working hard for a livelihood.

At midnight on Christmas Eve I went to the famous Church of the Madeleine to attend the midnight mass. Not that I am a Roman Catholic, but I like old customs and traditional observances.

The great iron gates of the church were closed, like the barriers at Waterloo Station in England, with two burly ticket-collectors guarding one narrow aperture which now and again opened gingerly to allow some highly-placed Christian to enter to worship his Lord and Master on his birthday. A big gendarme also stood beside the iron gate to arrest any shepherds or magi without tickets who recalcitrantly insisted on coming to pay homage to Baby Jesus on Christmas Eve.

A higgish and tightly-packed crowd besieged the iron railings. Pushing and jostling, they struggled and scrambled in a tight wedge. It soon became apparent that they were vociferously angry. So was the gendarme. For most of the wretched crowd of would-be worshippers had no tickets-of-admission, and they had the effrontery to want to enter the House of God and worship Jesus without tickets. The gendarme expostulated at such conduct. The crowd vociferated. Finally, a lot of ticket-holders surged along. They were furious that the unticketed barred their way. Clenched fists were raised; voices also. When a few of the unticketed women and some weak-kneed brethren gave way, and the ticket-holders reached the gendarme, he still refused to let most of them in.

Even the ticketed Christian must wait in the cold. After watching the crowd pushing, struggling, jesting, laughing, protesting, grumbling, and even fighting, for about 20 minutes, I was told that there was no hope for a ticketless sinner on the outskirts of the Faithful getting in.

SPECIAL

We regret to announce that the next two issues of the "Freethinker" will not be permitted to appear. This hurried Government rule applies to all periodical journals—except newspapers. After the period named, we hope to appear as usual.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

I left the scene and walked down the Rue Royale into the Place de la Concorde, and along the Rue de Rivoli to my hotel. "And so to bed," as Pepys says.

Next morning: "What a pity!" said the hotel-cashier to me. "If I had known you wanted to go I could have got you a ticket cheap. Do you want to change any more pound notes at the black-market rate of 800 to the pound?"

"Nine hundred," I said firmly, and got them. (The official rate is 480 or thereabouts.)

No. 2—CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION, RUE ST. HONORE.

In the afternoon of Christmas Eve, a dull, dreary afternoon, tired of looking at antiques, I walked into the Church of the Ascension. Three little boys, very dirty and ill-clad, were playing—no, not praying; playing inside. They had some brown paper, some string, and some cotton-wool, and the two elder were trying to make the *creche* representing the Bethlehem stable not very successfully. The youngest, a tousled-headed, bare-footed little rascal, watched his elders at their task.

And I, unobserved, watched.

Suddenly the smallest boy had the temerity to interfere by pushing at a piece of the brown paper. The eldest boy boxed his ears. The second boy, not to be out-done if there was sport on foot, dashed to the small victim. The youngest fled, like a greater being, "to the horns of the altar."

But sanctuary went unrecognised. As the child with his bare feet dashed up the altar steps, his pursuer caught him and gave him a couple of cuffs. Then the second boy returned to the business of making a stable, and taking two images of Joseph and Mary and a recumbent Babe, set them up with melancholy art.

A depressed little Sister of Mercy in a blue habit, worn and weary-looking, came in with a jug of water. She genuflected to the altar and began to pour the water into flower vases. She did not look at the boys. Nor did they look at her.

She, they, and I might have been different orders of beings in different worlds. Perhaps essentially we were. Yet there we were in the same church. It was weirdly unreal.

No. 3—CHURCH OF ST. ROCH, NEW YEAR'S EVE.

For the midnight mass the church was crowded with a large, attentive, and reverent congregation. I entered about half-way through the service. To an English eye, the surprising feature was the high proportion of men and young people present. The congregation seemed entirely lower middle-class. In France the Roman Catholic religion has not lost its hold entirely on the male sex or the younger generation, unlike the Church of England in England.

The choir boys' singing—on which this church prides itself—was noticeably good. The soloist singing an *Adeste* was weak and evidently a trifle stage-frightened, but his boyish treble was sweet, if thin.

I left after ten minutes or so. The humble, reverent, and immobile attitude of the throng when the Bell rang in the Prayer of Consecration, was both touching and impressive. A crowd acting as a unity is the only crowd one can respect.

No. 4—AT RUEL'S ECCLESIASTICAL ESTABLISHMENT.

I went into this shop, with its missals, its crucifixes, its vestments, and the rest, to examine antiques, and especially some costly book-bindings that were magnificent works of art. They

were as fine as anything by Riviere, Sangorski, or Zaensdorf. Incidentally, the shop had a book bearing on its leather binding the arms of the Pompadour, and the despatch case of Murat, Napoleon's Marshal whom he made King of Naples.

I picked up a magnificent volume in pink leather with gold tooled work and heavily gilded leaves. It was a finely-printed copy of the celebrated "Imitation of Christ."

"'Imitation de Jesu-Christ' is 8,000 francs only," said Madame.

"It seems a high price for imitating Jesus Christ," I commented. "Nearly seventeen English pounds."

"You speak of the official exchange rate," retorted Madame. "But monsieur can change on the Black Market and buy this beautiful work of art for what? Ten or twelve pounds! That surely is cheap for such an *objet d'art*. Or here is 'Trois Messes' for 4,000 francs only, in dove-grey leather. Observe the tooling, monsieur, is it not exquisitely done?"

But turning from the religious books, I purchased a fine copy (illustrated) of the "Scenes de Courtisanes" by Lucien, rejecting an Andrea de Nerciat as likely to upset the susceptibilities of English customs-officials.

"Will not monsieur have the Imitation of Jesus Christ also?" asked Madame.

"Imitating Jesus is too expensive, madame. And if I did imitate Jesus, I should have to sell the book and give the proceeds to the poor. It would be too tedious and roundabout a proceeding. Besides, the State already looks after the poor at my expense."

"But it is not necessary to take the book literally. Where would the world be if one did?"

"Ah, where indeed?" I said, and went off to search for an 18-carat gold *briquet* in the Rue de la Paix, for, like the young man in the Gospels who left Jesus sorrowful, I like great possessions.

C. G. L. DU CANN.

ARE THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS RELIABLE?

II.

ONE of the ways in which the New Testament Documents are proved reliable by modern apologists is by referring you to "authorities." Of course, it is quite true that there are authorities, and pretty good ones, on the New Testament, and what they have to say has to be carefully considered. But the real question to ask is, exactly on what part of the New Testament are they authorities?

Tischendorf and Lightfoot and Burkitt are New Testament authorities, and on some things we can confidently consult them; but when it comes to the only point that matters—the question of the New Testament Documents being "reliable"—what they have to say is of no more value than what the average newsboy has to say.

We can admit that, after studying ancient manuscripts, a man like Sir Frederic Kenyon can tell us something of their dates, but of what value is his opinion—or his study—on the problem of Jesus flying about with a Devil, even if he believes every word of the story?

Thus, in Mr. F. F. Bruce's little work, "Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?" most of the authorities to whom he confidently appeals, and who no doubt impress those of his readers who do not know the Freethought case, prove nothing whatever germane to his case. They are mere names, and as far as miracles are concerned, know no more about them than a five-year-old child.

Mr. Bruce labours hard to prove that the Pauline Epistles are "genuine." But what if they are? Paul believed in a God, and he called this God the Lord Jesus, and filled up his letters

with what the Lord Jesus thought or did or would do. All this came from his imagination, and is of no more value than what Defoe wrote about what Robinson Crusoe and his Man Friday thought and did. How could Paul know years after the supposed death of the "Lord Jesus" anything about him except from his "inner consciousness?" Why, he even declares that he did not get his facts from "flesh and blood." That there may have been a Paul who wrote these Epistles makes them no more "reliable" than Dickens made Pickwick "reliable." And if this is the case, who cares, except Mr. Bruce, what a Mr. E. K. Simpson says about the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, or what he or anybody else thinks as to their "genuineness?"

All the laboured pages that Mr. Bruce devotes to the "Canon" of the Gospels, and his dragging in what a fool like Papias thinks, is just mere waste of good paper and ink. It was centuries before a "Canon" was formed, and the people who did it had no more authority than I have. What they did or did not admit to the Canon proves absolutely nothing as to the "reliability" of the documents. What is wanted is evidence that miracles took place or have ever taken place; and blandly to quote Principal W. F. Howard to prove that "Mark is the most Aramaic of the Gospels" is sheer waste of space—unless Mr. Howard is prepared to say this proves that the miracles recorded in Mark took place.

This question of Aramaic obsesses Mr. Bruce who quotes somebody else, Prof. T. W. Manson, as giving "his opinion" that there was an Aramaic document behind the Greek "Q" document. This "Q" document is quite hypothetical, but is supposed to contain the non-Markan matter used by Matthew and Luke. Nobody really knows anything whatever about "Q" except what is made up by theologians, and anybody can invent a similar kind of document. Yet it is a fact that even Rationalists quote "Q" as proving something about a real Jesus as if there really was no doubt about it. In any case, what in heaven's name does the theory that "Q" was originally written in Aramaic, or that behind Mark was some Aramaic document, prove? Nothing whatever. Nobody knows for certain what language the early documents comprised in the Old Testament were written in, but supposing it was Biblical Hebrew, does that prove that there ever was a Jehovah, or that God, or the Lord God, talked with a real Adam?

Mr. Bruce is an M.A., and presumably he has had to study hard to get this honoured degree, but he seems to have left all reason behind in trying, with such puerile argumentation, to prove that the New Testament Documents are "reliable." He thinks that "the Sayings of our Lord appear to be supported by 'authority.'" But if the "Sayings of our Lord" can be proved to be current ethics in the Palestine of the period, and that their Jewish and Pagan sources are very well known and have been discussed a hundred times, of what value is the opinion of this or that "authority?"

But after doing his best to show that the Gospels are "history," and that they should be dated very close to the date given to the story of Jesus and so on, Mr. Bruce began to have an inkling of the truth—that is, he began to see that all this does not prove the New Testament Documents are "reliable" in the sense that they prove miracles. So he devoted a chapter to what he calls the "miracle-stories"; it is, he blandly adds, "precisely these miracle-stories which are the chief difficulty in the way of accepting the New Testament Documents as reliable." And does he prove that the "miracle-stories" are history? All I can say is this, that the 16 odd pages he devotes to the question are more or less sheer blarney and nonsense. What earthly use is quoting Canon Raven saying that "the true defence of Christianity is its interpretation?" So what? As there are hundreds of Christian interpretations, all differing from one another, how far can we go with such balderdash?

Again we sceptics are "faced" with the mystery of the "empty tomb." How do we account for it? It never occurred

to these simple apologists that the story of the "empty tomb" is a Christian lie, that is, there never was an "empty tomb." There is not a scrap of evidence that there ever was a Crucifixion, let alone an "empty tomb." The story is, if taken literally, just as true as one from the "Arabian Nights." In other words, there is no difficulty about it whatever for the sceptic. It is for Mr. Bruce and his like to provide us with the evidence that there was an "empty tomb," and so far that has been sadly lacking.

And how does Mr. Bruce deal with that particular piece of rubbish—the changing of water into wine? Nothing much sillier can be found in any "sacred" literature, but it has been gravely discussed for centuries, and all that poor Mr. Bruce can now say is that "it is clear that something of a very wonderful and impressive nature happened in which the disciples saw revealed the Divine Glory of their Master." The Divine Glory, according to one of the drunks at the wedding, was giving "good wine" at first, and when the guests were "well" drunk, perhaps giving them something much worse. I find it difficult to discuss this in "temperate" language, but as Mr. Bruce believes in demons and devils, witches and wizards, angels and curses, and finds nothing too silly in the Gospels he is not ready to defend, what can one do? His little book might well have passed in the hey-day of Victorianism, but we are in the year 1947, and however distasteful it may be to him, the day of fervent belief in miracles among intelligent people, even if championed by an eminent M.A., has long since passed.

I admit that there are people, however, who are impervious to argument. A whole-hearted belief without reason, or intelligence, or knowledge, is at the back of the Church and forms its greatest support. That is why we combat religious ignorance with all the weapons at our command.

H. CUTNER.

THEISM—A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

THE task of the Theist is twofold. He must give a definition of what is meant by the term "God," and then proceed to show that a being corresponding with this definition exists apart from and independently of its conception by the mental faculties of man. We are conscious of being able to perceive things, the perception of which is invariably accompanied by the conviction of their not having been produced by our intellectual activity; and we are no less conscious of being able to produce quite a number of things which have no existence at all except that derived from a mental capacity of ours termed imagination. This power, as its name implies, is that of forming mental images; and it is of the greatest possible utility to sculptors, painters, and poets. Let us for the sake of clarity term the things perceived in the former way real objects; and those perceived in the latter one ideal objects. The Theist must prove to which of these categories the existence of the God whom he defines actually belongs. Let us examine the evidence for and against the above alternatives.

1. Is God a real object? Enlightened Theists do not claim that God is perceptible by the senses. They contend that his existence may either be deduced by ratiocination, or discovered by intuition.

(1) The Ratiocinative Process. They say that the universe must have a cause; and that the orderliness and adaptativeness which the universe exhibits prove its cause to be endowed with intelligence and volition. But this argument is not conclusive. For, waiving the fact that the universe presents various anomalies, it is evident that the order and adaptation referred to may not be the work of a creator, but simply the modes whereby an eternal, omnipotent and ipso-determined being expresses its own proper nature. Moreover, the God of the Theist, by inflicting pain upon man and other animals, displays a moral disposition utterly at variance with that ascribed to him by the Theist.

2. The Intuitive Process. As this entirely depends upon the untestable declaration of the Intuitionist, it is not worth considering. At best intuition is no more than quick reasoning, and, as usually understood, it is a refuge of ignorance and an instrument of deceit.

(2) Is God an Ideal Object. Here it is of importance to remember that the imaginative faculty does not produce the materials which it employs. These are supplied to it by the senses. Imagination merely selects and combines what it gets from the senses. This process occurs in both our waking and our sleeping moments. "The dullest wight is a Shakespeare in his dreams." The wildest performances of artists are original only in their mutations and combinations. If you turn to the artistic presentation of beings regarded as divine you will not find any detail in the bodily members, the various gestures, and the facial expressions, which the animal world has not suggested. If you turn to the moral delineations which priests and prophets give of their deities, you will find in them nothing but human traits. According to those authorities, there have been angry, vengeful and jealous gods, even unchaste and thievish ones; and where a good kind are described, their goodness is only an improved example of human goodness extended to infinity.

C. CLAYTON DOVE.

OBITUARY

MR. HENRY SILVESTER

It is with great and genuine regret that I have to record the death of Mr. Henry Silvester at the age of 74. My first acquaintance with him was in connection with our meetings held in Victoria Park, where I made my first appearance on the N.S.S. platform. I think he was one of my captives, but he was a regular attendant and did his part in suppressing the rowdy defenders of Christianity. He was not one to push himself to the front, but whatever he could do he did. His association with the N.S.S. was never broken, and for many years he was a member of N.S.S. Executive and also a member of the Secular Society, Limited. He was in the best of health apparently until the end; indeed, the night before his death he told one of his daughters that he never felt in better health. I think he died as he would have wished. I have lost a very good friend.

The last scene was in the City of London Crematorium in Manor Park. The family members were present and also a number of his friends, to pay the last tribute to one whom I am assured never injured anyone, but acted as a friend to all who knew him. A very touching farwell was given by Mr. Rosetti. I have lost one whom I have always held in great respect.

C. C.

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, February 18, 7 p.m.: "Why Rationalism is Declining," Mr. KINGSLEY MARTIN, M.A.

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 11 a.m.: "Japan in Defeat," Professor G. W. KEETON, M.A., LL.D.

West London Branch N.S.S. (The National Trade Union Club, Great Newport Street, W.C. 1).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "Sun Worship the Origin of Christianity," Mr. J. HART.

COUNTRY—INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Science Room Mechanics Institute).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "Psychology and Religion," Mr. H. L. SEARLE.

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: "Today's Chief Threat to Freedom," Dr. C. A. SMITH.

Nottingham Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: "An Atheist Seeks the Spirits," Mr. J. CLAYTON (Burnley).

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